

THE INFLUENCE OF THE SYNAGOGUE ON EARLY CHRISTIAN WORSHIP

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A study of the rise and development of Christianity as portrayed in the writings of the New Testament cannot ignore the background of Judaism. Christianity finds its roots in the religion of the Old Testament as practiced by the Jews of the 1st century. At the heart of their religion was the teaching of God's Law and its observance in worship and obedience. In Jewish society worship took place both at the Temple in Jerusalem and in the many synagogues scattered throughout the land and in the Diaspora. According to Martin, "The background of early Christian worship must be sought in these two Jewish institutions of the Temple and the synagogue."¹⁾ But it appears that the synagogue was the most meaningful religious institution among the Jews in Jesus day. "If the Temple was still the focus of Jewish religion and national aspiration, the Synagogue had already become the centre of Jewish worship, life, and thought, wherever there were Jews, by the time of Jesus."²⁾ The fact that both Jesus and Paul preached the gospel and won converts out of the synagogue causes one to wonder about the relationship of the church to the synagogue, especially in its worship. Dugmore states the question very well as follows:

But if the first Christians attended the Synagogue, as we know they did, and continued to worship according to the liturgy of the Synagogue, the question arises, How much of that liturgy, if any, did they take with them into the distinctively Christian gatherings which took the place of Synagogue worship for them, when anathemas and hostile public opinion prevented them from joining in the worship of the their Jewish friends and founders?³⁾

1) Ralph p. Martin, *Worship in the Early Church* (London : Marshall, Morgan and Scott, Ltd., 1964), p. 19.

2) C. W. Dugmore, *The Influence of the Synagogue upon the Divine Office*, (London : Oxford University Press, 1944), pp. 1-2.

3) *Ibid.*, p. 3.

The purpose of this study is to investigate the influence of the synagogue on early Christian worship. The simple procedure will be, first, to discuss synagogue worship, next, to deal with the synagogue in the New Testament, and, third, to discuss early Christian worship with a view to pointing out the influences of the synagogue on it.

I. SYNAGOGUE WORSHIP

The word "synagogue" is from Greek *συναγωγή* and basically means "gathered together" or "assembly," void of religious meaning. In the LXX *συναγωγή* is used most frequently to render the Hebrew word for "congregation," though sometimes it served as the equivalent for "assembly." In the first century A.D. Philo and Josephus and New Testament writers use the term more and more in the sense of "place of assembly" "house of worship and instruction."⁴ The general usage of the term "synagogue" in this study has reference to a religious institution of the Jews involving an organized group of people gathered at a specific place.

The synagogue served three functions in Jewish life and these functions are expressed by the three Hebrew names of the synagogue: (1) "House of assembly," (2) "House of prayer," (3) "House of study." As a "house of assembly" the synagogue served as a place for various community meetings such as funeral services, political meetings, administration of justice, etc. The synagogue unified the Jews of each community and linked them with those of other communities in the Diaspora and in Palestine. Although all the synagogues were united by a common purpose, each had fairly complete autonomy. As a "house of prayer" the synagogue was a Jewish center of worship. It is in this function

4) I. Sonne, "Synagogue," *The Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible*, N, 476-77.

that it ultimately replaced the Temple. This function will be discussed more in detail later. As a "house of study" the synagogue was the place of instruction in the Law. It is the educational institution of Judaism. Scribes, or rabbis, were specially trained to do the teaching and were set apart to this service by special ceremonies of ordination.⁵⁾

The purpose of sabbatical gatherings at the synagogue were at first for the exposition of the Law, but in the course of time it was natural that prayers and preaching should be added to the service. At first, these meetings were held only on Sabbaths and feast days, but from early times there were gatherings also on the second and fifth days of the week at the same hours with the service in the Temple. The presence of ten men was necessary to hold the worship and in larger cities there were daily gatherings for worship.⁶⁾

The order of service in synagogue worship was usually the same and included the following five parts as outlined by Levertoff.⁷⁾

(1) *The recitation of the "shema."* This served as a confession of God's unity and consisted of the passages Dt. 6 : 4—9; 11 : 13—21; and Num. 15 : 37—41. Before and after these passages were recited, there was a pronouncement of "blessings" in con-

5) Samuel S. Cohen, "Synagogue," *Dictionary of the Bible*, James Hastings, editor. Revised Edition, F. Grant and H. H. Rowley, editors. (New York : Charles Scribner's sons, 1963), pp. 945—46. cf. Sonne, *op cit.*, p. 487. He says, "Following certain Rabbinic sources, most scholars agree that the synagogue was the place where children received their elementary instruction, perhaps in an adjoining room or in courtyard." But there was a difference between the Palestinian tradition and Babylonian concerning the relation of the children's school to the "place of study" and of both to the synagogue.

