

In Search of the Synagogue Part II: The Temple Destroyed; The Synagogue Takes a Turn [70c.e.–4th century]

To understand the evolution of the synagogue in Roman-occupied Palestine, we interviewed Lee I. Levine, professor of Jewish History and Archaeology at Hebrew University and author of The Ancient Synagogue: The First Thousand Years.

How did the destruction of the Jerusalem Temple in 70 C.E. impact upon Jewish communal life?

The impact varied significantly depending on where the Jews lived. The effect on those living closest to Jerusalem and the Temple, including the neighboring region of southern Judaea, was undoubtedly traumatic. Suddenly the major national and religious focus of Jewish life—the Temple—had been eliminated, and with it the rituals and ceremonies that had constituted the sole focus of Divine worship in Israel. Those living close by had frequented the institution on a regular basis; it played a central religious role in their lives. And since the Temple had also served as the central forum (or communal center—politically, socially, judicially, and religiously) for Jews throughout the province of Judaea, communal life in the region was seriously disrupted as well.



In contrast, the severity of Jerusalem's destruction for Jews living in the Galilee, and certainly for those throughout the Diaspora, was probably minimal and even negligible, except perhaps for the psychological impact.

What happened to the synagogue in the wake of this destruction?

The synagogue continued to function as the focal communal institution of Jews everywhere, both in the Diaspora and Judaea, much as it had in the pre-70 era. It universalized official Jewish ritual practice and democratized worship by taking it out of priestly hands—opening the way for any Jew anywhere to participate and officiate in the recognized communal ritual. Moreover, the synagogue radically changed the content of this ritual, shifting the focus from sacrifice and libation to Torah study and, later on, to prayer. Finally, the synagogue welcomed within its confines the presence of the congregation as a whole, unlike the Temple where people were often kept far removed from the scene of the ritual.

What about the existence of actual synagogue buildings in the post-70 era?

There is no question that synagogues existed then, as they are regularly mentioned in second- and third-century rabbinic sources. However, there is scant archaeological material for the 200 years following the Temple's destruction. Of the 150 or so synagogues known from Late Antiquity, fewer than a half dozen can be dated to the two centuries following the destruction.

How can this be explained?

Some scholars suggest that these synagogues were either destroyed or converted into buildings which served other purposes as a result of the various Jewish revolts against Rome between 66 and 135 C.E., especially in the aftermath of the Bar Kokhba revolt. We know from Malalas, a sixth-century chronicler, that army commanders (later emperors) who successfully led the Roman efforts to quell the Jewish revolt of 66 C.E. converted synagogues in Caesarea and Daphne into an *odeum* (a small theater) and theater

respectively. In addition, the Jerusalem Talmud notes the destruction of a major Alexandrian synagogue as a result of the 115–117 C.E. Diaspora revolt. However, there is no information linking the devastation resulting from the Bar Kokhba revolt in southern Judaea to the synagogues in the Galilee or elsewhere. So, while the Bar Kokhba revolt might explain the lack of evidence in and around southern Judaea, this theory does not account for the absence of remains elsewhere in the country.

Another theory is that the synagogues of this time were small and inconsequential, perhaps even located in private homes, as were “contemporary” churches. This would explain the difficulty in their identification as synagogues. However, it is difficult to imagine the existence of a synagogue in such modest circumstances when we know this institution convened in separate buildings both before (in the first century) and after (in the fourth to seventh centuries) the destruction.

What, then, is your opinion?

It seems most plausible that the synagogues of the post-70 C.E. era were destroyed or reused in later construction, i.e., in the third to fourth centuries and onward. It is well known from archaeological excavations that later buildings invariably obliterated earlier remains. Such was the case in Jerusalem, for example; medieval remains are far more prominent than those from the earlier Muslim and Byzantine eras, and the latter are more numerous than the Roman or Hellenistic strata, and all these together have almost completely erased any significant remains from the biblical period.

What can we learn from rabbinic sources about post-70 synagogues?

The rabbinic literature reports a fascinating exchange between two rabbis in the first half of the third century C.E. that has a modern ring: “And Rabbi Hama bar Hanina and Rabbi Hoshaya were walking among the synagogues of Lydda [a city in the coastal region, southeast of Tel Aviv, today located adjacent to Ben Gurion Airport]. Rabbi Hama bar Hanina asked Rabbi Hoshaya: ‘See how much money my ancestors [lit., my fathers] have invested here [in these buildings]?’ The other responded: ‘And how many souls have your ancestors lost here [lit., have they sunk here]? There are no people to study Torah!’” (Jerusalem Talmud, Sheqalim 5, 6, 49b)

Here, then, we have two contrasting rabbinic reactions to the city’s impressive synagogue buildings: one takes pride in the architectural structures, while the other sharply criticizes the waste of communal funds in light of poor attendance and suggests that monies should go instead toward supporting the community’s educational dimension. From this exchange we learn that synagogue buildings might have been very prominent at this time. Other sources provide additional information: eighteen synagogues existed in Sepphoris and its environs at the time of Rabbi Judah I’s funeral there, ca. 225 C.E. (Jerusalem Talmud, Kilaim 9, 4, 32b) and thirteen synagogue buildings stood in late third-century Tiberias (Babylonian Talmud, Berakhot 8a).

We can also learn about synagogues from the *halachic* (legal) questions asked of third-century rabbis. For example, the people of Bet Shean (at the eastern end of the Jezreel Valley) asked Rabbi Ami: “Is it permissible to take stones from one synagogue in order to build another?” In another case, “the people of Migdal [north of Tiberias] asked Rabbi Simeon ben Laqish: ‘Is it permissible to take stones [from a synagogue] in one city to build [a synagogue] in another?’” (Jerusalem Talmud, Megillah 3, 1, 73d).

