

Synagogues

from Conybeare and Howson, "The Life and Epistles of St. Paul", Chapter 6

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Along with this population of Greeks, Romans, and native Pisidians, a greater or smaller number of Jews was intermixed. They may not have been a very numerous body, for only one synagogue is mentioned in the narrative. But it is evident from the events recorded that they were an influential body, that they had made many proselytes, and that they had obtained some considerable dominion over the minds of the Gentile women.

On the Sabbath days the Jews and the proselytes met in the synagogue. It is evident that at this time full liberty of public worship was permitted to the Jewish people in all parts of the Roman Empire, whatever limitations might have been enacted by law or compelled by local opposition, as relates to the form and situation of the synagogues. We infer from Epiphanius that the Jewish places of worship were often erected in open and conspicuous positions. This natural wish may frequently have been checked by the influence of the heathen priests, who would not willingly see the votaries of an ancient idolatry forsaking the temple for the synagogue; and feelings of the same kind may probably have hindered the Jews, even if they had the ability or desire, from erecting religious edifices of any remarkable grandeur and solidity.

No ruins of the synagogues of imperial times have remained to us, like those of the temples in every province, from which we are able to convince ourselves of the very form and size of the sanctuaries of Jupiter, Apollo, and Diana. There is little doubt

that the sacred edifices of the Jews have been modified by the architecture of the remote countries through which they have been dispersed, and the successive centuries through which they have continued a separated people. Under the Roman Empire it is natural to suppose that they must have varied, according to circumstances, through all gradations of magnitude and decoration, from the simple *proseucha* at Philippi to the magnificent prayer houses at Alexandria.

Yet there are certain traditional peculiarities which have doubtless united together by a common resemblance the Jewish synagogues of all ages and countries. The arrangement for the women's places in a separate gallery, or behind a partition of lattice work – the desk in the center where the Reader, like Ezra in ancient times, from his "pulpit of wood," may "open the Book in the sight of all the people ... and read in the Book the Law of God distinctly, and give the sense, and cause them to understand the reading," (Neh. 8:4 8) – the carefully closed Ark on the side of the building nearest to Jerusalem, for the preservation of the rolls or manuscripts of the Law, the seats all round the building from which "the eyes of all them that are in the synagogue" may "be fastened" on him who speaks, (see Luke 4:20) – the "chief seats," which were appropriated to the "ruler" or "rulers" of the synagogue, according as its organization might be more or less complete, and which were so dear to the hearts of those who professed to be peculiarly learned or devout – these are some of the features of a synagogue, which agree

at once with the notices of Scripture, the descriptions in the Talmud, and the practice of modern Judaism.

The meeting of the congregations in ancient synagogues may be easily realized, if due allowance be made for the change of costume, for those who have seen the Jews at their worship in the large towns of Modern Europe. On their entrance into the building, the four cornered Tallith was first placed like a veil over the head, or like a scarf over the shoulders. [¹] The prayers were then recited by an officer called the "Angel" or "Apostle," of the assembly. The prayers were doubtless many of them identically the same with those which are found in the present service books of the German and Spanish Jews, Yough their liturgies, in the course of ages, have undergone successive developments, the steps of which are not easily ascertained.

It seems that the prayers were sometimes read in the vernacular language of the country where the synagogue was built; but the Law was always read in Hebrew. The sacred roll of manuscript was handed from the Ark to the Reader by the Chazan, of "Minister;" (Luke 4:17,29) and then certain portions were read according to a fixed cycle, first from the Law and then from the Prophets. It is impossible to determine the period when the sections from these two divisions of the Old Testament were arranged as in use at present; but the same necessity for translation and explanation existed then as now. The Hebrew and English are now printed in parallel columns. Then, the reading of the Hebrew was elucidated by the Targum or the Septuagint, or followed by a paraphrase in the spoken language of the country. [²]

The Reader stood while thus employed, and all the congregation sat around. The manuscript was rolled up and returned to the Chazan. (See Luke 4:20) Then followed a pause during which strangers or learned men, who had "any word of consolation" or exhortation, rose and addressed the meeting. And thus, after a pathetic enumeration of the sufferings of the chosen people, or an allegorical exposition of some dark passage of Holy Write, the worship was closed with a benediction and a solemn "Amen." (Neh. 8:6; 1 Cor. 14:16)

To such a worship in such a building a congregation came together at Antioch in Pisidia, on the Sabbath which immediately succeeded the arrival of Paul and Barnabas. Proselytes came and seated themselves with the Jews; and among the Jewesses behind the lattice were "honorable women" (Acts

13:50) of the colony. The two strangers entered the synagogue and, wearing the Tallith, which was the badge of an Israelite," sat down" (Acts 13:14) with the rest. The prayers were recited, the extracts from the Law and the Prophets were read (Acts 13:15); the Book returned to the Minister (Luke 4:20), and then we are told that the rules of the synagogue sent to the newcomers, on whom many eyes had already been fixed, and invited them to address the assembly, if they had words of comfort or instruction to speak to their fellow Israelites. The very attitude of St. Paul as he answered the invitation is described to us. He rose from his seat, and with the animated and emphatic gesture which he used on other occasions (Acts 26:1; 21:40: 20:34), he beckoned with his hand (Acts 13:16).

Synagogues: Their Origin, Structure and Outward Arrangements

[from "Sketches of Jewish Social Life", by Alfred Edersheim, Chapters 16 and 17.]

It was a beautiful saying of Rabbi Jochanan (Jer. Ber. v. 1), that he who prays in his house surrounds and fortifies it, so to speak, with a wall of iron. Nevertheless, it seems immediately contradicted by what follows. For it is explained that this only holds good where a man is alone, but that where there is a community prayer should be offered in the synagogue. We can readily understand how, after the destruction of the Temple, and the cessation of its symbolical worship, the excessive value attached to mere attendance at the synagogue would rapidly grow in public estimation, till it exceeded all bounds of moderation or reason. Thus, such Scriptural sayings as Isaiah 66:20, 55:6 and Psalm 82:1 were applied to it.

