

THE SYNAGOGUE (Ezekiel 11:16)

By Mark Moore

- I. Definition:
 - A. "A gathering," etymologically = to lead together.
 - B. Origin:
 - 1. Most likely during the Babylonian captivity after the destruction of the temple.
 - 2. Sacrifices could no longer be offered (Amos 7:17), but were replaced by prayer and study.
 - 3. Such meetings as Ezekiel 8:1; 20:1-3 likely got more frequent and organized, evolving into the synagogue system.
 - C. Importance: The synagogue is one of the leading factors which facilitated the spread of Christianity in a number of ways:
 - 1. It gave a welcome preaching point for early evangelists.
 - 2. It preserved and proliferated monotheism and the Holy Scriptures as the Jews spread among pagan people.
 - 3. It laid a Jewish theological/philosophical foundation among pagan cultures which is so critical to understanding Christianity.

- II. Description:
 - A. Structure
 - 1. Situated so that worshipers entered and faced toward Jerusalem (1 Kings 8:44, 48, Dan. 6:10; T.P. Berakot 4, 8b-c), with three entrances.
 - 2. They desired to place the building on the highest point of the city.
 - 3. They preferred a site near water for ritual cleansing.
 - B. Furniture:
 - 1. The most important fixture was the Ark for scrolls.
 - 2. Bema--Raised platform near the center where several people could stand.
 - 3. In front of the ark stood an 8 branched candlestick.
 - 4. The chief seats were those nearest the ark.
 - 5. Since the Middle Ages, synagogues have provided balcony seating for women or screens which separate men from women. It is not certain that there was separate seating for women in ancient times (Pfeiffer, p. 63).
 - 6. Alms-boxes at or near the door.
 - 7. Notice boards on which excommunicants would be recorded.
 - 8. A chest for musical instruments.
 - 9. Eternal light--A lamp which never is allowed to go out. Modern synagogues will often use electric timers to avoid breaking the Halakah prohibiting making fire on the Sabbath.
 - C. Leadership:
 - 1. Head of the Synagogue--ARCHISYNAGOGOS, (Mark 5:22). This person ranked just below a scribe. Also called the Sheliach. His qualifications were much like those Paul gives for an elder.
 - a. Supervision of the services
 - b. Maintaining order (Luke 13:14)
 - c. Inviting a guest to speak (Acts 13:15)
 - d. Handing the Scripture scroll from the Chazzan to the reader.
 - 2. Council of Elders--Served much like our board of Elders, sometimes called shepherds.
 - 3. The Chazzan (minister/servant)--functioning as our deacons taking care of janitorial duties of the synagogue and often acted like a schoolmaster of the town. The Sheliach and Chazzan were placed in leadership by the imposition of hands.

- D. The services
1. The Nature of the Service:
 - a. Each service required the presence of at least 10 adult males (i.e. who have been through bar mitzvah at 13).
 - b. Appropriate apparel included the prayer shawl [tallit], and its fringes [sisit], as well as phylacteries.
 - c. Synagogues were open daily for instruction and prayer.
 - d. Involved set prayers, reading of the Law (a cycle completed every 3 years), and the Derash "word of exhortation". There were five parts:
 2. Structure of the Service:
 - a. Shema (Deut. 6:4-9; 11:13-21; Num. 15:37-41--This became the Jewish confession of faith that later replaced animal sacrifices)
 - b. Prayer [Tefillah], chiefly the 18 benedictions as of the beginning of the 2nd century. A nineteenth was added by the grandson of Gamaliel which originally read, "For apostates may there be no hope, and may the Nazarenes and the heretics suddenly perish."
 - c. Reading of the Law.
 - (1) The Chazzan stands next to the reader and corrects any mistakes and stops the reader if he feels the passage would shock the congregation or make them laugh.
 - (2) Each passage is to be translated into the vernacular.
 - (3) No one was allowed to read more than one verse at a time and no less than three verses in the reading.
 - (4) The reader was forbidden to take his eyes off the scroll or to trust his memory.
 - (5) Any adult male could be a reader, except that the reading of Esther was not permitted by minors.
 - d. Reading of the prophets [Haftarah], with the benediction
 - (1) A reader was allowed here to read three verses at a time. He could also delete or skip verses if he chose.
 - (2) Jesus likely was reading the Haftarah in Nazareth (Luke 4:16-20).
 - e. The Scripture lesson:
 - (1) Anyone present and able could be asked to preach, especially prominent visitors (Luke 4:16-20; Acts 13:15).
 - (2) They did so while sitting on an elevated platform (Luke 4:20).
 - (3) Purpose: Praise God and Educate the people.
- E. Other functions of the Synagogue:
1. Judicial functions (Lk. 12:11; 21:12)
 - a. Formal court hearings
 - b. Punishment (Mat. 10:17; Mk. 13:9)
 - c. Excommunication (John 12:42; 16:2). The church also imitated this judicial function with excommunication. Although the synagogue could declare the death penalty, under Roman occupation, it had to be confirmed with the procurator (cf. John 18:31).
 2. Schools--bet hammidrash
 3. Community Center