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THE ORIGIN OF THE SYNAGOGUE

A Study in the Development of Jewish Institutions

BY

SOLOMON ZEITLIN

DROPSIE COLLEGE, PHILADELPHIA, PA.

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THE ORIGIN OF THE SYNAGOGUE*

A Study in the Development of Jewish Institutions

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Dedicated to my beloved teacher
and friend, Professor
Ismar Elbogen

Students of history recognize that a thorough knowledge of the history of the Greeks and Romans is necessary for an understanding of modern civilization and institutions, for modern institutions are based on the various forms of society and government that existed among the Greeks and Romans. Similarly, a thorough study of Jewish history in the time of the Second Commonwealth is indispensable for an understanding of both the Jewish and the Christian religions and their institutions. During this period Jewish institutions were crystallized and Jewish culture reached its peak. Christianity with its institutions is directly traceable to the Judaism of that period. The church, the essential institution of Christianity, is a daughter of the synagogue.

It is therefore not at all surprising that scholars interested in the origins of Christianity have dealt extensively with the Jewish

* The purpose of the paper is to trace the origin of the synagogue as an institution, not the origin of public worship. Jews used prayers in their worship long before the establishment of the synagogue. They prayed in the street, they even had special places for prayers, as Mizpah, and more particularly prayers were used during the sacrificial ceremonies.

I was charged during the discussion of my paper with secularizing Jewish history. History is not sacred nor secular; it is a science that deals with the record of the life of a people. The business of the historian is not only to record events but to interpret them and to show their cause and effect, for events are not the caprice of nature nor of rulers and dictators.

The literature on the synagogue is immense. An extensive bibliography is given by Schürer in his *Geschichte des jüdischen Volkes*, 3rd edition, 1898, II, 427-459, and also by Jean Juster in his *Les Juifs dans l'empire romain*, 1914, 456-472, Comp. Samuel Krauss' *Synagogale Altertümer*, 1922, 52-66.

history of the Second Commonwealth. However, these studies have been made from a theological point of view. It is true that religion played an important role in shaping historic processes, but it must be admitted that other forces too played their part in the shifting of historic trends. This is particularly true of economic conditions. Even institutions of a purely religious character may be traced in their origins to social and economic causes.

It is needless to enter into a lengthy discussion of the important part played by economic conditions in the shaping of history. As has been said, it is recognized by most historians. What we are particularly interested in is to emphasize in this paper the fact that many institutions of a purely religious character came into existence as a result of social and economic forces. Even some of the halakot were modified to meet material needs. Thus showing that religion could be adapted to practical life. According to biblical law, if a seed was soaked in water, it became susceptible to Levitical uncleanness.¹ For those Jews who were meticulous in the observance of Levitical law, this statute made the use of Egyptian grain impossible because the fields were irrigated. The Tosefta² says (*ἀντλίον*) אנטליא מאלכסנדריא שמתא מפי אנטליא וכי יתן מים על זרע ונפל and therefore such grain would come under the category *זרע ונפל* and therefore *מגבלהם עליו טמא*. However, when the Jews of Judea suffered from drought and famine during the Second Commonwealth, they were compelled to resort to the use of grain from Alexandria, then considered the granary of the world. These economic circumstances necessitated a modification in the biblical law. The rabbis interpreted the word *זרע* to imply not that the seed is attached to the soil *מחובר לקרקע* but rather detached from the soil *מלוקח מן הקרקע*.³ This interpretation, which was clearly dictated by economic stress, made it possible for the Jews to use Egyptian grain. Some rabbis of the conservative school, such as Joshua ben Perachia, objected to this modification of the law and ruled that wheat brought from Alexandria was unclean, because אנטליא, *ἀντλίον*, the Egyptians

¹ Lev. XI, 38.

² Tosef. Mach. III, 4.