The Babylon Talmud goes even farther. There we are told (Ber. 6 a), that the prayer which a man addresses to God has only its proper effect if offered in the synagogue; that if an individual, accustomed to frequent every day the synagogue, misses it for once, God will demand an account of him; that if the Eternal finds fewer than ten persons there gathered, His anger is kindled, as it is written in Isaiah 50:2 (Ber. 6 b); that if a person has a synagogue in his own town, and does not enter it for prayer, he is to be called an evil neighbour, and provokes exile alike upon himself and his children, as it is written in Jeremiah 12:4; while, on the other hand, the

practice of early resorting to the synagogue would account for the longevity of people (Ber. 8 a).

Putting aside these extravagances, there cannot, however, be doubt that, long before the Talmudical period, the institution of synagogues had spread, not only among the Palestinian, but among the Jews of the dispersion, and that it was felt a growing necessity, alike from internal and external causes.

Readers of the New Testament know, that at the time of our Lord synagogues were dotted all over the land; that in them “from of old” Moses had been read (Acts 15:21); that they were under the rule of certain authorities, who also exercised discipline; that the services were definitely regulated, although considerable liberty obtained, and that part of them consisted in reading the prophets, which was generally followed by an “exhortation” (Acts 13:15) or an address (Luke 4:17).

The word “synagogue” is, of course, of Greek derivation, and means “gathering together”—for religious purposes. The corresponding Rabbinical terms, “chenisah,” “cheneseth,” etc., “zibbur,” “vaad,” and “kahal,” may be generally characterized as equivalents. But it is interesting to notice, that both the Old Testament and the Rabbis have shades of distinction, well known in modern theological discussions. To begin with the former. Two terms are used for Israel as a congregation: “edah” and “kahal”; of which the former seems to refer to Israel chiefly in their outward organisation as a congregation—what moderns would call the visible Church—while “kahal” rather indicates their inner or spiritual connection.

Even the LXX seem to have seen this distinction. The word “edah” occurs one hundred and thirty times, and is always rendered in the LXX by “synagogue,” never by “ecclesia” (church); while “kahal” is translated in seventy places by “ecclesia,” and only in thirty-seven by “synagogue.” Similarly, the Mishnah employs the term “kahal” only to denote Israel as a whole; while the term “zibbur,” for example, is used alike for churches and for the Church—that is, for individual congregations, and for Israel as a whole.

The origin of the synagogue is lost in the obscurity of tradition. Of course, like so many other institutions, it is traced by the Rabbis to the patriarchs. Thus, both the Targum Jonathan and the Jerusalem Targum represent Jacob as an attendant in the synagogue, and Rebekah as resorting thither for advice when feeling within her the unnatural

contest of her two sons. There can be no occasion for seriously discussing such statements. For when in 2 Kings 22:8 we read that “the book of the law” was discovered by Shaphan the scribe in “the house of the Lord,” this implies that during the reign of King Josiah there could have been no synagogues in the land, since it was their main object to secure the weekly reading, and of course the preservation, of the books of Moses (Acts 15:21).

Our Authorized Version, indeed, renders Psalm 74:8, “They have burned up all the synagogues of God in the land.” But there is good authority for questioning this translation; and, even if admitted, it would not settle the question of the exact time when synagogues originated. On the other hand, there is not a hint of synagogue-worship either in the law or the prophets; and this of itself would be decisive, considering the importance of the subject. Besides, it may be said that there was no room for such meetings under the Old Testament dispensation. There the whole worship was typical—the sacrificial services alike constituting the manner in which Israel approached unto God, and being the way by which He communicated blessings to His people.

Gatherings for prayer and for fellowship with the Father belong, so far as the Church as a whole is concerned, to the dispensation of the Holy Spirit. It is quite in accordance with this general principle, that when men filled with the Spirit of God were raised up from time to time, those who longed for deeper knowledge and closer converse with the Lord should have gathered around them on Sabbaths and new moons, as the pious Shunammite resorted to Elisha (2 Kings 4:23), and as others were no doubt wont to do, if within reach of “prophets” or their disciples. But quite a different state of matter ensued during the Babylonian captivity.

Deprived of the Temple services, some kind of religious meetings would become an absolute necessity, if the people were not to lapse into practical heathenism—a danger, indeed, which, despite the admonitions of the prophets, and the prospect of deliverance held out, was not quite avoided. For the preservation, also, of the national bond which connected Israel, as well as for their continued religious existence, the institution of synagogues seemed alike needful and desirable. In point of fact, the attentive reader of the books of Ezra and Nehemiah will discover in the period after the return from Babylon the beginnings of the synagogue.

Only quite rudimentary as yet, and chiefly for the

purposes of instructing those who had come back ignorant and semi-heathenish—still, they formed a starting-point. Then came the time of terrible Syrian oppression and persecutions, and of the Maccabean rising. We can understand, how under such circumstances the institution of the synagogue would develop, and gradually assume the proportions and the meaning which it afterwards attained. For it must be borne in mind, that, in proportion as the spiritual import of the Temple services was lost to view, and Judaism became a matter of outward ordinances, nice distinctions, and logical discussion, the synagogue would grow in importance.

And so it came to pass, that at the time of Christ there was not a foreign settlement of Jews without one or more synagogues—that of Alexandria, of which both the Talmuds speak in such exaggerated language, being specially gorgeous—while throughout Palestine they were thickly planted. It is to these latter only that we can for the present direct attention.

Not a town, nor a village, if it numbered only ten men, who could or would wholly give themselves to divine things, but had one or more synagogues.

If it be asked, why the number ten was thus fixed upon as the smallest that could form a congregation, the reply is that, according to Numbers 14:27, the “evil congregation” consisted of the spies who had brought a bad report, and whose number was ten—after deducting, of course, Joshua and Caleb. Larger cities had several, some of them many, synagogues. From Acts 6:9 we know that such was the case in Jerusalem, tradition having also left us an account of the synagogue of “the Alexandrians,” to which class of Jews Stephen may have belonged by birth or education, on which ground also he would chiefly address himself to them.

