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# The Theology of Synagog Architecture

(As Reflected in the Excavation Reports)

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THE origins of the synagog are lost in the obscurity of the past. There seem to be adequate reasons for believing that this religious institution did not exist in pre-Exilic times. Whether, however, the synagog came into being during the dark years of the Babylonian Captivity, or whether it dates back only to the early centuries after the return of the Jews to Palestine, is a matter of uncertainty. The oldest dated evidence we have for the existence of a synagog was found in Egypt in 1902 and consists of a marble slab which records the dedication of such a building at Schedia, near Alexandria. The inscription reads as follows:

In honor of King Ptolemy and Queen Berenice, his sister and wife, and their children, the Jews (dedicate) this synagogue.<sup>1</sup>

Apparently the Ptolemy referred to is the one known as the Third, who ruled from 247 to 221 B. C. If this is true, it is not unreasonable to assume that the synagog existed as a religious institution in Egypt by the middle of the third century B. C. Interestingly enough, the inscription calls the edifice a *προσευχή*, which is the word used in Acts 16 for something less than a permanent structure outside the city of Philippi. This was the standard Hellenistic term for what in Hebrew was (and is) normally known as *בֵּית הַתְּפִלָּה*, the house of assembly, although there are contexts where it is referred to as *בֵּית הַתְּפִלָּה*, the house of prayer, possibly echoing Is. 56:7.

At any rate, it is not unlikely that during their exile from Palestine faithful Jews gathered in the homes of individual prophets to receive spiritual comfort and guidance. This practice, informally begun in days of great distress, may in time have resulted in the establishment of a religious institution which Renan once described

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<sup>1</sup> *The Jewish Encyclopedia* (New York and London: 1901—06), XI, 620.

as the most original and productive creation of the Jewish people.<sup>2</sup> In point of fact, the Christian Church owes much to the synagog by way of outlook and method. For this reason Adolf von Harnack spoke of this institution as a pace setter for Christian mission work.<sup>3</sup> Without a doubt it represented a revolutionary departure from the character of all earlier places of worship. It excluded both propitiation by sacrifices and initiation by mysteries. That is to say, the synagog ministered to the religious needs of men without benefit of either sacrificial or sacramental ritual.

Unfortunately, the various expeditions undertaken to uncover the remains of early synagoges in Palestine have yielded nothing of consequence, architecturally speaking, that antedates the third century of our era. We do have an inscription, however, from the Ophel in Jerusalem, discovered there by R. Weill in 1913—14 and published in his report of 1920, *La Cité de David*. It reads:

Theodotos, son of Vettenos, Priest and Archisynagogos, son of an Archisynagogos, grandson of an Archisynagogos, built the synagogue for the reading of the Law and for the teaching of the Commandments; furthermore, the Hospice and the Chambers, and the water installation for the lodging of needy strangers. The foundation stone thereof had been laid by his fathers, and the Elders, and the Simonides.<sup>4</sup>

The reading is given here in full because it refers to a number of items that need to be understood in an appreciation of the theology of synagog architecture. These will be referred to later. Suffice it to say at this point that the inscription dates from the century preceding the destruction of Jerusalem. Whether it has any connection with the Synagog of the Libertines (Acts 6) is debatable.

Under any circumstances, archaeologists have not found anything more of note by way of synagog remains in Palestine from before the third century of our era. The Roman devastations, of A. D. 70

<sup>2</sup> Quoted by Sukenik, *Ancient Synagogues in Palestine and Greece* (London: British Academy, 1934), p. 2.

<sup>3</sup> *Die Religion in Geschichte und Gegenwart: Handwörterbuch für Theologie und Religionswissenschaft*, 2d ed. Hermann Gunkel und Leopold Zscharnack (Tübingen: T. C. B. Mohr, 1927—32), V, 950. Hereafter this work will be abbreviated RGG.