Notably, these rabbinic questions about synagogue buildings in Palestine in the latter part of the third century are quite unique. We then need to consider: were these issues of import only at this time, or were such questions common but not preserved elsewhere?

There are many possible explanations. To me, the most plausible is that the Jews, having lost the Temple, Jerusalem, and much of the region of Judaea, and now finding themselves in the throes of political instability, a growing Christian presence, and possibly a resurgent paganism, may have sought to

reaffirm their identity and demonstrate their cohesiveness by erecting communal buildings, some of monumental proportions.

You say that at this time the synagogue continued to function as the central institution of Jewish communal life. How do we know this?

Archaeological evidence attests to the synagogue's importance. Throughout late Roman Palestine (second to fourth centuries C.E.), Galilean and Golan synagogue buildings, such as those at Khirbet Shema', Nevoraya, Qatzrin, Chorazim, and Horvat 'Ammudim, were erected in the very center of these towns and were much larger than any other local structure. At times the synagogue's prominence was expressed topographically—at Khirbet Shema' the building was positioned high on a hill, overlooking the town, while at nearby Meiron, the synagogue was perched at the very peak of a mountain towering over the adjacent village. In addition, the buildings tended to have imposing and elaborate façades, usually facing south, in the direction of Jerusalem.

Rabbinic sources of the period also attest to the synagogue's centrality in Jewish life. The Tosefta (a mid-third-century collection of laws usually based on the Mishnah) says: "One should not behave lightheartedly in a synagogue. One should not enter them in the heat because of the heat, or in the cold because of the cold, or in the rain because of the rain. And one should not eat in them or drink in them or sleep in them or stroll in them, or just relax [lit., enjoy oneself] in them, but [one should] read Scriptures and study laws [lit., Mishnah] and engage in midrash [i.e., exegetical commentary] in them" (Tosefta, Megillah 2, 18). From these prohibitions, we can infer that such practices were widespread; otherwise, why would the rabbis issue explicit restrictions? Indeed, other sources also indicate that the synagogue may have been used for a variety of communal, nonreligious purposes, and thus it is not surprising that a number of Jewish communities referred to their synagogue as a "house of the people." Synagogues in America today may be viewed as approximations of ancient synagogues and how they functioned.

When did synagogues start facing Jerusalem?

Archaeological evidence reveals that beginning in the third and fourth centuries almost all synagogues were oriented toward Jerusalem. The orientation was sometimes expressed by an elaborate exterior façade, and always by the building's interior design: the focal wall would face Jerusalem. Synagogues in the southern part of the country, in Eshtemoa and Susiya for instance, were thus oriented to the north.

We also read at this time in history about the requirement to direct oneself toward Jerusalem during the *Amidah* prayer:

Those who stand outside Israel must direct their hearts [i.e., face] toward the Land of Israel, as it is written: "And they will pray toward their land" [II Chr. 6:38]. And those standing in the Land of Israel direct their hearts toward Jerusalem and pray, as it is written: "And they shall pray toward this city" [ibid.]. Those standing in Jerusalem shall direct their hearts toward the Temple, as it is written: "And they shall pray toward this House" [ibid., 6:32]. Those standing in the Temple should direct their hearts toward the Holy of Holies and pray, as it is written: "And they shall pray toward this place" [I Kgs. 8:30]. Thus, those who stand in the north will face south, those who stand in the south will face north, those in the east will face west, and those in the west will face east. Thus all Israel will be praying to the same place (Tosefta, Berakhot 3, 15–16).

What does the synagogue's orientation toward Jerusalem tell us about the Jewish community at this time?

The orientation toward Jerusalem constituted a powerful statement of religious-ethnic particularism. No longer was the synagogue—the central communal institution—considered an "architecturally neutral" gathering place. The synagogue now expressed and reflected collective historical memories of the destroyed Temple and perhaps hopes and dreams of its restoration.

Not everyone, however, was pleased with these and other expressions of Temple worship. Some rabbis expressed reservations about the propriety of reproducing Temple-related items. The Babylonian Talmud cautions: "One should not make a house like the Sanctuary; nor an exedra[an outer room] like the Temple porch; nor a courtyard like the [Temple courtyard]; nor a table like the (Temple) table; nor a menorah like the (Temple) menorah...." (Rosh Hashanah 24 a–b).

When did prayer replace Temple sacrifice as the primary mode of worship?

In rabbinic circles, soon after the Temple's destruction in 70 C.E. (e.g., facing Jerusalem during the central *Amidah* prayer). By the third century, a statement in the Jerusalem Talmud says that prayers were introduced in place of the Temple's daily sacrifices (Jerusalem Talmud, Berakhot 4, 1, 7b; Babylonian Talmud, Berakhot 26b). Sometime in the third or fourth century, the rabbis introduced memories of the Temple ritual into synagogue liturgy, such as the recital of the requisite Temple sacrifices on Sabbaths and holidays. Together with the transfer of Temple practices to the synagogue setting (such as the use of the *shofar*, *lulav*, and *etrog*), the synagogue building was gradually accorded a degree of sanctity. As the third-century rabbi Samuel ben Rabbi Isaac explained, the synagogue should be considered "a diminished Temple" (Babylonian Talmud, Megillah 29a)—an eloquent expression to the ambiguity and ambivalence surrounding the synagogue's changing role. It was a diminished sanctuary, a replica of sorts, not nearly as sacred as the Jerusalem Temple, but sacred nonetheless.

In the coming centuries, with the triumph of Christianity under Constantine and thereafter, the sanctity of the synagogue accelerated. This is only one in a series of dramatic developments in the evolution of the synagogue we will explore in our next installment.

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