The Rabbis have it that, at the time of the destruction of Jerusalem, that city had not fewer than 480, or at least 460, synagogues. Unless the number 480 was fixed upon simply as the multiple of symbolical numbers (4 x 10 x 12), or with a kindred mystical purpose in view, it would, of course, be a gross exaggeration. But, as a stranger entered a town or village, it could never be difficult to find out the synagogue. If it had not, like our churches, its spire, pointing men, as it were, heavenward, the highest point in the place was at least selected for it, to symbolize that its engagements overtopped all things else, and in remembrance of the prophetic saying, that the Lord’s house should “be established in the top of the mountains,” and

“exalted above the hills” (Isa 2:2).

If such a situation could not be secured, it was sought to place it “in the corners of streets,” or at the entrance to the chief squares, according to what was regarded as a significant direction in Proverbs 1:21. Possibly our Lord may have had this also in view when He spoke of those who loved “to pray standing in the synagogues and in the corners of the streets” (Matt 6:5), it being a very common practice at the time to offer prayer on entering a synagogue. But if no prominent site could be obtained, a pole should at least be attached to the roof, to reach up beyond the highest house. A city whose synagogue was lower than the other dwellings was regarded as in danger of destruction.

Of the architecture of ordinary synagogues, not only the oldest still in existence, but the recent excavations in Palestine, enable us to form a correct idea. Internally they were simply rectangular or round buildings, with a single or double colonnade, and more or less adorned by carvings. Externally they had generally some sacred symbol carved on the lintels—commonly the seven-branched candlestick, or perhaps the pot of manna. [^3]

There is one remarkable instance of the use of the latter emblem, too important to be passed over. In Capernaum, our Lord’s “own city” (Matt 9:1), there was but one synagogue—that built at the cost of the pious centurion. For, although our Authorized Version renders the commendation of the Jewish elders, “He loveth our nation, and has built us a synagogue” (Luke 7:5), in the original the article is definite: “he hath built us the synagogue”—just as in a similar manner we infer that Nazareth had only one synagogue (Matt 13:54).

The site of the ancient Capernaum had till comparatively recently been unknown. But its identification with the modern Tell Hum is now so satisfactory, that few would care to question it. What is even more interesting, the very ruins of that synagogue which the good centurion built have been brought to light; and, as if to make doubt impossible, its architecture is evidently that of the Herodian period. And here comes in the incidental but complete confirmation of the gospel narrative. We remember how, before, the Lord Jesus had by His word of blessing multiplied the scanty provision, brought, it might be accidentally, by a lad in the company of those five Yousand who had thronged to hear Him, so that there was not only sufficient for their wants, but enough for each of the twelve apostles to fill his basket with the fragments

of what the Savior had dispensed.

That day of miraculous provision had been followed by a night of equally wondrous deliverance. His disciples were crossing the lake, now tossed by one of those sudden storms which so frequently sweep down upon it from the mountains. All at once, in their perplexity, it was the Master Whom they saw, walking on the sea, and nearing the ship. As the light of the moon fell upon that well-known form, and, as He drew nigh, cast His shadow in increasing proportions upon the waters which, obedient, bore His feet, they feared. It was a marvelous vision—too marvelous almost to believe it a reality, and too awful to bear it, if a reality. And so they seem to have hesitated about receiving Him into the ship.

But His presence and voice soon reassured them, and “immediately the ship was at the land.” That “land” was the seashore of Capernaum. The next morning broke with the usual calm and beauty of spring on the lake. Presently white sails were spreading over its tranquil waters; marking the approach of many from the other side, who, missing “the Prophet,” Whom, with the characteristic enthusiasm of the inhabitants of that district, they would fain have made a king, now followed Him across the water.

There could be no difficulty in “finding Him” in “His own city,” the home of Peter and Andrew (Mark 1:21,29). But no ordinary dwelling would have held such a concourse as now thronged around Him. So, we imagine, the multitude made their way towards the synagogue. On the road, we suppose, the question and answers passed, of which we have an account in John 6:25-28. They had now reached the entrance to the synagogue; and the following discourse was pronounced by the Lord in the synagogue itself, as we are expressly told in verse 59: “These things said He in the synagogue, as He taught in Capernaum.” But what is so remarkable is, that the very lintel of this synagogue has been found, and that the device upon it bears such close reference to the question which the Jews put to Jesus, that we can almost imagine them pointing up to it, as they entered the synagogue, and said: “Our fathers did eat manna in the desert; as it is written, He gave them bread from heaven to eat” (John 6:31).

For, in the words of Canon Williams, “The lintel lying among the ruins of the good centurion’s synagogue at Capernaum has carved on it the device of the pot of manna. What is further remarkable, this lintel is ornamented besides with a flowing pat-

tern of vine leaves and clusters of grapes, and another emblem of the mystery of which our Lord discoursed so largely in this synagogue.”

Before parting from this most interesting subject, we may place beside the Master, as it were, the two representatives of His Church, a Gentile and a Jew, both connected with this synagogue. Of its builder, the good centurion, Canon Williams thus writes: “In what spirit the large-hearted Roman soldier had made his offering, the rich and elaborate carvings of cornices and entablatures, of columns and capitals, and niches, still attest.” As for the ruler of that same synagogue, we know that it was Jairus, whose cry of anguish and of faith brought Jesus to his house to speak the life-giving “Talitha cumi” over the one only daughter, just bursting into womanhood, who lay dead in that chamber, while the crowd outside and the hired minstrels made shrill, discordant mourning.

Thus far as to the external appearance of synagogues. Their internal arrangement appears to have been originally upon the plan of the Temple, or, perhaps, even of the Tabernacle. At least, the oldest still standing synagogue, that of the Cyrenian Jews, in the island of Gerbe, is, according to the description of a missionary, Dr. Ewald, tripartite, after the model of the Court, the Holy, and the Most Holy Place.

