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The First-Century Synagogue: New Perspectives

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Intresset för antiken har ökat kraftigt inom många discipliner. Även den antika synagogan behandlas av allt fler forskare. «Den antika synagogan: Födelseplats för två världsreligioner» är idag temat för ett större projekt i Lund. Lee I. Levine, professor i «Archeology of the Mishnaic and Talmudic Periods» vid The Hebrew University i Jerusalem, har skrivit den stora handboken i ämnet. Han blev hedersdoktor vid Teologiska fakulteten i Lund den 25 maj 2000 och höll då en föreläsning som i en något reviderad form publiceras här.

Interest in the ancient synagogue has grown dramatically over the last several decades. Since the 1980s, more than ten monographs, some twenty volumes of studies, and scores of articles have been published on a wide range of synagogue-related topics, including synagogue art and architecture, epigraphy, liturgy, social and institutional dimensions, leadership roles, and the place of women. The result is an ever-growing corpus of material that has immeasurably enriched our understanding of many aspects pertaining to this central Jewish institution.

If this is true of synagogue studies in general, it is particularly noticeable with regard to the first-century synagogue both in Judaea and the Diaspora. Such studies have burgeoned owing primarily to Christian interest in the subject. The gospels frequently place Jesus in a synagogue setting (see especially Luke 4:16–30), and Paul regularly visited synagogues during his peregrinations throughout Asia Minor and Greece (Acts 13–18). Furthermore, Christian interest in the synagogue stems in part from the wider trend to reevaluate the Jewish heritage of early Christianity in a more positive light. The well-known events of the mid-twentieth century (the Holocaust, founding of the State of Israel, Vatican II, etc.) have each contributed to the development of this trend.

In this vein, another attraction of the first-century synagogue to scholars is related to the newly awakened interest in Jewish religious life generally during this period, itself resulting from an increased concern with the study of sects (the Pharisees and especially the Qumran scrolls), Second Temple literature (i.e., the Apocrypha and Pseudepigrapha), and the nature and varieties of Judaism at the time. The connection between the inhabitants of Qumran, usually identified with the Essenes, and early Christianity has been recognized since the earliest discoveries of these documents in the late 1940s.

The increased interest in the first-century synagogue is also indebted to the relatively accessible primary sources such as Josephus, Philo, and the New Testament. Synagogue inscriptions from this period contain fascinating historical information about the institution. This burst of activity contrasts with the state of affairs regarding synagogue research in Late Antiquity (third to seventh centuries); much of what we know about the synagogue then is recorded in rabbinic sources or preserved in corpora of inscriptions, some of which have been published only in Hebrew, thus rendering this material far less accessible to modern scholars.

Nevertheless, despite its flourishing state, the study of the Second Temple synagogue is not without considerable methodological challenges:

1) The sources available are, when all is said and done, quite limited. All told, references to the synagogue in the New Testament, Josephus, Philo, and elsewhere number but several score—for the entire Jewish world! The archeo-

logical material is likewise meager, especially when compared with the enormous quantity relating to Late Antiquity. Less than a half dozen buildings can be securely dated to the first century, although a modest number of inscriptions and papyri exist with respect to Egypt, Cyrene, Rome, and the Bosphorus Kingdom.

2) Given the fact that this is the earliest period documented for the study of the synagogue, several basic methodological issues arise. For example, how are we to define the synagogue—as a building? a gathering of people for any number of purposes? a recognized communal framework? On what basis should such an assessment be made? Moreover, assuming that we are dealing with a structure, what sort of archeological or literary evidence is required in order to validate the identification of a particular site as a synagogue?

3) There is also the vexing question of origins. Are we to assume a correlation between the earliest mention of a synagogue and the fact that it originated at this particular time? Based on this not uncommon assumption these days, the synagogue must have originated in Hellenistic Egypt where it is first mentioned. However, the question arises as to whether this is not investing too much significance in what can be construed as merely a chance find. What additional testimony or arguments are needed to bolster the premise that the earliest dated evidence indicates the time of origin?

4) Was the synagogue at this time a distinctively religious institution (as it became later on) or was it basically a communal one? If the latter, then in what ways did it serve a religious function? If the former, then what evidence is needed to prove its sacred character, and is such evidence, in fact, available?

