

The Synagogue Part 4

The function of the synagogue II
By Dan-Åke Mattsson

In the previous part, “The synagogue in the 1st century” (part 3) we saw how the service in a synagogue was done. Even if this was the most important function, the synagogue had several other functions in the Jewish community in the first century. But before looking more into these areas, we start our discussion by looking at the people who had responsibilities in the synagogue.

Tasks in the Synagogue

The rabbi and the priests did not take care of the synagogue's responsibilities and tasks. The *International Standard Bible* says: “In the old synagogues, the rabbis were not the head of the synagogue; those who took the lead were also not dependent on ancestry (the priest line)”¹. Instead, the elders, together with the synagogue president, had the responsibilities and got help from the attendant.

The Elders

Those who had the main responsibility in the local synagogue were the elders (Greek: *presbyteroi*). The research book *McClintock & Strong Biblical Cyclopedia* writes: “The synagogue in the respective cities was led by the elders [Heb. *tsakam*, Gr. *presbyteroi*], (Luke 7:3) that made up the local Sanhedrin”. The local Sanhedrin was the city’s court of law which we will discuss later in this article.

The Synagogue President (Heb. rosh kenaset)

In the New Testament (NT), three synagogue presidents are mentioned by name: Jairus (Mark 5:22), Crispus (Acts 18:8) and Sosthenes² (Acts 18:17). The phrase synagogue president is translated from the Greek word *archisynagogos* which means “One who is the head and who directs the affairs of the synagogue – ‘president of a synagogue, leader of a synagogue’”³.

This person was someone who had the actual responsibility in the synagogue and was, according to the research book *International Standard Bible Encyclopedia* most likely appointed by the elders⁴. The research book *International Standard Bible Encyclopedia* writes that: “One *archisynagogos* seems to have been appointed for a limited period, most likely one year. But the same person could be re-elected; sometimes, throughout their life”⁵.

¹ International Standard Bible Encyclopedia (1980) Volume IV, p. 681

² After Crispus converted to Christianity, it seems like Sosthenes succeeded him as synagogue president in Corinth. It may be that Sosthenes also converted to Christianity because the name Sosthenes, which is a rare Christian name is mentioned as a Christian brother in Paul’s letter to Corinth (1 Cor 1:1). Also see the research book *Word Picture* Volume III p. 302

³ Louw & Nida word 53.93 (Bibleworks 4.0)

⁴ International Standard Bible Encyclopedia (1980) Volume IV, p. 681

⁵ The Interpreter’s Dictionary of the Bible, Volume IV, p. 489

According to the bible commentator F. Bruce, the task could also stay in the family: “Sometimes the task was kept for life and remained in the same family, as some inscriptions witness”⁶. One of these inscriptions is the Theodotus inscription: “Theodotus, son of Vettenus, priest and synagogue-president, son of a synagogue-president and grandson of a synagogue-president, built this synagogue”.

The responsibility that the synagogue president had must include paying attention to what was happening in the synagogue, as it appears he did in Luke 13:14: Indignant because Jesus had healed on the Sabbath, the synagogue leader said to the people, “There are six days for work. So come and be healed on those days, not on the Sabbath”.

He also had responsibility for the service, which is shown when Paul and Barnabas visited a synagogue in Pisidian Antioch. “After the reading from the Law and the Prophets, the leaders of the synagogue sent word to them, saying, “Brothers, if you have a word of exhortation for the people, please speak” (Acts 13:15).

The research book *The Interpreter’s Dictionary of the Bible* continues about the synagogue president’s task: “According to some scholars, in the 1st century, it was the synagogue president that chose the theme for the sermon. At one time, it seemed like he had a complete seizure on the honour of reading the Torah. This kind of abuse of authority seems to be referred to in the apocryphal Halakah. Where it forbids *archisynagogos* [the synagogue president] to read the Torah unless he is asked by the congregation. (Tosef. Meg IV.21)”⁷.

It seems that a synagogue could have several leaders, as we read in Acts 13:15: “After the reading from the Law and the Prophets, **the leaders of the synagogue** sent word to them”. That this was a coincidence has been doubted by some, but there are found inscriptions that make this practice probable. The research book *Pictorial Encyclopedia of the Bible* says: “A text from Apamea in Syria contains a listing of three such officials and uses the plural term”⁸.