<sup>4</sup> Sukenik, p. 70.

and again in A. D. 132, left nothing much to be excavated along this line. True, for a time it was thought that the ruins of a synagogue at Capernaum might date from the time of our Lord. But no competent archaeologist would support that point of view today. The fact is that, outside the Theodotus inscription mentioned above, we have nothing to indicate what the architecture of synagogues was like before the third century. We can surmise that it consisted of a single room and a few antechambers; but this remains no more than a guess.

From the third to the sixth century of the Christian era, however, enough synagogue remains have been found to determine their general pattern, both in Palestine and in the Greek Diaspora. What is more, it is possible to construct a set of theological principles that either unwittingly or quite consciously determined the way in which synagogues were structured and equipped. We shall deal here with four major insights that appear to be expressed in what we know from the excavation of ancient synagogues. They are the following: God is one; the study of the Law is worship; the service of others is religion; and the individual is responsible for his own spiritual life. These will be taken up in that order.

## I

### GOD IS ONE

Nothing is more characteristic of Judaism than its *שמע*: "Hear, O Israel, the Lord, our God, the Lord is one."<sup>5</sup> Israel's religion was unique in this respect. Yahweh alone was God. He did not even have a consort, as the gods of other religions did. To be sure, Yahweh was served by angelic hosts, but these were lesser, even created, beings and were in no way His equals, even though the word *מלאכים* was occasionally used of them. Yahweh's holy mountain, therefore, Mount Zion, was described as "beautiful in elevation," "the joy of all the earth."<sup>6</sup>

This belief in one God, Ruler of heaven and earth, is reflected in the old Jewish tradition that a synagogue must be built "on the height of a city," that is to say, on the highest place in the area.

<sup>5</sup> Deut. 6:4. This is probably the best translation of the Hebrew.

<sup>6</sup> Psalm 48.

The Palestinian synagogues of which we have remains mostly meet this requirement, except at Capernaum. In other countries, of course, this stipulation could not always be met, because the local Roman authorities would not permit it. In fact, Diaspora synagogues were often built outside the municipality, near a stream, if that was possible. This was even true of the synagogue of Capernaum. Nonetheless, on the basis of theological principle, the place where the only true God was worshiped ought to stand on higher ground than any other edifice. (In later centuries, a pole was sometimes attached to the top of a synagogue so that at least the pole could rise above surrounding edifices. This device was perhaps the ancestor to steeples on Christian churches.)

Devotion to the service of one God is reflected, moreover, in the orientation of synagogue buildings. In excavating earlier synagogues, from the third and fourth centuries, it was found that they were built so as to have their façade with the three entrances looking toward Jerusalem. This meant that the individuals who led the congregation in prayer faced Jerusalem. The windows over the three doorways, remains of which were found, for example, at Capernaum and at Chorazin, were an abiding reminder to those who so prayed of the faithfulness of Daniel, who extended his hands in intercession and praise three times a day at windows open toward Jerusalem. Obviously, these windows in the synagogues could also serve the practical purpose of providing light for the gallery, wherever such an architectural feature existed.

In the Byzantine period, that is, during the fifth and sixth centuries, however, a reorientation took place. The entranceways to the synagogue were put on the opposite side; and the ark end of the edifice was designed to be the side nearest Jerusalem. The difference can be seen, for instance, in the ground plans of the Capernaum and Chorazin synagogues when compared with those of Na'aran and Beth Alpha. In the case of the former two the entrances face southward; in the instance of the latter, they look to the north.

Either way, a conscious effort was made to orient the building toward Jerusalem. This was true also of the Diaspora synagogues. The plan of the synagogues at Priene, for example, has the apse for the ark on its eastern side, toward Jerusalem. On the other hand, the building at Dura Europos was oriented to the west, also toward

the Holy City. These two were oriented in opposite directions because of their geographical situation and relationship to Palestine.

Now, such careful orientation of a sacred edifice is a practice that grows out of a monotheistic religion. Christianity and Islam are other cases in point. The theology behind such procedure is the conviction that there is but one God of the world, but that this God has revealed Himself in history at a given place on earth. The temples of polytheistic religions require no such orientation, because each place has its own deity and shrine.