5) How historically reliable are our literary sources for the first century? Of late, there has been a resurgence of skepticism with regard to their accuracy. Our age of «post-modernity» has engendered a widespread sense of distrust and doubt. It is often assumed that things are not what they seem to be, and certainly not what they are claimed to be. Not only is this true of the contemporary political and social realms, but this type of thinking has penetrated the academic world as well. All too often, assessments are made on the basis of a hermeneutics of suspicion. Thus, with regard to our topic, the reliability of traditions relating to the synagogue as recorded in Luke-Acts has been questioned, as has that of rabbinic sources. Even the heretofore almost universal acceptance of a first-century setting for the Jerusalem Theodotos inscription has now been re-dated to several centuries later (see below).

6) Finally, how do Second Temple synagogue studies relate to the following well-known phenomena? (a) The involvement and influence of the Pharisees on this institution—did they have a role and, if so, was it peripheral or central? (b) The relationship between the Temple and the synagogue—were they competing or complementary institutions? (c) The origin of the synagogue—did it begin in the Diaspora or in Judaea? To paraphrase Isaiah 2:4, did the synagogue «come out of Zion» or was it brought into Zion?

Bearing in mind the above issues may help us understand some of the controversies and theories that have surfaced over the past decade or so. In several instances, the 1990s have witnessed rather extreme formulations with regard to various aspects of the first-century synagogue. Some theses have challenged commonly-held notions, while others have broken new ground in relatively neglected areas. In what follows, we shall address some of the more provocative and challenging theories.

Were there First-Century Synagogues?

In a series of articles spanning the 1990s, H. Kee has claimed that a distinctive synagogue building never existed in Palestine until the third century CE.[1] Accepting widespread notions regard-

[1] H. Kee, «The Transformation of the Synagogue after 70 C.E.: Its Import for Early Christianity,» *NTS* 36 (1990), 1_24; idem, «Early Christianity in Galilee: Reassessing the Evidence from the Gospels» in: L. Levine, ed., *The Galilee in Late Antiquity* /New York and Jerusalem: Jewish Theological Seminary, 1992), 3–22; idem, «The Changing Meaning of Synagogue: A Response to Richard Oster,» *NTS* 40 (1994), 381–83;

ing the historical unreliability of New Testament and rabbinic evidence in relation to first-century Palestine, Kee proceeds to dismiss all attestations of the existence of synagogue buildings at this time. He interprets the term *synagoge* as referring only to a congregation or assembly of people (and not a building), acknowledging only the single exception of Luke 7:5. The possibility of its bearing several parallel meanings in the first century is never entertained.

He is unwilling to concede that any of the New Testament references to Jesus' appearance in synagogues reflects a Galilean setting around the year 30. At most, he claims, they are an indication of what transpired at the time of each gospel's writing, as is evident with Mark around the time of the destruction of the Temple.[2] Kee thus maintains, for example, that the story of Jesus' preaching in the synagogue of Nazareth (4:16–30) is in truth but a reflection of the situation in the Diaspora in the late first century.[3]

However, Kee's most far-reaching and provocative claim has to do with the Theodotos inscription, found in Jerusalem in 1913–14 and assigned by almost all scholars to the first century CE. The inscription is of cardinal importance, as it clearly and unequivocally notes the existence of a synagogue building in the city:

> Theodotos, the son of Vettenos, priest and *archisynagogos*, son of an *archisynagogos*, grandson of an *archisynagogos*, built this synagogue [*τὴν συναγωγήν*] for the reading of the Law and the study of the commandments, and a guesthouse and rooms and water installations for hosting those in need from abroad, it [i.e., the synagogue] having been founded by his fathers, the presbyters, and Simonides.[4]

Kee rejects this dating, claiming instead that the inscription derives from the third century on paleographical grounds, and the institution itself from the second century since two previous generations are noted therein. He claims to have consulted «informally» with several epigraphists who confirmed the late dating of this inscription.[5] Unfortunately, he cites neither his sources nor the reasoning and considerations behind their determination.[6] Kee also negates a first-century dating, inter alia, assuming that a distinctive Roman name such as Vettenos would not have been used by a «devout» first-century Jew in light of the unwelcome Roman conquest of Judaea.[7] This last claim is most speculative and problematic in and of itself. In the first place, there were in all probability many Jews (wealthy and others) who in fact welcomed Roman rule and its many benefits. But even if Kee's assessment that a «devout» first-century Jew might have avoided using a Roman name is correct, how much less likely it would have been for a similarly «devout» Jew of the second and third centuries to have used such a Roman name, after the Romans had destroyed the Temple, turned Jerusalem into the pagan city of Aelia Capito-

idem, «Defining the First-Century CE Synagogue: Problems and Progress,» *NTS* 41 (1995), 481–500 (reprinted in: H. C. Kee and L. H. Cohick, eds., *Evolution of the Synagogue: Problems and Progress* [Harrisburg: Trinity, 1999], 7–26). See also K. Atkinson, «On Further Defining the First-Century CE Synagogue: Fact or Fiction?,» *NTS* 43 (1997), 491–502.