³ Sifra Shmini, Tos. Mach. 1.

irrigated their fields, which made Egyptian wheat susceptible to Levitical uncleanness.⁴

Another instance that may be cited is that of the *ketubah*, regarded as a religious document in the institution of marriage. It was originally introduced for the economic protection of women. According to the old halakah a woman might be acquired as a wife in one of three ways: האשה נקנית בשלש דרכים בכסף בשטר ובביאה, by means of money, i. e. by purchase; by a written deed of gift, i. e. the father might give his daughter to any man he chose without her consent; or by possession, *usus*. That this was the practice of the early Hebrews may be seen from the story of Jacob, who with menial labor paid Laban for the right to marry his daughters. Similarly, for Michal David paid her father King Saul with two hundred foreskins of the Philistines.⁵

In the Book of Tobit we are told that when Ragel gave his daughter away in marriage to Tobias, he wrote an instrument of cohabitation⁶ which is synonymous with the *shetar* mentioned in the Mishnah.

In case of divorce the status of the woman was still worse, as she could be divorced at the pleasure of her husband without any economic security. To make the divorce less easy and especially to protect the divorced woman, the rabbis introduced the *ketubah*, a deed which the bridegroom has to sign in which he obligates himself to pay two hundred *zuzim* in case of divorce. By this law the rabbis accomplished two purposes,—first, they made divorce more difficult for the husband, for he had to pay money to his wife

⁴ Tosef. ibid. III, 4 אנטליא טמאות מפני אנטליא טמאות מאלכסנדריא טמאות חטים הבאות מאלכסנדריא טמאות מפני אנטליא טמאות שלהן.

To this the rabbis replied that it might be unclean to Joshua ben Perachia who did not accept the interpretation of the halakot, but clean for the Jew who believed in the methods of interpreting the halakah אמרו חכמים אם כן יהיו טמאות ליהושע בן פרחיה וטהורות לכל ישראל פרחיה וטהורות לכל ישראל.

See Zeitlin, "The Semikah Controversy between the Zugoth." 1917. Comp. also L. Ginzberg, מקומה של ההלכה בחכמת ישראל, p. 6.

⁵ Sam. XVIII, 25-27.

⁶ Tobit VII, 14 'καὶ ἔγραψεν συγγραφὴν βιβλίου συνοικίσεως καὶ ὡς δίδωσιν αὐτῇ αὐτῷ γυναῖκα κατὰ τῆς κρίσεως τοῦ Μωσέως νόμου.

Septuagint, but not in the sense of house of worship. The words קהל עדה are translated synagogue, while a house of worship in the Greek language is *προσευχή*, proseuche. So בית תפלה¹⁰ is in the Septuagint translated proseuche.

Philo in his treatise *Against Flaccus*, where he complains that this governor encouraged the Alexandrian Greeks to destroy the Jewish houses of worship, always calls them proseuchae, and in his work *Concerning the Embassy to Gaius* the Jewish house of worship is always referred to as proseuche. Once in Philo we find the word synagogue for house of worship.¹¹ Josephus calls a house of worship sometimes proseuche and sometimes synagogue.¹²

In the New Testament the Jewish house of worship is always called synagogue. From the Tannaitic literature we learn that the synagogue as an institution played a great part in the life of the Jews in the period of the Second Commonwealth, but when this institution originated is still obscure.

Although the word בית הכנסת does not occur in the Bible, all scholars are of the opinion that the synagogue as a fixed institution was in existence in Babylonia after the destruction of the first Temple. The rise of this institution was necessitated by the need of communal worship and instruction, felt after the destruction of the Temple.

G. F. Moore, in his book on Judaism, writing on the origin of the synagogue, says:

“It is not probable that the synagogue began with so definite a purpose. Its origin is unknown, but it may be reasonably surmised that it had its antecedents in spontaneous gatherings of Jews in Babylonia and other lands of their exile on the Sabbaths and at the time of the old seasonal feasts or on fast days, to confirm one another in fidelity to their religion in the midst of heathenism, and encourage themselves in the hope of restoration. In such gatherings we may imagine listening to the words of a living prophet like Ezekiel or the author of Isaiah 40ff., or reading the words of older prophets; confessing the sins which had brought this judgment upon the nation and beseeching the return of God’s

¹⁰ Isaiah LVI, 7.

¹¹ *Quod omnis probus liber*, 12.