And in all synagogues the body of the building, with the space around, set apart for women, represents the Court of the Women, while the innermost and highest place, with the Ark behind, containing the rolls of the law, represents the sanctuary itself. In turn the synagogue seems to have been adopted as the model for the earliest Christian churches. Hence not only the structure of the “basilica,” but the very term “bema,” is incorporated in Rabbinical language. This is only what might have been expected, considering that the earliest Christians were Jews by nationality, and that heathenism could offer no type for Christian worship. To return.

As concerned the worshippers, it was deemed wrong to pray behind a synagogue with your turning the face to it; and a story is told (Ber. 6 b) of Elijah appearing in the form of an Arab merchant, and punishing one guilty of this sin. “You standest before Your Master as if there were two Powers [or Gods],” said the seeming Arab; and with these words “he drew his sword and killed him.” A still more curious idea prevailed, that it was requisite to advance the length of at least “two doors” within

a synagogue before settling to prayer, which was justified by a reference to Proverbs 8:34 (Ber. 8 a).

The inference is peculiar, but not more so, perhaps, than those of some modern critics, and certainly not more strange than that of the Talmud itself, which, on a preceding page, when discussing the precise duration of the wrath of the Almighty, concludes that Balaam had been the only person who knew it exactly, since it is written of him (Num 24:16), that he “knew the Youghts of the Most High!” Another direction of the Talmud was to leave the synagogue with slow steps, but to hasten to it as rapidly as possible, since it was written (Hosea 6:3, as the Rabbis arranged the verse), “Let us pursue to know the Lord.”

Rabbi Seira tells us how, at one time, he had been scandalized by seeing the Rabbis running on the Sabbath—when bodily rest was enjoined—to attend a sermon; but that, when he understood how Hosea 11:10 applied to the teaching of the Halkhah, he himself joined in their race. And so Rabbi Seira, as it seems to us, somewhat caustically concludes: “The reward of a discourse is the haste” with which people run to it—no matter, it would appear, whether they get in to hear it, or whether there is anything in the discourse worth the hearing.

As a rule, synagogues were built at the expense of the congregation, Yough perhaps assisted by richer neighbors. Sometimes, as we know, they were erected at the cost of private individuals, which was supposed to involve special merit. In other cases, more particularly when the number of Jews was small, a large room in a private house was set apart for the purpose. This also passed into the early Church, as we gather from Acts 2:46, 5:42. Accordingly we understand the apostolic expression, “Church in the house” (Rom 16:3,5; 1 Cor 16:19; Col 4:15; Phil 2), as implying that in all these and other instances a room in a private house had been set apart, in which the Christians regularly assembled for their worship.

Synagogues were consecrated by prayer, alYough, even thus, the ceremony was not deemed completed till after the ordinary prayers had been offered by some one, Yough it were a passing stranger. Rules of decorum, analogous to those enforced in the Temple, were enjoined on those who attended the synagogue. Decency and cleanliness in dress, quietness and reverence in demeanor, are prescribed with almost wearisome details and distinctions. Money collections were only to be made for the poor or for

the redemption of captives.

If the building were in a dangerous condition, the synagogue might be broken down, provided another were built as rapidly as possible in its place. But even so, the sanctity of their place remained, and synagogue-ruins might not be converted into mourning places, nor used as thoroughfares, nor might ropes be hung up in them, nor nets spread, nor fruits laid out for drying. The principle of sanctity applied, of course, to all analogous uses to which such ruins might have been put. Money collected for building a synagogue might, if absolute necessity arose, be employed by the congregation for other purposes; but if stones, beams, etc., had been purchased for the building, these could not be resold, but were regarded as dedicated.

A town synagogue was considered absolutely inalienable; those in villages might be disposed of under the direction of the local Sanhedrim, provided the locale were not afterwards to be used as a public bath, a wash-house, a tannery, or a pool. The money realized was to be devoted to something more sacred than the mere stone and mortar of a synagogue—say, the ark in which the copies of the law were kept. Different from synagogues, Yough devoted to kindred purposes, were the so-called “oratories” or “places where prayer was wont to be made” (Acts 16:13). These were generally placed outside towns and in the vicinity of running water or of the sea (Josephus, Ant. xiv, 256-258), for the purpose of the customary lustrations connected with prayer (Philo ii. 535).

The separation of the sexes, which was observed even in the Temple at the time of Christ, was strictly carried out in the synagogues, such division being made effectual by a partition, boarded off and provided with gratings, to which there was separate access. The practice seems simply in accordance with Eastern manners and modes of thinking. But the Rabbis, who seek Scripture authority for every arrangement, however trivial, find in this case their warrant in Zechariah 12:11-14, where “the wives” are no less than five times spoken of as “apart,” while engaged in their prayerful mourning.

The synagogue was so placed that, on entering it, the worshippers would face towards Jerusalem—mere “orientation,” as it is now called, having no meaning in Jewish worship. Beyond the middle of the synagogue rose the platform or “bema,” as it was anciently, or “almmeor,” as it is presently named. Those who were called up to it for reading ascended by the side nearest, and descended by

that most remote from their seats in the synagogue. On this “bema” stood the pulpit, or rather lectern, the “migdal ez,” “wooden tower” of Nehemiah 8:4, whence the prescribed portions of the law and of the prophets were read, and addresses delivered. The reader stood; the preacher sat.

Thus we find (Luke 4:20) that, after reading a portion from the prophet Isaiah, our Lord “closed the book, and He gave it again to the minister, and sat down,” before delivering His discourse in the synagogue of Nazareth. Prayer also was offered standing, although in the Temple the worshippers prostrated themselves, a practice still continued in certain of the most solemn litanies. The pulpit or lectern—“migdal” (tower), “chisse” and “churseja” (chair or throne), or “pergulah” (the Latin “pergula,” probably elevation)—stood in the middle of the “bema,” and in front of “the ark.”