2 Kee, «Transformation of the Synagogue,» 14.

3 Ibid., 18.

4 See L. Levine, *The Ancient Synagogue: The First Thousand Years* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000), 54–56.

5 Kee, «Defining the First Century Synagogue,» 8.

6 For previous critiques of Kee's thesis, see E. P. Sanders, *Jewish Law from Jesus to the Mishnah* (London: SCM Press, 1990), 341–43; R. E. Oster, Jr., «Supposed Anachronism in Luke-Acts' Use of *ΣΥΝΑΓΩΓΗ*: A Rejoinder to H. C. Kee,» *NTS* 39 (1993), 178–208; P. W. van der Horst, «Was the Synagogue a Place of Sabbath Worship Before 70 CE?» in: S. Fine, ed., *Jews, Christians, and Polytheists in the Ancient Synagogue: Cultural Interaction during the Greco-Roman Period* (London: Routledge, 1999), 18–23; and most exhaustively in: J. Kloppenborg Verbin, «Dating Theodotos ('CIJ' II 1404),» *JJS* 51 (2000), 243–80. A more nuanced view of first-century synagogue buildings is adopted by R. Horsley, «Synagogues in Galilee and the Gospels,» in: Kee and Cohick, eds., *Evolution*, 46–69. Horsley acknowledges the existence of synagogues in the Hellenistic cities of Palestine (Caesarea, Dor) and beyond (Antioch), but not for the Galilee.

lina, and prohibited Jews from living in the city and its environs!

The very assumption of a Jewish institution in third-century Jerusalem catering to Jewish pilgrims contradicts the accepted (and, in my opinion, correct) historical picture, whereby Jewish life disappeared almost entirely from the Jerusalem scene after 70, the only exceptions being occasional visits by individuals to the destroyed Temple Mount and the rather brief existence of some sort of pietistic group («the Holy Community of Jerusalem») that seems to have lived there for a while around the turn of the third century.[8] Kee's suggestion, that there was a synagogue in the city for at least a century and that it conducted a range of communal activities, including hosting visitors (pilgrims?), stretches the limits of credulity.

Finally, Kee makes reference to H. McKay's study relating to synagogue worship, wherein she claims that formal synagogue worship did not exist in the first century and, in fact, crystallized only at the turn of the third century CE.[9] Such a conclusion, of course, fits nicely with Kee's theory of synagogue origins. However, her approach is seriously flawed in several respects. Although ostensibly paying careful attention to Second Temple sources, McKay dismisses or is forced to explain away evidence that apparently refers to Jewish Sabbath worship. II Macc. 8, 27 and Pseudo-Philo 11, 8 seem to indicate some sort of communal worship (as she herself has defined it, i.e., public prayer) and such a religious framework were certainly to be found at Qumran and among the Therapeutae of Alexandria.[10] The evidence from Agatharchides of Cnidus, while somewhat confusing in and of itself, does seem to indicate a worship setting either in the Jerusalem Temple or in synagogues (referred to by him as temples).[11]

Much more problematic, however, is McKay's narrow conception of what constituted Jewish worship at the time.[12] In the first place, she dismisses the name *proseuche* (house of prayer) given to the synagogue in many Diaspora communities as being relevant to the discussion. This term appears, inter alia, in Egypt, Delos, Asia Minor, and the Bosphorus Kingdom, and is used as well with regard to the first-century synagogue in Tiberias. Although we have no idea as to what prayers were recited therein, the fact that many institutions bore the name *proseuche* would seem to indicate that this type of prayer worship constituted an important component of synagogue religious life.