¹² *Ant.* XIX, 6, 3, *B.J.* II, 14, 4, 5; VII, 3, 3.

favor in such penitential prayers as ere long became an established type in Hebrew literature, or in poetical compositions of similar content such as are found in the book of Lamentations and in the Psalter.¹³

Bacher¹⁴ maintains that the institution of the synagogue originated in Babylonia, and Ezekiel's expression ואהי להם למקדש מעט "I will be to them as a little sanctuary," refers to the synagogue of Babylonia. Wellhausen¹⁵ holds the view that the synagogue is a continuation of the ancient במוֹת (*Bamoth*). Löw¹⁶ was of the opinion that the synagogue was in existence even before the destruction of the first Temple, and suggested that the בית עם mentioned by Jeremiah, which the Babylonians destroyed together with the Temple, was the forerunner of the synagogue. Neither of these theories, that the origin of the synagogue was pre-Exilic and that it was invested with religious character from its very inception, appears to me to be acceptable. If we assume that the institution of the synagogue originated during the Babylonian period or even before that time and that its character was a religious one, we fail to understand why the synagogue was not called בית הפילה or even בית העדה, בית הקהל, or בית הקהלה instead of בית הכנסת a term that never occurs in the entire biblical literature. Again, the question arises why the Greek word for a Jewish house of worship is synagogue, a word that never occurs in the Septuagint nor in Greek literature before the rise of Christianity in the sense of a house of worship.¹⁷ We should expect the word *προσευχη*, *proseuche*, instead of *synagogue*, especially since we find the word *proseuche* as referring to house of worship in the Septuagint.¹⁸

¹³ Judaism, p. 283.

¹⁴ J.E. Art. Synagogue. Comp. Meg. 29a ואהי להם למקדש מעט אמר ר' יצחק אלו בחי כנסיות ובחי מדרשות שבבבל שרפו כל מועדי אל: ילקוט שמעוני 49. Comp. also S. Krauss' *Synagogale Altertümer*, 49. מה מועדי אל מקומות שהיה שמך מועד

¹⁵ Wellhausen, *Israelitische und jüdische Geschichte*, 1901, 197. Compare also Renan, *Histoire du peuple d'Israël*, 1893, IV, 218.

¹⁶ Löw, *Gesammelte Schriften*, V, IV.

¹⁷ The statement made during the discussion that the word *συναγωγή* in the sense of the house of worship was mentioned by the pagan writers long before the Christian era is unfounded. There is no reference in the Greek literature of that period to that effect.

¹⁸ Isaiah LVI, 7.

I venture the suggestion that the term בית הכנסת betrays the origin and the character of the synagogue. It has been pointed out that the word בית הכנסת is not mentioned in the Bible. We find the word כנס for the first time in the book of Esther (post-Exilic period).¹⁹ This, to my mind, gives us a clue to the origin of the synagogue as belonging to the period after the return from Babylonia. When the Jews returned to Palestine, they did not settle in one place only, as in Jerusalem, but were scattered over all Judea, in various villages and towns. In these smaller settlements, where they had to meet the social and economic problems that confronted them in their practical life, they summoned assemblies of all the inhabitants of the town or village. The people that participated in their deliberations were called בני הכנסת, the men of the assembly. The head of the assembly was called ראש הכנסת. The officer of the assembly, whose duties were not only those of janitor, but also the care of the religious needs of the assembly, was called חזן הכנסת, and the house where the assembly was held was called בית הכנסת, the house of the assembly.

The assembly, to be sure, had no permanent meeting place, but it met in different places from time to time, and any one of these was called בית הכנסת, the house of the assembly. This view is supported by all the passages in the early Tannaitic literature, where reference is made to the head of the assembly as ראש הכנסת and never as ראש בית הכנסת. Likewise, the members of the assembly were always called בני הכנסת, never בני בית הכנסת.²⁰ Consequently, the word בית הכנסת refers to a house of assembly, not to a house of worship. It is interesting to note that in the Talmud we find the expression בית הכנסת של עצים,²¹ a storage house for lumber. This clearly indicates that the expression בית הכנסת does not refer only to a house of worship but to any kind of gathering place.

The meetings were called by different leaders for the purpose of considering problems of an economic and social character, as was the case when Joseph, the son of Tobias, called an ecclesia, assem-

¹⁹ See above, note 9.

²⁰ In Tosef. Bik. 2, 8, the correct reading is בני הכנסת וכל חזנין וכל.