From the third century forward into the Byzantine period, synagogues normally took the form of a basilica, with three entrances at the front. The center door was very large and led into the nave, unless the ark of the Law was so constructed and located as to obstruct this doorway, as was the case in Capernaum. The other two doors led directly into the aisles of the synagogue. There was nothing devious or mysterious about entering such a building. There was no architectural device like that of the typical temple of Baal centuries before this, where it was impossible to have direct access to the main room, on the theory that the curious were not to be encouraged to look inside except by very special effort.<sup>7</sup> Yahweh's revelation of His will in the Torah, on the contrary, was intended to invite also the passerby and the casually curious to become better acquainted. There was no mystery to be found in the synagogue, not in the usual Oriental sense.<sup>8</sup> Many Gentiles came to appreciate this fact and became proselytes.

And, of course, no images of God Himself were to be found in a synagogue. The making of "graven images" was specifically prohibited by the Decalog. The interpretation put on this commandment, however, seems to have varied from time to time and from place to place. For in the ruins of some of the synagogues that have been excavated archaeologists discovered some rather remarkable mosaics. It seems that in the fifth century such mosaics replaced the flagstones of previous synagogue architecture. This

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<sup>7</sup> George Ernest Wright, *Biblical Archaeology* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press; London: Gerald Duckworth & Co., Ltd., 1957), p. 114.

<sup>8</sup> In his *The Idea of the Holy*, Rudolf Otto tells us that the concept of "The Numinous" became clear to him in a little Moroccan synagogue that he visited. Cf. *RGG*, V, 950.

development was anticipated by the magnificent murals from the third century uncovered at Dura Europos.

All of the mosaic representations, as well as the murals, are two-dimensional. In a sense, therefore, they are not "images." Very few statues have been found among the remains of ancient synagogues. They consist mostly of the stone lions found at Chorazin and Kifr Birim, where they seem to portray the strength of Yahweh. The mosaics found in the nave of the building at Beth Alpha reveal a greater variety in subject matter and a remarkable interest in colorful representation. But even here the Deity itself was not depicted, except in the form of a hand intervening at the sacrifice of Isaac.

Abraham's willingness to offer up his own son was, in fact, the subject matter occupying the whole first panel. This seems to have been a popular theme; it occurs also among the murals of Dura. The second panel at Beth Alpha consists of a picture of the zodiac. It is similar to the one found in the synagogue of Na'aran. The third panel, in front of the apse, contains a representation of the ark and other synagog appurtenances, among them the symbol of two lions, suggesting the attributes of strength and victory in God.

Despite the elaborate detail in the various mosaics that have so far been uncovered in ancient synagogues, no attempt was ever made to depict God in some human form. This is of the utmost significance. It points up the degree to which synagog architecture was committed to the conviction that God is one, and that there is no way of representing Him in art as a person.

## II

### STUDY AS WORSHIP

The second theological insight that finds expression in synagog architecture, especially in the appurtenances of these structures, might be formulated as follows: The study of the Torah is in itself an act of worship. Synagogues, both outside and within Palestine, carried on the custom of reading from Israel's sacred writings, a practice that goes back to Ezra and the scribes. It was in the synagog as a religious institution that a fairly standard system of lections from both the Law and the Prophets was developed. It was here, moreover, that the reading of the ancient Hebrew text was

supplemented by translations and expositions so that the Scriptures might be understood by the whole assembly. In other words, the sacred texts were not read as though there were some kind of magic about them. They were presented because they constituted God's revelation to rational and intelligent beings.

The chief furnishing, therefore, of the synagog was a shrine for these holy writings. It was known as the chest (תִּבְיָהּ) or ark (אָרוֹן הַקֹּדֶשׁ). In point of fact, this was really the only essential equipment of a synagog. In earlier centuries it seems that this ark of the Law was constructed to be set or moved into the nave, either as a portable item or something more or less permanent. At Capernaum, for example, the ark was placed near the main entrance in such a way as to render the doorway useless. The same may be said for the structure at Chorazin.