However, even were we to disregard this evidence and assume, as do several scholars,[13] that organized Jewish communal prayer in first-century Judaean synagogues is indeed only clearly attested after 70, this does not necessarily mean that there had not been a worship framework beforehand. Jewish worship does not necessarily refer to prayer, although this indeed has become a central component in the Judeo-Christian tradition over the past two thousand years. In Jewish tradition, then and now, God can be addressed through study as well, and thus McKay's basic definition of first-century Jewish worship simply falls short.[14] We know from a wide range of sources that Jewish communities met regularly on Sabbaths and holidays and that the service featured the reading of the Torah and the Prophets, and often included a translation of the biblical text (*targum*). Moreover, pious acts of reading sacred Scriptures (see, for example,

7 Kee, «Defining the First Century Synagogue,» 20.

8 S. Safrai, «The Holy Congregation of Jerusalem,» in: S. Safari, *In the Days of the Temple and the Mishnah* (2 vols.; Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1994), I, 85–102, 171–81 (Hebrew).

9 H. McKay, *Sabbath and Synagogue: The Question of Sabbath Worship in Ancient Judaism* (Leiden: Brill, 1994).

10 See, for example, Philo, *Vita Contemplativa*, 30–33; idem, *Hypothetica* 11; and the Qumran scroll *Shirot 'Olat ha-Shabbat.*

11 M. Stern, *Greek and Latin Authors on Jews and Judaism* (3 vols.; Jerusalem: Israel Academy of Sciences and Humanities, 1974–84), I, 107.

12 For critiques of this thesis, see S. Reif, in *JTS* 46 (1995), 611–12; van der Horst, «Was the Synagogue,» 23–37.

13 S. Zeitlin, *Studies in the Early History of Judaism*, I (New York: KTAV, 1973), 92–133; E. Fleischer, «On the Beginnings of Obligatory Jewish Prayer,» *Tarbiz* 59 (1990), 402–25 (Hebrew); Levine, *Ancient Synagogue*, 151–58.

14 McKay, *Sabbath and Synagogue*, 3–4.

The Testament of Levi 13) were often accompanied by some sort of instruction, whether it be in the form of a sermon or an actual teaching session. The Qumran scrolls (1QS 6, 6–8), Philo (see above, n. 10), and Mishnah Avot (e.g., 2, 16; 3, 6), for example, attest to the religious significance of sacred study and its worship dimension. McKay, however, makes a clear-cut dichotomy; such gatherings were educational frameworks and do not fall under her rubric of worship. As noted, this is a most questionable assumption, to say the least.

In short, the theses put forth by Kee and McKay are indeed radical and, if granted, would push up the dating of the earliest synagogues as crystallized institutions to the third century CE. For Kee, the appearance of monumental synagogue remains at that time indicates the creation of a new institution. As a result, he has left the first century bereft of the synagogue, and this despite a considerable amount of archeological and literary evidence apparently at hand. In essence, both Kee and McKay have adopted rather strict definitions of what they are looking for (an assembly of people, a particular type of worship), and this seems to have prevented them from appreciating the nuanced and multi-faceted forms of Jewish life, materially and spiritually, that existed in the first-century.

Did the Jerusalem Temple Influence the First-Century Synagogue?

For generations it had been assumed that the Second Temple synagogue coexisted in a state of tension and competition with the Temple. One institution was said to focus on sacrifices, the other on prayer and study; one was led by priests, the other by Pharisees; one was hierarchical, the other participatory; one was restricted to Jerusalem, the other could exist anywhere. This dichotomy has been rightfully rejected in the last decades, and it is generally agreed today that the Pharisees had nothing to do with the early synagogue nor did the synagogue per se figure into the traditions attributed to them in later rabbinic literature.[15] Moreover, there is no reason to assume that the institution evolved in rivalry with the Temple, but rather in order to serve other functions and needs of the many Jewish communities of the first century.