²¹ Jer. B.B. 18c. Comp. M. Abot III, 10, בתי כנסיות של עמי הארץ, assembly houses of the masses. B.M. 24 בתי כנסיות של נכרים של נכרים, the assembly houses of the Gentiles, Comp. also לועזות של בית הכנסת, Tos. Meg. IV, 13.



bly, in the Temple to discuss the question of taxation in connection with payment demanded by the Ptolemies.²² Such meetings, though called primarily for economic reasons, were no doubt attended with some sort of prayer, as was the custom among the Jews. When the Hasmoneans called the people to rise against the Syrians, they assembled the Jews at Mizpah and offered a prayer.²³

Later, when these meetings assumed a more regular character, two days a week were set aside for the purpose, namely Monday and Thursday, and these days were called *ימי כניסה*, "days of assembly." On these days also the court would be held²⁴ in the cities for the convenience of those who had come to the assembly from the towns and villages. On these two days, Monday and Thursday, when the people were assembled, the rabbis thought fit to institute the public reading of the Torah²⁵ for their benefit. The Talmud ascribes the reading of the Torah on Monday and Thursday to Ezra.²⁶

Out of consideration for the assembled people, also, the rabbis allowed the Megillah to be read ahead of the regular date. According to old custom the Megillah was supposed to be read on the 14th of Adar, in some localities on the 15th of Adar. The rabbis modified the law and permitted the Megillah to be read on the 13th, 12th or 11th²⁷ of the month according to the day of the week on which Purim fell in order to take advantage of the assemblies. Thus, if Purim, the 14th of Adar, fell on Tuesday, the Megillah was to be read on Monday, the 13th, a day of assembly. If it fell on Wednesday, the Megillah was to be read on Monday, the 12th, and if on Sunday, the reading was to take place on Thursday, the 11th, a day of assembly.

In these assemblies we may say that the germ of the institution of the synagogue is to be found.

The synagogue as an institution, a house of reading the Torah and prayers, came into existence when the Pharisees introduced

²² Ant. XII, 4, 2.

²³ IMac. III, 46.

²⁴ B.K. 82a, Jer. Meg. 75a.

²⁵ Ibid. קורין בשני ובחמישי בשבת.

²⁶ Ibid. Comp. S. Zeitlin, Takkanot Ezra, JQR. 1917.

²⁷ Megillah I, 1-2.

the daily sacrifice as a communal offering, a procedure to which the Sadducees were strongly opposed.²⁸ In the early days of the Second Commonwealth, the daily sacrifice was considered a private sacrifice, and hence was brought by the wealthy class, the members of which could afford to offer money to the treasury of the Temple for the purchase of cattle for sacrifice. The Pharisees, who were in favor of the democratization of the Temple and the institutions connected with it, maintained that the *קרבת חמיר*, the daily sacrifice, was not to be considered an individual sacrifice, but should be a communal one, that the money for the purchase of the cattle should come from the whole Jewish people, and the animals should be bought from the funds of the treasury.²⁹ As they were interested in having these daily sacrifices become a national institution, they were not satisfied with the mere purchase of the cattle with communal funds, but wished the entire nation to participate in the ceremony of the slaughtering of the *קרבת חמיר* morning and afternoon. To accomplish this, the Israelites, the inhabitants of the cities, towns and villages, were divided into 24 divisions, called *מעמדות* *ma'amadot*. The members of each *ma'amad* were supposed to go to Jerusalem to the Temple to take part in the ceremony of the slaughtering of the daily sacrifice. The members of the divisions represented the entire Jewish people. As not all the members of the *ma'amad* could go or wished to go to Jerusalem, the part that actually went represented the *ma'amad* and the entire Jewish people. The members that remained at home gathered in their respective cities and towns on the days on which they were supposed to be in Jerusalem and read the portions of the Torah relating to the sacrifice.³⁰ Hence, as the whole Jewish people was divided into *ma'amadot*, all Jews had to assemble in their respective towns on the days when they were supposed to be in Jerusalem and read the appropriate portions of the Torah. Thus they had to assemble twice daily throughout the year, *morning* and *afternoon*; on sabbaths three times, *morning*, *mussaf* and *afternoon*; on the Day of Atonement four times, *morning*, *mussaf*, *afternoon* and

²⁸ Men, 65a.