The latter, which occupied the innermost place in the synagogue, as already noticed, corresponded to the Most Holy Place in the Temple, and formed the most important part. It was called the “aron” (ark), the “tevah,” or “tevutha” (chest, like that in which Noah and Moses were saved), or the “hechal” (little temple). In reality, it consisted of a press or chest, in which the rolls of the law were deposited. This “ark” was made movable (Taan. ii. 1,2), so as to lift out on occasions of public fasting and prayer, in order to have it placed in the street or market-place where the people gathered.

Sometimes there was also a second press for the rolls of the prophets, in which the disused or damaged rolls of the law were likewise deposited. In front of the ark hung the “vilon” (“velum,” veil), in imitation of that before the Holy Place. Above it was suspended the “ner olam,” or ever-burning lamp, and near to it stood the eight-branched candlestick, lit during the eight days of the feast of the dedication of the Temple (John 10:22), or Candelas. The practice of lighting candles and lamps, not merely for use, but in honour of the day or feast, is not unknown in the synagogues.

Of course, in regard to this, as to other practices, it is impossible to determine what was the exact custom at the time of our Lord, although the reader may be able to infer how much and what special practices may have been gradually introduced. It would lead beyond our present scope to describe the various directions to be observed in copying out the synagogue-rolls, which embodied the five books of Moses, or to detail what would render them unfit for use.

No less than twenty such causes are mentioned by the Rabbis. At present the vellum, on which the Pentateuch is written, is affixed to two rollers, and as each portion of the law is read it is unrolled from the right, and rolled on to the left roller. The roll itself was fastened together by linen wrappers or cloths (“mitpachoth”), and then placed in a “case” (“tik,” the Greek “theke”). All these articles are already mentioned in the Mishnah.

Later practices need not here occupy our attention. Lastly, it should be noted, that at first the people probably stood in the synagogues or sat on the ground. But as the services became more protracted, sitting accommodation had to be provided. The congregation sat facing the ark. On the other hand, “the rulers of the synagogue,” Rabbis, distinguished Pharisees, and others, who sought honour of men, claimed “the chief seats,” which were placed with their backs to the ark, and facing the worshippers.

These seats, which bear the same name as in the New Testament, were made objects of special ambition (Matt 23:6), and rank, dignity, or seniority entitled a Rabbi or other influential man to priority. Our Lord expressly refers to this (Matt 23:6) as one of the characteristic manifestations of Pharisaical pride. That both the same spirit and practice had crept into some of the early churches, appears from the warning of St. James (James 2:2,3) against an un-Christ-like “respect of persons,” which would assign a place high up in “synagogues” of Christians to the mere possession of “goodly apparel” or the wearing of the “gold ring.”

Hitherto we have chiefly described the outward arrangements of the synagogues. It will now be necessary, however rapidly in this place, to sketch their various uses, their worship, and their officials, most of which are also referred to in various parts of the New Testament.

The Worship of the Synagogue

One of the most difficult questions in Jewish history is that connected with the existence of a synagogue within the Temple. That such a “synagogue” existed, and that its meeting-place was in “the hall of hewn stones,” at the south-eastern angle of the court of the priest, cannot be called in question, in face of the clear testimony of contemporary witnesses. Considering that “the hall of hewn stones” was also the meeting-place for the great

Sanhedrim, and that not only legal decisions, but lectures and theological discussions formed part of their occupation, we might be tempted to conjecture that the term “synagogue” had been employed in its wider sense, since such buildings were generally used throughout the country for this two-fold purpose as well as for worship.

Of theological lectures and discussions in the Temple, we have an instance on the occasion when our Lord was found by His parents “sitting in the midst of the doctors, both hearing them, and asking them questions” (Luke 2:46). And it can scarcely be doubted, that this also explains how the scribes and Pharisees could so frequently “come upon Him,” while He taught in the Temple, with their difficult and entangling questions, up to that rejoinder about the nature of the Messiah, with which He finally silenced them: “If David then call Him Lord, how is He his Son?” (Matt 22:45).

But in reference to the so-called “Temple-synagogue,” there is this difficulty, that certain prayers and rites seem to have been connected with it, which formed no part of the regular Temple services, and yet were somehow engrafted upon them. We can therefore only conclude that the growing change in the theological views of Israel, before and about the time of Christ, made the Temple services alone appear insufficient. The symbolical and typical elements which constituted the life and centre of Temple worship had lost their spiritual meaning and attraction to the majority of that generation, and their place was becoming occupied by so-called teaching and outward performances. Thus the worship of the letter took the place of that of the spirit, and Israel was preparing to reject Christ for Pharisaism.

The synagogue was substituted for the Temple, and overshadowed it, even within its walls, by an incongruous mixture of man-devised worship with the God-ordained typical rites of the sanctuary. Thus, so far from the “Temple-synagogue” being the model for those throughout the country, as some writers maintain, it seems to us of later origin, and to have borrowed many rites from the country synagogues, in which the people had become accustomed to them.

The subject has a far deeper than merely historical interest. For the presence of a synagogue within the Temple, or rather, as we prefer to put it, the addition of synagogue-worship to that of the Temple, is sadly symbolical. It is, so to speak, one of those terribly significant utterances (by deed), in

which Israel, all unconsciously, pronounced its own doom, just as was this: “His blood be upon us and our children,” or the cry for the release of Barabbas (the son of the father), who had been condemned “for sedition” and “murder”—no doubt in connection with a pseudo-Messianic rising against the Roman power—instead of the true Son of the Father, who would indeed have “restored the kingdom to Israel.”

And yet there was nothing in the worship itself of the synagogue which could have prevented either the Lord, or His apostles and early followers, from attending it till the time of final separation had come. Readers of the New Testament know what precious opportunities it offered for making known the Gospel. Its services were, indeed, singularly elastic. For the main object of the synagogue was the teaching of the people. The very idea of its institution, before and at the time of Ezra, explains and conveys this, and it is confirmed by the testimony of Josephus (Ag. Apion, ii, 157-172).