Another place that has been the object of linguistic discussion is Luke 8:41. The usual Greek word for the synagogue leader, *archisynagogos* does not occur but *archon*. As a comment on the use of ‘*archon*’ *Pictorial Encyclopedia of the Bible* writes: “This term is rare but has been located in contemporary inscriptions as an alternate and less proper form of ‘*archisynagogos*’. Since the terms are still in a state of flux and yet in the literary language it is to be expected that such variations would be found”⁹.

As we will see later, flogging was practised as a method of punishment in the synagogue, a task that was entrusted to the synagogue leader. “He [the synagogue leader] also carried out the corporal punishments of the council”¹⁰.

⁶ The Books of Acts, p. 267-8, footnote 23

⁷ The Interpreter’s Dictionary of the Bible, Bind IV p. 489

⁸ Pictorial Encyclopedia of the Bible (1976) Bind V, p. 564

⁹ Ibid

¹⁰ Ibid

The Synagogue attendant (Heb. *Hazzan*)

The synagogue attendant's task was usually to assist the synagogue leader. We find a synagogue attendant (Gr. *hyperetes*) in Luke 4:20: "Then he [Jesus] rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the **attendant** and sat down". To retrieve and hand the scrolls to those who would read was just one of many tasks that an attendant in the synagogue had. The research book *McClinton & Strong Encyclopedia* writes: "He took the care of the furniture, open the doors, cleaned the synagogue, lit the lamps, got the building ready for the service, and called the people together for worship, call out the names that were chosen by the synagogue's leader to come up on the podium to read a paragraph from the Law and the Prophets, ..." ¹¹. In addition, he could also function as a teacher in the synagogue's primary school.

The giver of Alms

As we also see later, it was common for collections to be made for the poor in the synagogue. To hand out the gifts, there existed specially elected Alm collectors. "The *Mishna* says: "Money for the communal fund is collected by two people and distributed by three people" ¹².

Women

It seems that women did not have any part in the teaching in the synagogue. *International Standard Bible Encyclopedia* writes about who could lead the prayer and read from the Law: "Any one man could lead the prayer and translate the scripture" ¹³.

The Court

Even if the synagogue first and foremost was used for teaching, it was also used as a local court and called the "local Sanhedrin" ¹⁴ that appears in Luke 21:12: "But before all this, they will seize you and persecute you. They will hand you over to synagogues and put you in prison...". The NT mentions two "types" of punishment that were executed: flogging and being put out of the synagogue. "Be on your guard; you will be handed over to the local councils and be **flogged** in the synagogues" (Matt. 10:17). "They said this because they were afraid of the Jewish leaders, who already had decided that anyone who acknowledged that Jesus was the Christ would be **put out** of the synagogue".

Those who had the responsibility to judge in the synagogue were most likely the elders. "It is highly probable that it was especially within their [the synagogue elders] competence to exercise the weightiest of all religious disciplinary actions: the announcement of exclusion or expulsion from the congregation" ¹⁵.

Expulsion

As we have seen, expulsion from the synagogue is mentioned several times in the NT. Jesus warned his followers that there would come a time when this would happen: "They will put you out of the synagogues" (Joh. 16: 2). Being put out of the synagogue was seen as a serious punishment appears in John 12: 42: "Nevertheless, many even of the authorities believed in

¹¹ McClintock & Strong Encyclopedia (Synagogue - Biblical Cyclopedia)

¹² mPeah 8: 7H

¹³ International Standard Bible Encyclopedia (1980) Volume IV p. 681

¹⁴ The Great Sanhedrin was located in Jerusalem and consisted of 71 people who acted as the supreme court of the Jews.