However, recent studies have gone even further in removing any possible friction between these two institutions. Not only was there no inherent tension between the Temple and synagogue, but there was, in fact, a significant degree of influence of the former on the latter. A. Kasher has suggested this possibility with regard to Egyptian *proseuchae*, as did J. Strange from an architectural perspective with respect to Judaea. Strange proposes that the arrangement of columns separating synagogue benches from the building's central space, where the liturgy took place, was an intentional replica of the Temple courts, especially the Women's Court.[16] He assumes that the prayer service and Torah-reading that dominated synagogue liturgy required special architectural arrangements, and the Temple provided the model for this.[17]

Recently, however, D. Binder has presented us with a thorough and detailed treatment of first-century synagogue evidence.[18] He has also attempted to demonstrate that the synagogue constituted an extension of the Temple, asserting that it was the latter's sanctity, functions, officials, architecture, and art that were imitated by the synagogue. Two assumptions underlie his argument: (1) synagogues of the first century were considered sacred institutions; and (2) these synagogues were patterned after the Temple. The evidence for the former is, at best, partial. Synagogue sanctity is clearly attested for

[15] S. J. D. Cohen, «Were Pharisees and Rabbis the Leaders of Communal Prayer and Torah Study in Antiquity? The Evidence of the New Testament, Josephus, and the Early Church Fathers,» in: H. C. Kee and L. H. Cohick, eds., *Evolution*, 89–105.

[16] A. Kasher, «Synagogues as ‹Houses of Prayer› and ‹Holy Places› in the Jewish Communities of Hellenistic and Roman Egypt,» in: D. Urman and P. V. M. Flesher, *Ancient Synagogues: Historical Analysis and Archaeological Discovery*, I (Leiden: Brill, 1995), 205–20; J. F. Strange, «The Art and Archaeology of Ancient Judaism,» in: J. Neusner, ed., *Judaism in Late Antiquity*, I: *The Literary and Archaeological Sources* (Leiden: Brill, 1995), 75–76; idem, «Ancient Texts, Archaeology as Text, and the Problem of the First-Century Synagogue,» in: Kee and Cohick, eds., *Evolution*, 27–45.

only a relatively small number of Diaspora sites, and it is only hinted at (and even then, very rarely) in Palestinian ones. Binder's efforts to interpret a number of passages from Josephus to prove the existence of such sanctity are unconvincing.[19]

However, it is Binder's second claim that is far more revolutionary, namely, that synagogues were patterned after the Temple:

> ... the hypothesis naturally emerges that the synagogues should not be viewed as being in opposition to the Temple, but rather as extensions of it. Specifically, I will argue that the synagogues in both Palestine and the diaspora served as subsidiary sacred precincts that extended spatially the sacrality of the Temple shrine and allowed Jew everywhere participation within the central cult.[20]

Binder simply fails to substantiate this claim. The evidence is just not there and what is invoked is speculative and forced, at best. Despite his efforts, it must be concluded that everything about these two institutions was different, sacrifice vs. Torah-reading and prayer, silence vs. public recitations, priestly leadership vs. lay leadership, etc. The fact that the Torah was read in the Temple once a year, on Yom Kippur, or once every seven years at the *Haqhel* ceremony during the Sukkot festival, or even the fact that sages taught on the Temple Mount, has little to do with contemporary synagogue practice. The sanctity universally associated with the Temple is of an entirely different order than the scattered references to sanctity in some synagogues. We have no evidence of synagogue sanctity from any contemporary halakhic or exegetical source. Thus, other than his own assertions and some rather vague and questionable claims regarding similarities, Binder is unable to marshal enough evidence to substantiate his sweeping and all-inclusive theories.[21]

Were Synagogues Voluntary Associations?

Ever since the studies of E. Schürer and Juster, scholars have sought to classify the synagogue under a specific Greco-Roman institutional rubric. Referred to in our sources as, inter alia, a *collegium*, *thiasos*, or *synodos* (as well as *proseuche* and *synagoge*, terms likewise borrowed from the larger Hellenistic-Roman world), the Jewish community and its synagogue had thus been associated with one or another of these recognized socio-religious frameworks.

The subject has been addressed most comprehensively of late in a collection of studies, *Voluntary Associations in the Graeco-Roman World*,[22] and particularly in an article therein by P. Richardson, «Early Synagogues as *Collegia* in the Diaspora and Palestine.» Richardson's claim that the synagogue was defined as a *collegium* is based on two considerations: (1) the use of the term in Roman documents referring to the Jewish community; (2) the synagogue indeed functioned as a social and religious association, as did the *collegium*.

Given these significant differences, we might ask whether the use of this terminology by the Romans with reference to the synagogue was merely a question of convenience, that is, the

[17] In a series of articles, A. Grossberg has gone even further in this comparison of the synagogue and the Temple, although with respect to the later buildings, especially those in the Galilee. See his «Ancient Synagogues and the Temple,» in: H. Branover and I. C. Attia, eds., *Science in the Light of Torah* (Northvale, NJ: Jason Aronson, 1994), 237–54; idem, «The Memory of the Temple in Ancient Palestinian Synagogues,» *Tehumin* 15 (1995), 461–88 (Hebrew). This comparison is likewise very speculative and unconvincing.