But perhaps the ordinary reader of the New Testament may have failed to notice, how prominently this element in the synagogue is brought out in the gospel history. Yet the word “teaching” is used so frequently in connection with our Lord’s appearance in the synagogue, that its lesson is obvious (see Matt 4:23; Mark 1:21, 6:2; Luke 4:15, 6:6, 13:10; John 6:59, 18:20). The “teaching” part of the service consisted mainly in reading a section from the law, with which the reading of a portion from the prophets, and a sermon, or address, were conjoined. Of course, the liturgical element could in such services never have been quite wanting, and it soon acquired considerable importance. It consisted of prayer and the pronouncing of the Aaronic blessing (Num 6:24-26) by priests—that is, of course, not by Rabbis, who were merely teachers or doctors, but by lineal descendants of the house of Aaron. There was no service of “praise” in the synagogues.

Public worship [4] commenced on ordinary occasions with the so-called “Shema,” which was preceded in the morning and evening by two “benedictions,” and succeeded in the morning by one, and in the evening by two, benedictions; the second being, strictly speaking, an evening prayer.

The “Shema” was a kind of “belief,” or “creed,” composed of these three passages of Scripture: Deuteronomy 6:4-9, 11:13-21; Numbers 15:37-41.

It obtained its name from the initial word “Shema”: “Hear, O Israel,” in Deuteronomy 6:4. From the Mishnah (Ber. 1. 3) we learn, that this part of the service existed already before the time of our

Lord; and we are told (Ber. iii. 3), that all males were bound to repeat this belief twice every day; children and slaves, as well as women, being exempted from the obligation. There can be no reasonable doubt on the subject, as the Mishnah expressly mentions the three Scriptural sections of the "Shema," the number of benedictions before and after it, and even the initial words of the closing benediction (Ber. ii. 2, i. 4; Tamid, v. 1). We have, therefore, here certain prayers which our Lord Himself had not only heard, but in which He must have shared—to what extent will appear in the sequel.

These prayers still exist in the synagogue, although with later additions, which, happily, it is not difficult to eliminate. Before transcribing them, it may be quoted as a mark of the value attached to them, that it was lawful to say this and the other daily prayers—to which we shall hereafter refer—and the "grace at meat," not only in the Hebrew, but in any other language, in order to secure a general understanding of the service (Sotah, vii. 1). At the same time, expressions are used which lead us to suppose that, while the liturgical formulæ connected with the "Shema" were fixed, there were local variations, in the way of lengthening or shortening (Ber. i. 4). The following are the "benedictions" before the "Shema," in their original form:

1. "Blessed be You, O Lord, King of the world, Who forms the light and creates the darkness, Who maketh peace and creates everything; Who, in mercy, giveth light to the earth and to those who dwell upon it, and in Your goodness day by day and every day renews the works of creation. Blessed be the Lord our God for the glory of His handiwork and for the light-giving lights which He has made for His praise. Selah! Blessed be the Lord our God, Who hath formed the lights." [^5]
2. "With great love hast You loved us, O Lord our God, and with much overflowing pity hast You pitied us, our Father and our King. For the sake of our fathers who trusted in Thee, and You taught them the statutes of life, have mercy upon us and teach us. Enlighten our eyes in Your law; cause our hearts to cleave to Your commandments; unite our hearts to love and fear Your name, and we shall not be put to shame, world without end. For You art a God Who prepares salvation, and us hast You chosen from among all nations and tongues, and hast in truth brought us near

to Your great Name—Selah—that we may lovingly praise Thee and Your Oneness. Blessed be the Lord Who in love chose His people Israel."

After this followed the "Shema." The Mishnah gives the following beautiful explanation of the order in which the portions of Scripture of which it is composed are arranged (Ber. ii. 2). The section Deuteronomy 6:4-9 is said to precede that in 11:13-21, so that we might "take upon ourselves the yoke of the kingdom of heaven, and only after that the yoke of the commandments." Again: Deuteronomy 11:13-21 precedes Numbers 15:37-41, because the former applies, as it were, both night and day; the latter only by day.

The reader cannot fail to observe the light cast by the teaching of the Mishnah upon the gracious invitation of our Lord: "Come unto Me, all ye that labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take My yoke upon you, and learn of Me; for I am meek and lowly in heart: and ye shall find rest unto your souls. For My yoke is easy, and My burden is light" (Matt 11:28-30). These words must indeed have had a special significance to those who remembered the Rabbinic lesson as to the relation between the kingdom of heaven and the commandments, and they would now understand how by coming to the Savior they would first take upon them "the yoke of the kingdom of heaven," and then that of "the commandments," finding this "yoke easy" and the "burden light."

The prayer after the "Shema" was as follows:

"True it is, that You art Jehovah our God and the God of our fathers, our King and the King of our fathers, our Savior and the Savior of our fathers, our Creator, the Rock of our salvation, our Help and our Deliverer. Your Name is from everlasting, and there is no God beside Thee. A new song did they that were delivered sing to Your Name by the seashore; together did all praise and own Thee King, and say, Jehovah shall reign world without end! Blessed be the Lord Who saves Israel!"

The anti-Sadducean views expressed in this prayer will strike the student of that period, while he will also be much impressed with its suitableness and beauty. The special prayer for the evening is of not quite so old a date as the three just quoted. But as it is referred to in the Mishnah, and is so apt and simple, we reproduce it, as follows:

"O Lord our God! cause us to lie down in peace, and raise us up again to life, O our King! Spread

over us the tabernacle of Your peace; strengthen us before Thee in Your good counsel, and deliver us for Your Name's sake. Be You for protection round about us; keep far from us the enemy, the pestilence, the sword, famine, and affliction. Keep Satan from before and from behind us, and hide us in the shadow of Your wings, for You art a God Who helps and delivers us; and You, O God, art a gracious and merciful King. Keep You our going out and our coming in, for life and for peace, from henceforth and for ever!" (To this prayer a further addition was made at a later period.)