Since such "chests" were apparently made of wood, no remains of them have been found. Yet there are enough pictorial representations of these arks to leave no doubt at all as to what they looked like. We have already mentioned the third panel of mosaics at Beth Alpha. This contains the picture of an ark as well as other items of equipment. Another representation was discovered among the synagog ruins of Bukeia (Peqi'in). Others may be seen on lamps and pieces of gilt glass found in various places. Of the latter, one piece, discovered in the catacombs at Rome, even depicts the contents of such an ark as consisting of scrolls, each one rolled on a rod, lying in rows on shelves.

In later synagogs special apses were constructed to house the ark of the Law. The ground plans for the synagogs both at Beth Alpha and at Jerash indicate the existence of such apses. The ruins of the synagog at Priene also contained this feature. There is no apse, however, either at Capernaum or at Chorazin, as we have already implied.

A veil (פִּרְסוֹת) was usually hung over the whole apse, and not just over the ark, as in modern times. This becomes evident from the excavations at Beth Alpha, for example. There the floor of the apse ran out into the main auditorium for some distance. On the edges of this platform sockets were found, containing two posts, which, no doubt, supported a bar or wire on which the veil was hung. At Hammath, Ascalon, and Ashdod even



the remains of marble screens, richly decorated, were discovered. These were used to separate the place of the ark from the worshippers, in imitation of the veil in the temple at Jerusalem.

Both the veil and the screen were a reminder of Israel's experience in the desert when Moses had to veil his face as he read from God's holy Law. It is an architectural feature St. Paul alluded to in 2 Cor. 3:15 in describing the inability and even unwillingness of the Jews to realize that the Law had been done away with by Christ. For our present purpose it is enough to say that the use of veil and screen is a reminder that the ark was no ordinary chest. It was deemed to be sacred, and its contents even more so. The handling of the scrolls of the Law, therefore, whether for reading or for exposition, was an act of worship. In this respect synagog screens were unlike the iconostasis of Christian churches, where the Eucharist was screened off from view. There was nothing sacramental, in the usual sense of that word, about the ark and its scrolls.

This emphasis on the reading and learning of the Law was expressed also in the use of lecterns. Judging from a representation of such a reading stand on a lamp shown by Sukenik,<sup>9</sup> this was at first a very light piece of furniture that could even be hung up when not in use. The mosaics at Beth Alpha and Jerash confirm this observation. Obviously, the lectern had a very practical function and use: the reader could place his scroll there as he read to the assembly. This very practice underlines the interest of the synagog in the study of the Law as an act of worship.

Every larger synagog of our day has what might be called a speaker's platform. Technically it was called in ancient days the βήμα. It would seem that this feature was added rather universally to the synagog near the end of the sixth century; for the one stone βήμα that has been discovered, at Beth Alpha, was built on top of the mosaics, obviously at a later date. It is possible, of course, that there were wooden platforms before this and that none of these have survived, except at Capernaum, where some evidence remains for the existence of such a βήμα. Not even at Dura was there much to suggest the presence of a βήμα, except possibly some otherwise inexplicable holes in the floor, where

<sup>9</sup> Sukenik, p. 15.

the corners of the platform may have been fastened down.<sup>10</sup> Under any circumstances the addition of such a platform again accented the importance of hearing and learning the Law.

In this connection it might be in order to refer to the "seats of Moses" that were found among the remains of a good many synagoges. There was a time when it was thought that this New Testament expression was used only symbolically. However, that point of view has been abandoned, now that such special seats of honor have been excavated. The first one was unearthed at Hammath-by-Tiberias and was followed very shortly by another at Chorazin. In the former synagog it was found *in situ*, next to the wall orientated toward Jerusalem. It was unquestionably reserved for the most distinguished elder of the congregation. Among the ruins of Delos a very handsome marble seat was uncovered. It was still in place. Surprisingly, however, it faced east, which suggests that outside of Palestine it may not have been obligatory to have the elders sit "with their backs to the Holy." At Dura the elder's seat was of very simple construction. Four steps led to a higher one that served as the seat proper. The riser was at one time painted red, but the color is much worn off, and the tread of the step below is deeply indented from use.