[18] D. Binder, *Into the Temple Courts: The Place of the Synagogues in the Second Temple Period* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1999).

[19] Binder, *Into the Temple Courts*, 123–26.

[20] Ibid., 31–32.

[21] It is indeed ironic that the one rabbinic source indicating a Temple architectural arrangement being used in a synagogue is overlooked by Binder. Tosefta Sukkah 4, 6 speaks of a large Alexandrian synagogue which bore features and a plan reminiscent of the Temple. The question, of course, is whether the description is historically accurate or a literary creation of the second century.

[22] Edited by J. S. Kloppenborg and S. G. Wilson (New York: Routledge, 1996).

Roman authorities merely used a term familiar to them without attempting to be exact and precise.[23] In other words, did the term *collegium* actually reflect the legal status of the synagogue? If so, did it apply to all synagogues throughout the Mediterranean or did the use of different terms reflect distinctly different models?

However, before trying to link the synagogue too closely with one or more of the above-noted Greco-Roman associations, it must be reiterated that in many and significant ways this Jewish institution differed from the other, much more widely-known frameworks. The Jewish community functioned with a far greater range of activities and rights than the ordinary *collegium,* and the Romans were far more tolerant of the Jewish «collegium» than of the others; often *collegia* at large were banned by the authorities while the Jewish community remained unaffected.[24] The Jews had the right to maintain their own courts, attend to their own food requirements, not worship the civic deities or appear in court on their Sabbath and festivals, not serve in the army, send monies to Jerusalem, and conduct a wide range of communal affairs; in certain places, the Jewish community was recognized as a *politeuma*, a well-attested civic framework attested in Alexandria and Berenice. Most of the above rights and privileges were not applicable to contemporary *collegia* or *thiasoi*. Thus, the application of the term *collegia* to the synagogue may be one of Roman convenience and not in any way reflect a specific legal framework. Certainly, the Jews never viewed their synagogue or community in this light. Never does this term appear in any Jewish document or inscription.

Furthermore, reference to the synagogue as a voluntary association seems to be a somewhat strange categorization for first-century Jewish society (in contrast, for example, to the post-emancipation, modern era). In reality, the individual Jew had very little option other than to remain within the framework of the local community or synagogue. A Jew's rights and privileges within a particular city or the Roman world generally were conferred only to the degree that he was part of the recognized Jewish community. Without that legal umbrella, a Jew would have been without recourse to any protective framework (unless, of course, he was a Roman citizen like Paul) and would not have benefited from any rights enjoyed by other Jews. One instance where this unique status is explicitly articulated reads as follows:

> It was also at this time, when they (Herod and Agrippa) were in Ionia, that a great multitude of Jews, who lived in its cities, took advantage of their opportunity to speak out freely, and came to them and told them of the mistreatment which they had suffered in not being allowed to observe their own laws and in being forced to appear in court on their holy days because of the inconsiderateness of the examining judges. And they told how they had been deprived of the monies sent as offerings to Jerusalem and of being forced to participate in military service and civic duties and to spend their sacred monies for those things, although they had been exempted from these duties because the Romans had always permitted them to live in accordance with their own laws (Josephus, *Jewish Antiquities* 16.2, 3, 27–28).

Thus, to define the Jewish community and its synagogue as basically a voluntary association similar to others in the Roman world may be inappropriate. Where others could choose to be associated with a specific professional, religious, or social grouping, the Jew's community of reference was virtually a given and, in fact, not really voluntary. Advocating anything else is to ignore the basic status of the Jews in Palestine and the Diaspora at this time and impose an inappropriate rubric on what was indeed a more corporate and structured social situation.

In the rush to discover the common denominators between Jews and their Greco-Roman neighbors in antiquity, and indeed there was a plethora of similarities and fructifying influences, at the same time, one ought not lose sight of the differences. In terms of communal organization and legal standing, these differences were indeed substantial and decisive.

[23] As, for example, in noting the right of the Jews to offer sacrifices in an edict to the Jewish community of Sardis—Josephus, *Jewish Antiquities* 14.10, 24, 261.