¹⁵ The History of the Jewish (1986), Volume II, p. 431

him [Jesus], but for fear of the Pharisees they did not confess it, so that they would not be put out of the synagogue”. The Synagogue had three forms or degrees for expulsion.

nidduj’

The first, which in Hebrew was called *nidduj’*, included that the ostracised person “was denied the use of the bath, the razor, or comfort meals. Those dealing with him were ordered to stay at approx. 2 meter distance. He was allowed to go to the temple, but was not allowed to walk about as usual. The length of the sentence was thirty days, and could be extended to sixty or ninety days if necessary”¹⁶.

cherem

If the person had not improved himself, the next expulsion, called *cherem* in Hebrew, set to life. “Now, stricter punishments were enforced. The law-breaker was not allowed to teach or learn in the company of others, to employ or be employed, nor to perform commercial transactions beyond buying the necessities of life. The verdict was delivered by a court of ten, and was accompanied by a solemn curse ...”¹⁷.

Shamma-tha

The last form of expulsion was the most severe. “Lastly followed (*Shamma-tha*), which was a total offcut from the congregation. It has been assumed by some that the previous two forms of expulsion could not be separated from each other”¹⁸.

When one knows about this system, one understands that the parents of a man born with blindness that Jesus healed were so afraid to say their meaning to the Pharisees.

“But how he now sees we do not know, nor do we know who opened his eyes. Ask him; he is of age. He will speak for himself.” His parents said these things because they feared the Jews, for the Jews had already agreed that if anyone should confess Jesus to be Christ, he was to be put out of the synagogue” (John 9: 21, 22). The man who was healed and told what Jesus had done to him was eventually cast out of the synagogue. “They answered him, “You were born in utter sin, and would you teach us?” And they cast him out” (John 9:34).

Flogging

Flogging is not mentioned as a punishment in the Law of Moses but was still common with the Jews in the 1st century. As mentioned above, Jesus predicted this kind of treatment of his followers. In the *Mishna*, there is a detailed description of how this should be executed.

“One ties his two hands on either side of a pillar, and the minister of the community grabs his clothing— if it is torn, it is torn, and if it is ripped to pieces, it is ripped to pieces— until he bares his chest. A stone is set down behind him, on which the minister of the community stands. And a strap of cowhide is in his hand, doubled and redoubled, with two straps that rise and fall [fastened] to it. Its handle is a handbreadth long and a handbreadth wide, and its end must reach to his belly button. And he hits him with a third of the stripes in front and two-thirds behind. And he does not hit [the victim] while he is either standing or sitting, but

¹⁶ McClintock & Strong, Volume III, p. 93

¹⁷ Ibid

¹⁸ Ibid

bending low, as it is said, And the judge will cause him to lie down. And he who hits him hits with one hand, with all his might”¹⁹.

Paul who had been an eager follower of the Christians, got a taste of his own medicine, which he describes in the letter to the Corinthians: “Five times I received at the hands of the Jews the forty lashes less one” (2 Cor 11: 24). The reason that they were careful with the number of lashes being under 40, comes from the *Mishna*. “How many times do they flog him? Forty stripes less one, as it is said, By number, forty—a number near [but less than] forty ... And if the victim dies under the hand of the one who does the flogging, the latter is exempt from punishment. But if he added even a single stripe and the victim died, lo, this one goes into exile on his account” (Makkot 3: 10, 14).

School

An important part of the life of the Jews was the ability to read and write, and a natural place to learn was in the synagogue. It seems like that one started school at the age of five and was taught by the synagogue attendant (*hazzan*) or a local *Torah* teacher. The main goal of the teaching was to know how to read and understand the *Torah* (the Law). The website *biblescholar.com* talks a bit about how the teaching was done in addition to reading and writing: “However, there is one fact that is of the utmost importance for our understanding of the subject at hand, and that is: although scrolls, or books for reading and study, were used, and although the practice of writing was highly developed, writing materials were costly and scarce, and all manuscripts had to be written by hand by scribes trained in this profession. Therefore, learning usually meant memorization by constant repetition. Professor Shmuel Safrai, [...], relates: ‘Individual and group study of the Bible, repetition of the passages, etc., were often done by chanting them aloud. There is the frequent expression “*the chirping of children,*” which was heard by people passing close by a synagogue as the children were reciting a verse’”²⁰.