The "Shema" and its accompanying "benedictions" seem to have been said in the synagogue at the lectern; whereas for the next series of prayers the leader of the devotions went forward and stood before "the ark." Hence the expression, "to go up before the ark," for leading in prayer. This difference in position seems implied in many passages of the Mishnah (specially Megillah, iv.), which makes a distinction between saying the "Shema" and "going up before the ark."

The prayers offered before the ark consisted of the so-called eighteen eulogies, or benedictions, and formed the "tephillah," or supplication, in the strictest sense of the term. These eighteen, or rather, as they are now, nineteen, eulogies are of various dates—the earliest being the first three and the last three. There can be no reasonable doubt that these were said at worship in the synagogues, when our Lord was present. Next in date are eulogies 4, 5, 6, 7, 9, and 16. Eulogy 7, which in its present position seems somewhat incongruous, dates from a period of great national calamity—perhaps the time of Pompey. The other eulogies, and some insertions in the older benedictions, were added after the fall of the Jewish commonwealth—eulogy 12 especially being intended against the early Jewish converts to Christianity.

In all likelihood it had been the practice originally to insert prayers of private composition between the (present) first three and last three eulogies; and out of these the later eulogies were gradually formulated. At any rate, we know that on Sabbaths and on other festive occasions only the first three and the last three eulogies were repeated, other petitions being inserted between them. There was thus room for the endless repetitions and "long prayers" which the Savior condemned (Mark 12:40; Luke 20:47).

Besides, it must be borne in mind that, both on entering and leaving the synagogue, it was custom-

ary to offer prayer, and that it was a current Rabbinical saying, "Prolix prayer prolongs life." But as we are sure that, on the Sabbaths when Our Lord attended the synagogues at Nazareth and Capernaum, the first three and the last three of the eulogies were repeated, we produce them here, as follows:

1. "Blessed be the Lord our God and the God of our fathers, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob; the great, the mighty, and the terrible God; the Most High God, Who shows mercy and kindness, Who creates all things, Who remembers the gracious promises to the fathers, and bringeth a Savior to their children's children, for His own Name's sake, in love. O King, Helper, Savior, and Shield! Blessed art You, O Jehovah, the Shield of Abraham."
2. "You, O Lord, art mighty for ever; You, Who quickens the dead, art mighty to save. In Your mercy You preserves the living; You quicken the dead; in Thine abundant pity You bearest up those who fall, and heals those who are diseased, and looses those who are bound, and fulfills Your faithful word to those who sleep in the dust. Who is like unto Thee, Lord of strength, and who can be compared to Thee, Who kills and makes alive, and causes salvation to spring forth? And faithful art You to give life unto the dead. Blessed be You, Jehovah, Who quickens the dead!"
3. "You art holy, and Your Name is holy; and the holy ones praise Thee every day. Selah! Blessed art You, Jehovah God, the Holy One!"

It is impossible not to feel the solemnity of these prayers. They breathe the deepest hopes of Israel in simple, Scriptural language. But who can fully realize their sacred import as uttered not only in the Presence, but by the very lips of the Lord Jesus Christ, Who Himself was their answer?

The three concluding eulogies were as follows:

"Take gracious pleasure, O Jehovah our God, in Your people Israel, and in their prayers. Accept the burnt-offerings of Israel, and their prayers, with Your good pleasure; and may the services of Your people Israel be ever acceptable unto Thee. And oh that our eyes may see it, as You turn in mercy

to Zion! Blessed be You, O Jehovah, Who restores His Shechinah to Zion!"

"We praise Thee, because You art Jehovah our God, and the God of our fathers, for ever and ever. You art the Rock of our life, the Shield of our salvation, from generation to generation. We laud Thee, and declare Your praise for our lives which are kept within Thine hand, and for our souls which are committed unto Thee, and for Your wonders which are with us every day, and Your wondrous deeds and Your goodness, which are at all seasons—evening, morning, and mid-day. You gracious One, Whose compassions never end; You pitying One, Whose grace never ceases—for ever do we put our trust in Thee! And for all this Your Name, O our King, be blessed and extolled always, for ever and ever! And all living bless Thee—Selah—and praise Your Name in truth, O God, our Salvation and our Help. Blessed art You, Jehovah; Your Name is the gracious One, to Whom praise is due."

(We give this eulogy in its shorter form, as it is at present used in evening prayer.) "Oh bestow on Your people Israel great peace, for ever; for You art King and Lord of all peace, and it is good in Thine eyes to bless Your people Israel with praise at all times and in every hour. Blessed art You, Jehovah, Who blesseth His people Israel with peace."

Another act, hitherto, so far as we know, unnoticed, requires here to be mentioned. It invests the prayers just quoted with a new and almost unparalleled interest. According to the Mishnah (Megillah, iv. 5), the person who read in the synagogue the portion from the prophets was also expected to say the "Shema," and to offer the prayers which have just been quoted. It follows that, in all likelihood, our Lord Himself had led the devotions in the synagogue of Capernaum on that Sabbath when He read the portion from the prophecies of Isaiah which was that day "fulfilled in their hearing" (Luke 4:16-21). Nor is it possible to withstand the impression, how specially suitable to the occasion would have been the words of these prayers, particularly those of eulogies 2 and 17.

The prayers were conducted or repeated aloud by one individual, specially deputed for the occasion, the congregation responding by an "Amen." The liturgical service concluded with the priestly benediction (Num 6:23,24), spoken by the descendants of Aaron. In case none such were present, "the legate of the Church," as the leader of the devotions was called, repeated the words from the Scriptures in their connection. In giving the benediction,

the priests elevated their hands up to the shoulders (Sotah, vii. 6); in the Temple, up to the forehead. Hence this rite is designated by the expression, "the lifting up of the hands." [^6]

According to the present practice, the fingers of the two hands are so joined together and separated as to form five interstices; and a mystic meaning attaches to this. It was a later superstition to forbid looking at the priests' hands, as involving physical danger. But the Mishnah already directs that priests having blemishes on their hands, or their fingers dyed, were not to pronounce the benediction, lest the attention of the people should be attracted. Of the attitude to be observed in prayer, this is perhaps scarcely the place to speak in detail. Suffice it, that the body was to be fully bent, yet so, that care was taken never to make it appear as if the service had been burdensome.