The most honored elder of a synagog would normally be one who was best versed in the Law. Once again, therefore, the principle that the study of the Law is worship reveals its influence on the architectural features of ancient synagoges. From all this it is evident that the synagog was intended to serve the interests of religious education. This was surely one of the functions of the elaborate murals found at Dura. Familiar Bible stories are here illustrated to help the worshiper understand and appreciate some of the more remarkable of Yahweh's mighty acts toward Israel.

It was this concentration on learning and teaching that often intrigued Gentiles. There was here no special mystery into which one had to be initiated. There was here no sacrificial system. Men and women went to the synagog to worship by hearing the Sacred Scriptures read and expounded. All of the monotheistic vigor of

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<sup>10</sup> *A Preliminary Report on the Synagogue at Dura* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1936), p. 17.

Judaism shone through this kind of religious activity; and many non-Jews became proselytes of the gate, if not always of righteousness.

Educational activities went on at the synagog, of course, outside the regular hours of public worship too. In fact, some of the extra rooms found next to the main auditorium in the ruins of a good many synagogs were apparently used for purposes of training the children, preparing them for their *בֵּר מִצְוָה*, for example. All of this impressed many Gentiles. Also in this respect the religion of the Jews was different. It seemed to make a very constructive contribution to life. Small wonder that in the inscription of Theodotos, son of Vettenos, special mention is made of the fact that the synagog was built "for the reading of the Law and for the teaching of the Commandments."<sup>11</sup> This was the essence of synagog worship.

### III

#### THE SERVICE OF OTHERS IS RELIGION

The Theodotos reading goes on to mention "the hospice and the chambers" as well as "the water installation for the lodging of needy strangers." It is clear from this kind of statement that the activities at the synagog were not limited to the study of the Law. It was also a place where charity was practiced on behalf of the needy and of the stranger.

The Greek word for "lodging" is *κατάλυμα*, the term translated as "inn" in Luke's Christmas story. It is evident from this that at least the larger synagogs were used not only for educational purposes but for the care of those in need. This was in part the use to which the extra enclosures and rooms were put that can still be seen in the ground plans established by various excavations. At Beth Alpha, for example, a large courtyard was found to have been built on the north end of the basilica proper. At Capernaum a large courtyard, in the shape of a trapezium and running along the whole length of the synagog on the east side, was uncovered. At Jerash, too, there seems to have been a rather sizable enclosure on the apse side of the synagog structure. In Priene the same kind of courtyard was unearthed at the opposite side. A large court and several rooms were also uncovered at Dura.

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<sup>11</sup> See above, page 903.

Possibly the Miletus synagog can serve as our best example in this connection. In front of the entrance to the synagog proper lay a forecourt with a peristyle, lined on its southern half by benches. On the north side lay another court, bounded on the north by a wing consisting of a row of chambers. On the west side was another row of rooms of various sizes. This suggests that the practice of hospitality and the care of the needy was not confined to Jerusalem, where it might be expected because of the many pilgrims that came to the Holy City each year. Moreover, the presence of so many rooms gives us some idea of the degree to which synagog served as community centers. We know from other sources that they served as meeting places for community leaders, popular assemblies, publication of legal notices, and similar activities. The point of all this is that the synagog, known both as a house of assembly and a house of prayer, did not stand apart from its environment, as a sacrosanct edifice. On the contrary, its chief business was to serve others. This was the very heart of its religious outlook.