²⁹ Ibid. באין מתרומת הלשכה.

³⁰ Tan. IV, 1, see *ibid*, 27b הכנסת לבית הכנסת ונכנסין לבית הכנסת. They also read the portion of מעשה בראשית.

ne'ilah. We may even postulate that the Israelites of each *ma'amad*, when they assembled in their respective places, not only read the portions of the Torah relating to the daily sacrifice but also recited the liturgy of the Temple service. As a result of all this, it became necessary for each group to establish a permanent place for assemblies, and this place was called *בית הכנסת*. The difference between this meeting place and the early one lay in the fact that the early assemblies used to meet only from time to time, while the later type became permanent institutions for the reading of the Torah and for worship. As the origin of the *בית הכנסת*, synagogue, was *not religious* but secular, it retained some of its early character even after the *בית הכנסת*, synagogue, had become identified with religious functions. We find that Jewish guilds used to meet in the synagogue of Alexandria,³¹ at the time of the rebellion against Rome, and that the Jews of Galilee assembled in the synagogue to discuss plans of military organization in connection with the revolt against the Romans.³² The meetings of the various charitable organizations at which alms were allotted to the needy were held in the synagogues.³³

The Jewish masses looked upon the synagogue as a popular institution and called it "the people's house." The rabbis were greatly opposed to the secularization of the synagogue, and they even said that the *הארץ עם* were dying young because they called it "the people's house."³⁴ The Jewish masses, who spoke Aramaic, called a house of worship *כנישתא*, while the Hellenized Jews, who spoke Greek, called it synagogue, a literal translation of the Hebrew word *כנסת* or of the Aramaic *כנישתא*. Thus we find the word synagogue used for a house of worship once in Philo and three times in Josephus. On the other hand, the pagans, who did not know Hebrew and therefore were not acquainted with the word *בית הכנסת*, called a Jewish house of worship *proseuche*, not synagogue. In the decrees of the Roman governors we find the Jews

³¹ Suc. 51b.

³² Josephus, *Vita*, 54, B.J. II, 14, 4, Comp. J. Bik, 65d דקוסרין מדרתא דקוסרין.

³³ Tos. B.B. VIII, 14 הכנסת בבית הצדקה פוסקין עליהן צדקה.

³⁴ Shab. 32a: ר' שמעון בן אלעזר אומר בעון שני דברים עמי הארצות מתים על שקורין ל' לארון הקדש ארנא ועל שקורין לבית הכנסת בית עם.

allowed to assemble and to build proseuchae.³⁵ Josephus tells us in the name of Apion that Moses built a proseuche in Egypt.³⁶ In the Greek papyri we find that Ptolemy III allowed the Jewish proseuchae rights of asylum.³⁷

The early Christians, who for the most part were Jews, knew a little Hebrew and their language was in all probability Aramaic. They spoke of a Jewish house of worship as a *בית הכנסת* or *בנישוח*.³⁸ Later, when they instituted their own house of prayer, they called it also *בית הכנסת*, but not by the Greek name synagogue. They used another Greek word, a synonym, *ἐκκλησία*, ecclesia, which, again, is a translation of the Hebrew word *כנסת* or *בנישוח*. They were apparently anxious to differentiate between the Jewish house of worship, which the Hellenized Jews called synagogue, and the Christian house of worship, which they called ecclesia. However, Ignatius, one of the early Church Fathers, who lived in the first century of the common era, still called the Christian house of worship by the name synagogue.³⁹ Even the holy communion was called *synox*.

The foregoing data, we believe, demonstrate that the origin of the synagogue dates back to the time when local assemblies were occasionally summoned to consider the needs of a community. In addition to these local assemblies, there were assemblies of national character, convened to consider problems affecting the whole of Jewry. These were called the Great Synagogue, *כנסת הגדולה*, to differentiate them from the local meetings. Those who participated in such assemblies were called the men of the Great Synagogue, *אנשי כנסת הגדולה*. The head of such assemblies was called *ראש כנסת הגדולה*, the head (president) of the Great Synagogue. These Great Synagogues were not of a permanent nature with

³⁵ *Ant.* XIV, 10, 23, *Comp. ibid.* XVI, 6, 2, where Augustus Ceasar calls a Jewish house of study by the name of Sabbatian, the reason being that the Jews spent the entire Sabbath in study in their synagogues.