6) Paul Levertoff, "Synagogue," *The International Standard Bible Encyclopaedia*. V, 2878. See also W. Bacher, "Synagogue," *Hastings' Dictionary of the Bible*, IV, 642.

7) Levertoff, *op. cit.*, p. 2879.

nection with them. This was a very important part of the liturgy and was believed to have been ordered by Moses.

(2) *Prayers*. The most important prayers were the "Eighteen Eulogies," which was a cycle of eighteen prayers and also called "The Prayer." The congregation responded to the one leading the prayers with an "Amen."

(3) *The reading of the Law and the Prophets*. This involved the reading of the pericope from the Law for that Sabbath. As it was read an interpreter translated it verse by verse into Aramaic. This reading from the Law was called the *parashah*. The whole Pentateuch was divided into 154 or 155 pericopes, and as one was read each Sabbath, all was read in order during a three-year period. After the reading of the Law, the pericope from the Prophets (called *Haphtarah*) was read for that Sabbath. It was also translated into Aramaic by an interpreter, but in longer sections than the Law.

(4) *The sermon*. This followed the reading from the Law and the Prophets and was originally an exposition of the Law regarding its moral demands. Later it took on more of a devotional character. It was customary to invite any teacher present to deliver the message, or a stranger might ask the ruler of the synagogue for permission to speak. In this way Jesus spoke in the synagogue at Nazareth and took the prophetic lesson as the basis for his message (Lk. 4: 16ff.). Also Paul was invited to speak in the synagogue at Antioch of Pisidia after the reading of the Law and the Prophets (Acts 13: 4ff.)

(5) *The benediction*. A priest was called on to pronounce the benediction after the sermon and the congregation responded with "Amen."

Next, some attention should be given to the officials of the synagogue and to their role in the worship service. The highest officer is known as the "ruler of the synagogue" (Grk. *archisun-*

agogos) (cf. Mk. 5 : 35; Lk. 8 : 41, 13 : 14; Acts 18 : 8, 17), and in some cases a synagogue may have had several rulers (Mk. 5 : 22; Acts 13 : 15). Probably he was elected from among the elders and his job was to supervise the synagogue services. He would select the Scripture reading and might even fix the topic of the sermon. At one time he seems to have been the only one eligible to read the Torah. But later the reading of the Law and the Prophets was the responsibility of the *hazzan* or he might call upon someone else. This *hazzan* is the Talmud word for "servant" or "officer" who assisted the ruler in the services. It appeared that he acted as master of ceremonies in many cases as well as tending to the building as a kind of custodian. Also he seems to have been an elementary teacher. In Luke 4 : 20 he is called an attendant, and it was he who received the scroll after Jesus had read from it. Besides the offices of ruler and *hazzan*, which were filled by persons elected for periods of time, there were duties performed at each meeting by someone selected by the ruler or the *hazzan*. A "messenger of the congregation" was called upon to conduct the prayers. He had to be a man of good character. It often happened that there was no qualified person present or else he refused, so the *hazzan* just went ahead and recited the prayers as well as read the Scriptures. Also there was a committee of almoners: at least two who collected the alms for the poor and three who distributed them. The interpretation of the Scriptures into Aramaic could be done by any capable person, even a minor.⁸⁾

II. THE SYNAGOGUE IN THE NEW TESTAMENT

The term *συναγωγή* occurs fifty-seven times in the New Testament and only two of these (Rev. 2 : 9, 3 : 9) are not in the

8) Sonne, *op. cit.*, pp. 489—90. Levertoff, *op. cit.*, pp. 2878—79.

Gospels and the Book of Acts. It is translated as "synagogue" fifty-five times, as "assembly" once and as "congregation" once.⁹⁾ Its usual meaning is that of the Jewish building where the Law and the Prophets is read and discussed.