That Jesus had gotten a good teaching from his ancestors, most likely also from the synagogue, we can see from the knowledge he had already as a 12-year-old. Luke 2:46-47 “Sitting among the teachers, listening to them and asking them questions. And all who heard him were amazed at his understanding and his answers”.

Shelters

According to the Law of Moses, Jewish men were required to attend three festivals in Jerusalem “Three times a year all your males shall appear before the Lord your God at the place that he will choose: at the Feast of Unleavened Bread, at the Feast of Weeks, and at the Feast of Booths”²¹(Dt. 16: 16). This must have led to at these times there were many travellers that where in need of shelter in Jerusalem. According to the Theodotus inscription, there was an option to stay the night in the synagogue. “Theodotus, ... has built the synagogue for the reading of the Law and teaching of the Commandments, and he has built hostelry and the chambers ... in order to provide lodgings for those from abroad who need them...”

¹⁹ mMakkot 3: 12,13. Herbert Danbys translation, p. 408, 409.

<https://archive.org/details/DanbyMishnah/page/407/mode/1up?view=theater>

²⁰ <https://www.biblescholars.org/2013/05/study-shows-jesus-as-rabbi.html>

²¹ Easter, Pentecost and the Feast of Tabernacles

Collections for the Poor

The synagogue was also a place where one collected money for different purposes “Thus, when you give to the needy, sound no trumpet before you, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues” (Matt 6:2). The Jewish philosopher Flavius Josephus (37 AD – ca. 100 AD) mentions that these kinds of collections also happened. He recites a letter where it is mentioned that an official had gone beyond Julius Caesar's directive and forbidden the Jews to assemble in their synagogues to perform their worship and make collections: “Now it does not please me that such decrees should be made against our friends and confederates, whereby they are forbidden to live according to their own customs, or to bring in contributions for common suppers and holy festivals, while they are not forbidden so to do even at Rome itself”²². Such collections are also mentioned in the *Mishna* “They collect indiscriminately and they distribute indiscriminately” (Demai 3: 1G). The book *The History of the Jewish People* talks about the collection in the synagogue: “It was in the synagogue the collection of Alms happened. A difference was made between the weekly money box (cupa), where the local poor people were supported regularly once a week, and the ‘plate’ that every person in need (especially foreigners) could receive a daily ration from”²³.

We have, in this series, seen that the synagogue in the time of Jesus was a very well-established place for the Jews to come together. Researchers say that this method of worship and assembling was truly unique. We have also seen that Jesus and his followers made good use of the synagogue in preaching the Gospel. So, it may not be so strange that one finds many common features between the synagogue and the Christian congregation. This will be the theme for the final part of this series.

²² Antiquities of the Jews 14. 214.

<http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/cgi-bin/ptext?doc=Perseus:text1999.01.0146;book=section=185>

²³ The History of the Jewish People (1986) Volume II p. 437

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Antiquities of the Jews Flavius Josefus, translated by William Whiston, A.M., Ed Flavius Josephus, Antiquities of the Jews, Book 1, Whiston chapter pr. (tufts.edu)

The Books of the Acts Bruce. F. F., 1981, The International Commentary on The New Testament, Eerdmans Publishing, Michigan

McClintock J & Strong J., Cyclopedia of Biblical, Theological And Ecclestial Literature, 2000. Electronic issue. Ages Software, USA og Synagogue - Biblical Cyclopedia

The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia. Ed. Bromiley, 1988 Eerdmans Publishing, Michigan

The Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible, An Illustated Encyclopedia, Ed. Buttrick G. A., 1962, Abingdon Press, Nashville

Louw & Nida Greek NT Lexicon based on Semantic Domains, 2nd Ed. 1988. Electronic issue in Bibleworks 4.0, 1998

The Mishna, A New Translation, 1988, Neusner Jacob. Yale University Press, London

Pictorial Encyclopedia of the Bible, Ed. Tenney. M., 1976, Zondervan, Michigan

The History of the Jewish People in the Age of Jesus Christ 175 B.C – A.D. 135 Emil Shürer, New English Version, Ed. Vermes G., 1986, Clark Ltd, Edinburgh

Word Pictures in the New Testament, 1930. Robinso. T., Electronic issue in BibleWorks 4.0