It was these educational and charitable programs of the synagog as an institution that undoubtedly prompted Von Harnack to utter the remark, referred to toward the beginning of this paper, to the effect that the synagog set the pace for Christian missionary activity. The activities of the synagog must have stood out as a beacon light in a world given to the worship of many idols, the practice of temple prostitution, and the exploitation of the simplicity of the poor and uneducated. Small wonder that many Gentiles became "God fearers."

#### IV

##### INDIVIDUAL RESPONSIBILITY

The Septuagint often used the term "synagog" for the Old Testament  $\text{קִנְיָה}$ . And it was by way of this Greek translation of the Hebrew Scriptures that the word  $\text{συναγωγή}$  became common. The Hellenistic expression, however, was  $\text{προσευχή}$ , as we saw at the beginning of this paper. Sometimes the term  $\text{προσευκτήριον}$  was used instead. Both of these latter words underline the fact that the synagog was above all a house of prayer. It was here that the faithful assembled for the reading of the Law and the saying of prayers.

The absence of any kind of altar among synagog remains implies that the individual who led the assembly in public prayer, even though he was called a priest at times (as in the Theodotos inscription), was not thought of as being an intermediary between men and God in the sense of the priesthood at Jerusalem. In the synagog each man entered the presence of God on his own responsibility. Each worshiper had the task of personally appropriating what was being read and taught as the right way to minister to his own spiritual needs.

The group of individuals who assembled for worship in the synagog entered the assembly room as equals and sat down together on mats or on the stone benches built along three sides of the auditorium, as, for example, at Capernaum, where on both the east and the west side two benches were built, one above the other and coterminous with the walls. Oddly enough, at Dura the benches intended for men had footrests. Those used by women did not. Just how seriously this distinction between men and women at worship was taken in ancient days is hard to determine. Philo made a note of this practice of segregation. The synagogs at Capernaum, Chorazin, and Beth Alpha had galleries that ran along three walls of the basilica. It is more than likely that women were expected to sit in these galleries. It may well be that this custom of having the women sit separately, in galleries and later behind screens, was taken over from the temple in Jerusalem, where there was a special enclosure known as the Women's Court.

If this is true, we might conclude that such segregation helped to remind all of the worshipers of their common loyalty to the temple and its sacred site in the Holy City. It helped to focus the heart of the individual worshiper on the common hope of all Israel. This was probably also the function of such a religious symbol as the *מְנוּרָה*, or lampstand, which almost always graces any representation of the ark of the Law. The proper balance between the religious life of the individual and the worship of the community of God's ancient people as a whole may certainly be seen in some of the Biblical themes used as motifs both for mosaics and for murals. The story of the Flood, the sacrifice of Isaac, Daniel in the lions' den would all tend to evoke in the individual the spirit of loyalty, prayer, and praise, but within a con-

text that would remind him of his being a part of a greater whole to which God had committed Himself by way of a covenant.

The synagog has served Judaism well, especially after the destruction of the temple. Through the centuries all types of synagog architecture were developed. This was due to a conviction that the religion of Yahweh must relate itself to the cultural climate of the community where it was located. From the third to the sixth century, therefore, synagog took the shape of basilicas, the most practical kind of building in the Graeco-Roman world. The use of the zodiac as a major theme in what little Jewish art work we have of these early centuries also involves this matter of relating to the cultural life of the environment. A belief in astrology was common to all of life at that time. The synagog took note of it but used it to help bring people to the knowledge of Yahweh. That the use of such themes occasionally bordered on compromising the faith can hardly be debated. Basically, however, they manifest the degree to which Judaism proposed to move out into the world to spread the knowledge of God until it should cover the earth as the waters cover the sea.

Throughout the centuries to follow the theology reflected in the remains of ancient synagog has proved vigorous enough to sustain this institution as the very heart of Jewish social and religious life. As a matter of fact, one is tempted to suggest that it has retained more of its pristine force in the synagog than in many churches, which in reality should be thought of as underscoring these theological principles and extending them to include the worship of the Father, through His Son Jesus Christ, to whom be glory forever and ever!

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