The New Testament references to the synagogue confirm to a large extent the foregoing information about the synagogue and its role in Judaism. References are made to synagogues in Palestine, Syria, provinces of Asia Minor, Macedonia, and Greece. All four Gospel writers refer to teaching and preaching in the synagogue. Matthew refers to prayer and almsgiving in the synagogue (6 : 5, 2); Luke speaks of reading of Scripture (Lk. 4 : 16 ff. and Acts 13 : 15), and mentions the invitation to strangers to speak in the synagogue (Acts 13 : 15). Healings also took place in the synagogue (Mk. 1 : 23—27, 3 : 1—5, etc.). A new word about the synagogue concerns Jesus, warning to the believers about their being delivered up to the synagogues, beaten, and scourged (Mt. 10 : 17, 23 : 34; Mk. 13 : 9; Lk. 12 : 11, 21 : 12), and Paul's testimony that he beat and imprisoned Christians whom he found in the synagogue (Acts. 22 : 19, 26 : 11). Of course, this condemnation and punishment of Christians was predicted by Jesus and did take place in the time of Paul and at his hands because of their discipleship and confession of Christ Jesus as Messiah.¹⁰⁾

As Jesus carried on His public ministry, he often went into synagogues to teach and preach. His ministry in the synagogues is mentioned no less than fourteen times by the Gospel writers (Mt. 4 : 23, 9 : 35, 12 : 9, 13 : 54, Mk. 1 : 21, 1 : 39, 3 : 1, 6 :

9) Robert Young, *Analytical Concordance to the Bible* (New York : Funk & Wagnalls Co., 1917), p. 951. Also cf. "Index—Lexicon to the New Testament, p. 91."

10) Wolfgang Schrage, *συναγωγή*, *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, Gerhard Friedrich, editor. (Grand Rapids : Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1971), VII, 828—34.

2; Lk. 4 : 15, 44, 6 : 6, 13 : 10; Jn. 6 : 59, 18 : 20). According to Luke Jesus begins His ministry by teaching in the synagogue (4 : 15) and it was His custom to go to the synagogue on the Sabbath (4 : 16). He taught not only in the synagogues at Nazareth and Capernaum, but throughout all Galilee. He did not just expound the Old Testament Scriptures in the synagegue, but he proclaimed the kingdom of God and declared himself to be the fulfillment of prophecy (Lk. 4 : 16ff.). The evidence is that only after Jesus could not openly teach in the synagogue due to the rejection of His message and the hostility of the Pharisees did he withdraw and pursue His ministry in the countryside (LK. 4 : 28ff., Mt. 12 : 9ff.).

Although Paul before his conversion sought to find Christians in the synagogues at Damascus and to imprison them (Acts 9 : 2), it was in those same synagogues where he first preached Jesus as the Son of God after his conversion. (Acts 9 : 20). And more than half the references to the synagogue in the Book of Acts tell of Paul's entering the synagogues and winning converts there during his missionary travels. Sample passages indicating his use of the synagogue as a base for evangelistic ministry are as follows:

And Paul went in, as was his custom, and for three weeks he argued with them from the scriptures, explaining and proving that it was necessary for the Christ to suffer and to rise from the dead, and saying, "This Jesus, whom I proclaim to you, is the Christ." (Acts 17 : 2-3).

So he argued in the synagogue with the Jews and the devout persons (Acts 17 : 17a).

The New Testament clearly shows that Christianity has its roots in Judaism and that the first Christians worshiped in the synagogue. Not only did Jesus and Paul make many of their first converts in the synagogue, but these early Christians persisted

in worship at the synagogues as long as the Jews and rulers of the synagogues allowed.

III. EARLY CHRISTIAN WORSHIP

Christian worship, as a distinctive, indigenous thing, arose from the fusion, in the crucible of Christian experience, of the synagogue and the Upper Room... The typical worship of the Church is to be found to this day in the union of the worship of the synagogue and the sacramental experience of the Upper Room; and that union dates from New Testament times.¹¹⁾

Martin points out that in the days of the Church's life there seemed no desire by the Christians to leave the parent religion. Their first experience of worship after Jesus ascension emphasizes their devotion in prayer and implies that they were diligent at the "prayer-assembly." (Acts 1:14). "The Greek term used here is a regular one for the Jewish synagogue Fellowship (Acts xvi, 13, 16)."¹²⁾

Probably the best explanation and example of early Christian worship is that in Acts 2:42 concerning those at Jerusalem: "And they devoted themselves to the apostles teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers."