One of the Rabbis tells us, that, with this object in view, he bent down as does a branch; while, in lifting himself up again, he did it like a serpent—beginning with the head! Any one deputed by the rulers of a congregation might say prayers, except a minor. This, however, applies only to the "Shema." The eulogies or "tephillah" proper, as well as the priestly benediction, could not be pronounced by those who were not properly clothed, nor by those who were so blind as not to be able to discern daylight. If any one introduced into the prayers heretical views, or what were regarded as such, he was immediately stopped; and, if any impropriety had been committed, was put under the ban for a week.

One of the most interesting and difficult questions relates to certain modes of dress and appearance, and certain expressions used in prayer, which the Mishnah (Megillah, iv. 8,9) declares either to mark heresy or to indicate that a man was not to be allowed to lead prayers in the synagogue. It may be, that some of these statements refer not only to certain Jewish "heretics," but also to the early Jewish Christians. If so, they may indicate certain peculiarities with which they were popularly credited.

Of the services hitherto noticed, the most important were the repetition of the eulogies and the priestly benediction. What now followed was regarded as quite as solemn, if, indeed, not more so. It has already been pointed out, that the main object of the synagogue was the teaching of the people. This was specially accomplished by the reading of the law. At present the Pentateuch is for this purpose arranged into fifty-four sections, of which one is read on each successive Sabbath of the year,

beginning immediately after the feast of Tabernacles. But anciently the lectionary, at least in Palestine, seems to have been differently arranged, and the Pentateuch so divided that its reading occupied three, or, according to some, three and a-half years (half a Jubilee-period). The section for the day was subdivided, so that every Sabbath at least seven persons were called up to read, each a portion, which was to consist of not less than three verses.

The first reader began, and the last closed, with a benediction. As the Hebrew had given place to the Aramaic, a "Meturgeman," or interpreter, stood by the side of the reader, and translated verse by verse into the vernacular. It was customary to have service in the synagogues, not only on Sabbaths and feast-days, but also on the second and fifth days of the week (Monday and Thursday), when the country-people came to market, and when the local Sanhedrim also sat for the adjudication of minor causes.

At such week-day services only three persons were called up to read in the law; on new moon's day and on the intermediate days of a festive week, four; on festive days—when a section from the prophets was also read—five; and on the day of atonement, six. Even a minor was allowed to read, and, if qualified, to act as "Meturgeman." The section describing the sin of Reuben, and that giving a second account of the sin of the golden calf, were read, but not interpreted; those recounting the priestly blessing, and, again, the sin of David and of Amnon, were neither read nor interpreted. The reading of the law was followed by a lesson from the prophets.

At present there is a regular lectionary, in which these lessons are so selected as to suit the sections from the law appointed for the day. This arrangement has been traced to the time of the Syrian persecutions, when all copies of the law were sought for and destroyed; and the Jewish authorities are supposed to have selected portions from the prophets to replace those from the law which might not be produced in public. But it is evident that, if these persecuting measures had been rigidly enforced, the sacred rolls of the prophets would not have escaped destruction any more than those of the law.

Besides, it is quite certain that such a lectionary of the prophets as that presently in use did not exist at the time of our Lord, nor even when the Mishnah was collated. Considerable liberty seems to have been left to individuals; and the expression

used by St. Luke in reference to our Lord in the synagogue at Capernaum (Luke 4:17), "And when He had opened the book, He found the place where it was written," most accurately describes the state of matters. For, from Megillah iv. 4, we gather that, in reading from the prophets, it was lawful to pass over one or more verses, provided there were no pause between the reading and the translation of the "Meturgeman."

For here also the services of a "Meturgeman" were employed; only that he did not, as in reading the law, translate verse by verse, but after every three verses. It is a remarkable fact that the Rabbis exclude from public reading the section in the prophecies of Ezekiel which describes "the chariot and wheels." Rabbi Elieser would also have excluded that in Ezekiel 16:2.

The reading of the prophets was often followed by a sermon or address, with which the service concluded. The preacher was called "darshan," and his address a "derashah" (homily, sermon, from "darash," to ask, inquire, or discuss). When the address was a learned theological discussion—especially in academies—it was not delivered to the people directly, but whispered into the ear of an "amora," or speaker, who explained to the multitude in popular language the weighty sayings which the Rabbi had briefly communicated to him.

A more popular sermon, on the other hand, was called a "meamar," literally, a "speech, or talk." These addresses would be either Rabbinical expositions of Scripture, or else doctrinal discussions, in which appeal would be made to tradition and to the authority of certain great teachers. For it was laid down as a principle (Eduj. i. 3), that "every one is bound to teach in the very language of his teacher."

In view of this two-fold fact, we can in some measure understand the deep impression which the words of our Lord produced, even on those who remained permanently uninfluenced by them. The substance of His addresses was far other than they had ever heard of, or conceived possible. It seemed as if they opened quite a new world of Yought, hope, duty, and comfort. No wonder that even in contemptuous Capernaum "all bare Him witness, and wondered at the gracious words which proceeded out of His mouth"; and that the very Temple-guard sent to make Him prisoner were overawed, and before the council could only give this account of their strange negligence: "Never man spake like this man" (John 7:46).

Similarly, the form also of His teaching was so different from the constant appeal of the Rabbis to mere tradition; it seemed all to come so quite fresh and direct from heaven, like the living waters of

the Holy Spirit, that “the people were astonished at His doctrine: for He taught them as one having authority, and not as the scribes” (Matt 7:28,29).

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