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Jesus and the Synagogue

By Jim Myers

Jesus never established a church. Doesn't that seem strange since the central place of worship for those who claim to be the authorized descendants of the Jesus Movement is a church? Wouldn't it seem like Jesus would have been the founder of the first church, if that was his goal?

When he came to Nazareth, where he had been brought up, he went to the synagogue on the sabbath day, as was his custom. (Luke 4:16)

Jesus went throughout Galilee, teaching in their synagogues and proclaiming the good news of the kingdom and curing every disease and every sickness among the people. (Matthew 4:23)

The authors of two different Gospels make it clear that Jesus was not only aware of the existence of synagogues, but that it was also his "custom" to attend meetings on the Sabbath at a synagogue. *This should raise a few questions for the vast majority of present day followers of Jesus who neither go to a synagogue nor worship on the Sabbath (Friday sundown through Saturday sundown).*

I must also point out that, unlike in present day Rabbinic Judaism, the synagogue was not the central place of worship during the life of Jesus. *The Temple was the Torah authorized institution of Jewish worship, to which Jews from the remote parts of the world made pilgrimage and sent their tithes. The synagogue came into being during the Babylonian Captivity (500 BCE).*

The first synagogue in the world was built, it seems, in Babylon. There is no accurate information in this regard, except for the legend connected with the founding of the *Shef ve-Yativ* (literally: the "moved and settled") Synagogue in Nehardea. The legend tells us that King Yehoyachin who was exiled in the first Diaspora to Babylon (597 BCE), brought with him earth from Israel, or more accurately bricks, which he used in its building. ¹

Many scholars and textbooks use the word "synagogue" as if the word described a single, consistent, and well-defined phenomenon. But in reality there were many kinds of synagogues, during both the Second Temple and Rabbinic Periods, with varying functions, architecture, religious rituals, and social settings. ²

Since the synagogue grew from diverse and complex origins, it is most unlikely that any single group or office controlled all the synagogues of antiquity. The synagogue was not a Pharisaic invention and there is no reason to assume that all pre-70 synagogues, even in the land of Israel, were under Pharisaic control. ³

Theodotus explains that his synagogue is to serve for "reading of the Law and the teaching of the commandments." The study of scripture, then, is an activity that the synagogues of Israel and the Diaspora have in common. Otherwise, however, they are very different. The synagogues of Israel were not *proseuchai*, "prayer-houses." It is striking that only one text refers to a *proseuche* in Israel (Josephus, Life 277, 280, and 293,

describing a synagogue in Tiberius), and that only one text (Mat. 6:5) explicitly locates regular prayer in Palestinian synagogues.⁴ In Jerusalem there is no indication of any municipal synagogue. There the synagogues were private affairs, just like clubs or associations.

The Seat of Moses

The Synoptic Gospels are loaded with clues that help us rediscover the ancient world in which Jesus lived. Many of these were not completely understood until archaeologists began digging and uncovering the treasures hidden for so many centuries.



SOURCE: http://darkwing.uoregon.edu/~dfalk/courses/ejud/synagogues_files/image019.jpg

1 Then Jesus said to the crowds and to his disciples, 2 "The scribes and the Pharisees sit on Moses' seat; 3 therefore, do whatever they teach you and follow it; but do not do as they do, for they do not practice what they teach. (Matthew 23)

The *Darshan* (preacher / teacher) did not stand above his audience. Though the preacher might speak from a raised platform or pulpit (*bimah*), he did not stand, as we might expect a public speaker to do today. Rather, the *Darshan* normally was seated. This practice is clear from the fact that throughout Talmudic literature the expression used to introduce what happened or was said by a particular *Darshan* during a public sermon is "He sat and preached" (*yashav vedarash*) (see Avot deRabbi Natan, Version A, Ch. 4; Song of Songs Rabbah 1:15.2; cf. Luke

4:20). It may be that in some synagogues the *Darshan* was seated facing the congregation on a kind of special throne. This may well have been the function of the "seat of Moses," mentioned already in the New Testament (Matthew 23:2) as occupied by "scribes and Pharisees." Examples of such thrones have been discovered in the excavations of synagogues from Talmudic times, at Hammat Tiberias and Chorazin in Israel. A

splendid example comes from the synagogue on the Aegean island of Delos, thought to date from the first century B.C.⁵

A Greek inscription found in Jerusalem, from the beginning of the first century CE, boasts of having "*built the*

synagogue for the reading of the Law and for the study of the precepts, as well as the hospice and the chambers and the bathing establishment, for lodging those who need them, from abroad." Jesus walks into a synagogue in his home town of Nazareth one Sabbath; he's handed a copy of the Book of Isaiah, which he proceeds to read from aloud and then preach.⁶

Jesus' actions fit well within the culture of his day. How did his future followers come to believe that the Jewish customs and traditions, that Jesus practiced, were evil? How important is it for present day followers to understand the actions and words of Jesus in their correct cultural context?

SOURCES:

³ http://mishkantorah.org/parasha/5763/jews_of_iraq.htm

²⁻³ From the Maccabees to the Mishnah by Shaye J. D. Cohen; Wayne A. Meeks, editor. (Westminster Press, Philadelphia, PA 1987) [p. 114]

⁴ From the Maccabees to the Mishnah [p. 113].

⁵ <http://www.jtsa.edu/davidson/melton/bestof/darshan.shtml>

⁶ <http://www.pathsinjudaism.com/judaism/syllabus/rabbinic2.htm>