³⁶ *Against Apion*, II, 2.

³⁷ Dittenberger, *Orientalis graeci inscriptiones selectae*, 129.

³⁸ *Mat.* IV, 23; IX, 35; X, 17.

³⁹ Epistle of Ignatius to the Trallians, ch. 7, (longer version). *Comp. Epiphanius, Haer.* XXX, 18. It is interesting to note that Christian heretical sects like the Ebionites and the Marcionites called the Christian house of worship synagogue. See Epiphanius, *ibid.*; *comp. also A. Harnack, Zeitschr. f. w. Theol.*, 1876.

regular sessions, but were summoned as occasion demanded to discuss national problems. During the period of the Second Commonwealth they were convened several times. One of these great Synagogues met in the days of Ezra and Nehemiah to pass important ordinances.⁴⁰ A second one was summoned at the time when the war between Antiochus III and Ptolemy V was waged, about the year 198 B. C. E., to decide whether Judea should side with Antiochus or remain loyal to the Ptolemaic dynasty.⁴¹ This Great Synagogue was under the leadership of Simon II, the Righteous. We have had occasion elsewhere to point out that the text in Mishnah Abot, in which Simon the Righteous was called one of the last survivors of the Great Synagogue, שמעון הצדיק היה משרי אנשי כנסת הגדולה, should be amended to read שמעון הצדיק היה מרישי כנסת הגדולה. Simon the Righteous was one of the heads (presidents) of the Great Synagogue.⁴²

A third such assembly of the Great Synagogue was convened in the year 141 B. C. E., when the Jews, in recognition of the great deeds of the Hasmonean family in liberating Judea from the Syrians, decided to appoint Simon high priest, and made the high priesthood hereditary in the family. Before the time of Simon, the high priesthood had for many centuries, from the time of Solomon, who built the first Temple, been hereditary in the family of Zadok. To change this tradition it was necessary to summon the Great Synagogue and the priests, as the author of the first Book of Maccabees notes: "On the eighteenth day of Elul, in 172, the year that is the third year of Simon, the high priest and the prince of the people of God, in a Great Synagogue of the priests and people and princes of the nation and the elders of the country."⁴³

Another Great Synagogue was summoned in the year 65 C. E., when the Jews threw off the yoke of the Romans and the Herodian dynasty and a new provisional government was set up, to decide the question of the war against the Romans and to adopt a new constitution.⁴⁴

⁴⁰ Ez. X, 7.

⁴¹ Ant. XII, 4, 11.

⁴² נר מערבי, 1924.

⁴³ I Mac. XIV, 28, ἐπὶ συναγωγῆς μεγάλης.

⁴⁴ B. J. II, 20, 3.

After the last attempt for national independence by Bar Kokba which ended in disaster and complete destruction, Palestine Jews identified themselves mainly as a religious community. The term כנסת which originally was used in the sense of an assembly was now applied to the entire Jewish community in a theological sense of the word אמרה כנסת ישראל לפני הקב"ה.⁴⁵ It may be safe to assume that the conception of כנסת ישראל, the Synagogue of Israel, as applied to the Jewish community, was coined in Palestine in the early centuries of Christianity.

The word ecclesia applied not only to a Christian house of worship but to the Christian community as well.⁴⁶ The Jews likewise, under the influence of their Christian neighbors, used the word כנסת ישראל, the Synagogue of Israel, also in the sense of the entire Jewish community. The head of the Jewish community was addressed by the Christians as ἀρχιεπιστοπάγωγος, the ruler of the Synagogue. It is worth while noting that in the Midrashic and Cabalistic literature the כנסת ישראל, the Synagogue of Israel, represents the bride, while God represents the bridegroom. In the Patristic literature we find that the ecclesia represents the bride and Jesus is the bridegroom of the ecclesia.



⁴⁵ Dr. Schulman aptly brought out this idea during the discussion of my paper.

⁴⁶ Comp. Origen, *Contra Celsum*, VIII, 75.

⁴⁷ Comp. Eusebius, *Ecc. Hist.* X, 4.