"The basis of early Christian worship," according to Cullman, was "sermon, prayer and supper."¹³⁾ The sermon was an important part of synagogue worship, as has already been noted, and "the custom of expounding the portion of Scripture just read, which we find in the Church from the very beginning, was directly derived from the practice of the Synagogue."¹⁴⁾

The epistles of Paul emphasize the importance of prayer (Phil.

11) W. D. Maxwell, *An Outline of Christian Worship* (Oxford, 1945), p. 5 as quoted by Martin, *op. cit.*, pp. 26-27.

12) Martin, *op. cit.*, p. 18.

13) Oscar Cullman, *Early Christian Worship* (Chicago: Henry Regnery Company, 1953), p. 20.

14) Dugmore, *op. cit.*, p. 74.

pray for him(Col. 4 : 3). There are numerous prayers of praise 4 : 6; I Thess. 5 : 17; Col. 4 : 2) and he enjoins his readers to (Eph. 1 : 3—7), thanksgiving (Eph. 1 : 16; Phil. 1 : 3—6; Col. 1 : 3—5; I Cor. 1 : 4—8), and intercession (Eph. 1 : 17ff. ; Phil. 1 : 9—11; Col. 1 : 9—12) in Paul's epistles.

Dugmore is cautious concerning the view that early Christian prayers have a word for word parallel with those of the synagogue liturgy. However, he admits the influence of the language, though in the early period of the Church, prayer language was less rigid than afterwards. It is in the subjects of prayer that the influence of the Synagogue can be seen more clearly. "Christians prayed for 'faith, fear, peace, forbearance, self-control, purity, and temperance' in words which, with the exception of the closing petition 'through Jesus Christ our Lord,' the Rabbis would have whole-heartedly endorsed."¹⁵⁾ It was an established Jewish practice to pray for kings and rulers, and Christians were urged by Polycarp to do this.¹⁶⁾ As was the custom among the Jews, so the Christians from the beginning prayed standing, with the hands raised and slightly extended towards heaven.¹⁷⁾ The use of the term "amen" finds its source in the prayers of the synagogue. It usually occurs at the close, of the New Testament doxologies which ascribe praise to God and His Christ (Rom. 1 : 25, 9 : 5, 11 : 36, 16 : 27; Gal. 1 : 5, Eph. 3 : 21, Phil. 4 : 20, Heb. 13 : 21, I Pet. 4 : 11, 5 : 11, etc.), and is the response of the four beasts to the praise song of the angels in Rev. 5 : 14.

Other elements in early Christian worship which were influenced by synagogue worship are the use of Psalms and Hymns, *Confession formulae*, benedictions, and doxologies.¹⁸⁾ Although

15) *Ibid.*, p. 78.

16) *Ibid.*, p. 79.

17) *Ibid.*, p. 80.

18) Cullman, *op. cit.*, pp. 21—23.

Judaism furnished many of the patterns and some of the language for these, the creative genius of the Christians in their new faith and personal relationship to Jesus must not be overlooked.¹⁹⁾ The very important features of Christian worship of the Eucharist and the practice of baptism may seem related to the Jewish Passover and proselyte baptism, but they are distinctive in their purpose and meaning. Thus, it seems a mistake to think that Judaism really influenced these elements of Christianity.

The conclusion reached by this study is that the Synagogue profoundly influenced the worship of the early Church. It provided not only much of the form and order, but to a great extent its content with the exception of the Eucharist and baptism. It appears that Dugmore is justified in stating that "it was the liturgy of the Synagogue rather than the worship of the Temple which moulded the services of the early Christian Community,"²⁰⁾ but this writer feels he overstates the case by saying, "we are forced to conclude that the Synagogue worship was the norm of Christian worship in the days of the Apostles."²¹⁾

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19) cf. C. F. D. Moule, *Worship in the New Testament* (Richmond: John Knox Press, 1961). He emphasizes the uniqueness of Christian worship and contrasts it to the worship in the synagogue.

20) Dugmore, *op. cit.*, p. 7.

21) *Ibid.*, p. 8.

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