[24] E. M. Smallwood, *The Jews under Roman Rule: From Pompey to Diocletian* (Leiden: Brill, 1976), 224–30.

The First-Century Synagogue as a Communal Institution with a Religious Dimension

In light of the above, a very different approach to our understanding of the first-century institution has been put forth recently by this author.[25] On the basis of first-century archeological and literary sources, I have suggested that the synagogue at that time was primarily a communal institution serving the many and varied needs, including the religious ones, of the local community. First-century sources point clearly to a wide range of activities and services that may have taken place there: political and social gatherings, courts, punishments such as flogging, hostel, collection of monies for local and Temple needs, communal meals, instruction, and, finally, worship—be it prayer or Torah-reading.[26]

On this basis, it has been suggested that the antecedent of the synagogue, and thus its point of origin, was the biblical city-gate where all of the above-noted activities transpired. The transition from the city-gate to the actual synagogue building took place sometime in the Hellenistic period, when the gate area underwent a radical physical change owing to the introduction of new and more effective offensive weaponry. As a result, instead of being a large open area with adjacent rooms, the city-gate area became a strictly functional one, i.e., for entry into and exit from the city. As a result, a new venue had to be found for the activities formerly located at the city-gate, and what evolved eventually became known as the synagogue. A more precise date for this transition is beyond the scope of the sources available; we simply do not have enough information from Hellenistic Palestine generally and Jewish Palestine in particular to systematically trace this process. Clearly, it occurred over time and undoubtedly at a different pace from one community to the next.

The implications of this proposed scenario are far-reaching and affect almost all of the issues raised in the above-mentioned studies. First and foremost, the first-century synagogue was not primarily a religious institution-— certainly not in Judaea — as it was to become in Late Antiquity. Therefore, the search for religious symbols and appurtenances in these buildings that were basically neutral in character is misguided. Any attempt to disqualify buildings because they were not distinctively religious is unwarranted. Similarly unjustified are efforts to define the synagogue as a sacred building imitating the Temple. The synagogue evolved to meet needs very different from those of the Temple. It is true that some Diaspora synagogues indeed acquired a sacred dimension, but this was not because sacredness was inherent in a synagogue setting, but rather because Jewish communities in the Diaspora felt the need for such a religious designation and profile, whether for purely religious reasons, or perhaps no less for social and political ones.

Similarly with regard to the question of origins, over which so much ink has been spilled this last century. By viewing the synagogue as having evolved from an earlier city-gate setting, the question of where and when it began becomes superfluous. In Palestine it developed over the course of the Hellenistic period (third to first centuries BCE); during this period it was not singled out in literary sources such as I and II Maccabees since the functions it fulfilled and the status it enjoyed were far from being extraordinary. At the same time, the Diaspora was rapidly developing, but these Jewish communities had no specific communal framework with which to work since the synagogue institution in Judaea was just beginning to evolve. They thus adopted and adapted indigenous institutional frameworks to answer their immediate communal needs. This would account for the tremendous diversity of buildings, names, communal officials, and types of communal activities from one Diaspora community to the next.

Moreover, the implications of this approach reach far beyond the first-century synagogue and in many ways characterize the synagogue for centuries to come. The synagogue remained first and foremost a communal framework down to the end of antiquity; it was the only Jewish public building that we know of in this period throughout Judaea and the Diaspora. While it is true that the synagogue's religious profile grew

[25] Levine, *Ancient Synagogue*, 19–41.

[26] Ibid., 124–59.

dramatically in Late Antiquity, particularly as expressed in its main hall, which indeed had become a «diminished sanctuary,» the synagogue complex as a whole continued to function as it had from its very inception. It was always a multi-functional institution answering the many needs of the entire community. Furthermore, the synagogue belonged to the local community that built and maintained it; there never was a higher authority that determined its policy, namely, how it should be built, decorated, administered, or what sort of liturgy was to be used in it. Thus, the diversity among synagogues, so evident in the first century, continued (and continues to this very day) to be a hallmark of the institution.

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The last years of the twentieth century have brought with them a rich trove of stimulating studies regarding the first-century synagogue. Despite the relative paucity of sources for this period, this topic has proven, and undoubtedly will continue, to be a source of creative research. If the vibrancy of a field is measured by the contrasting (and often conflicting) theories proposed, and by the vigorous debate engendered, then the first century and its synagogues are in a very healthy state indeed.