



the Synagogue

the Platform for Spreading of the Gospel

by Tim Kelley

Many people who profess to believe that Jesus (Yeshua) is the Messiah also believe that when He came on the scene, He came to set the Hebrew people aside and start something new – the “church”. This belief that the “church” replaced Israel seems pretty solid in the minds of most Christian believers. They see Jesus’ frustration with the Jewish leadership, they interpret Paul’s writings as an attack on the Jewish traditions and the Torah, and based on Jesus’ “I will build my church” declaration, they believe that God has set Israel aside and is starting something new. Then to top it off, it appears that Paul provided a new system of worship, a new form of church government.

But is that really the case? Did God replace Israel with the “church”? Did the Jewish and non-Jewish believers all of the sudden come under a new form of governance? Did Yeshua start something new, or did He continue to support the beliefs, expectations, and traditions of the first century Jewish people?

As YHVH begins peeling the scales of our eyes, we come to see that YHVH does not change . . . that the system that Yeshua and the disciples used was just as effective years after Yeshua’s death as it was before.

This study will show that the synagogue system in which Yeshua grew up was the same system that He used to reach His disciples, and remained the system in which His disciples reached out to the world. In this study we’ll:

- learn the history of the synagogue system
- see that Yeshua and the apostles used the synagogue system to further the gospel
- see that the structure that Paul taught was indeed that of the 1st century Jewish synagogue.

History

Around 800 BCE, YHVH sent a warning via the prophet Hosea to the people of the northern tribes of Israel which in the Bible are collectively referred to as Ephraim. He said to them:

^{ESV} Hosea 4:6 My people are destroyed for lack of knowledge; because you have rejected knowledge, I reject you from being a priest to me. And since you have forgotten the law of your God, I also will forget your children.

Because the people were not being taught Torah, but instead were being taught the false religion of Jeroboam, the people lost sight of God and fell into idolatry. This, of course, led to the captivity of the northern tribes by the Assyrians. About 300 years later the prophet Malachi wrote a similar warning to the southern tribes. It seems the priests had not been doing one of their major duties – to teach Torah to the people. Malachi states that:

Malachi 2:7-8 “ . . . the lips of a priest should guard knowledge, and people should seek instruction from his mouth, for he is the messenger of the LORD of hosts. ⁸ But you have turned aside from the way. You have caused many to stumble by your instruction . . .”

Ephraim rejected the warning of Hosea, but fortunately for us, the Jewish people heeded the warning of Malachi. They looked back on what had happened to their northern-tribe brothers as well as their own recent captivity and decided to do something about it and thus they began to return to the Torah.

For the Jewish exiles returning to the land, Ezra the priest is given much of the credit for their return to Torah, but because the Temple had been destroyed, he and the other priests no longer had a platform

from which to teach. Thus he turned to the “beit kneset”¹ - the house of assembly, later referred to as the synagogue.

The word “synagogue” simply means “gather together”. It’s first used in the Septuagint (LXX) to translate the Hebrew word “kavah” (קָוָה – 6960) in Genesis 1 –

^{NKJ} **Genesis 1:9** Then God said, "Let the waters under the heavens be gathered together into one place, and let the dry *land* appear"; and it was so.

In Exodus, “synagogue” translates the Hebrew word “edah” (עֵדָה – 5712) or “congregation” –

^{NKJ} **Exodus 12:3** "Speak to all the congregation of Israel, saying: 'On the tenth *day* of this month every man shall take for himself a lamb, according to the house of *his* father, a lamb for a household.

It’s again used in the same context to translate the word “qahal” (קָהָל – 6951) which is again translated “assembly” or “congregation”, but this time in the sense of a spiritual body –

^{NKJ} **Exodus 12:6** 'Now you shall keep it until the fourteenth day of the same month. Then the whole assembly of the congregation of Israel shall kill it at twilight.

Historians are unclear as to when the synagogue system began, but Scripture points out that it certainly predated the 1st century –

^{NKJ} **Acts 15:21** "For Moses has had throughout many generations those who preach him in every city, being read in the synagogues every Sabbath.

The rabbis teach that it began with Moses, but it likely started much later. There are indications that meeting places for the Hebrew people were in existence during the times of the early kings². Bullinger’s “Companion Bible”³ notes that –

“Synagogues were in use from the earliest times, and Dr. John Lightfoot (Works, vol. 5, page 112) identifies them with the ‘high places’ so often mentioned in Scripture in a commendable sense, as in 1 Samuel 9:10; 10:5 and 1 Kings 3:4.”

Bullinger goes on to say that these ‘high places’ should be distinguished from those of the pagans, and then asks –

“How else could the ‘holy convocations’ be held in accordance with Leviticus 23?”

It’s interesting to note that the “high place” spoken of in 1 Kings 3:4 is the same place YHVH asked Solomon “What shall I give you?”

^{ESV} **1 Kings 3:3-5** Solomon loved the LORD, walking in the statutes of David his father, only he sacrificed and made offerings at the high places. ⁴ And the king went to Gibeon to sacrifice there, for that was the great high place. Solomon used to offer a thousand burnt offerings on that altar.

⁵ At Gibeon the LORD appeared to Solomon in a dream by night, and God said, "Ask what I shall give you."

¹ “Kneset” is a Hebrew word for assembly, but it’s not used in scripture. It comes from the root word “kanac” (כָּנַע – 3664) which means to gather.

² Psalm 74:8

³ The Companion Bible; EW Bullinger; Kregel Publications, Grand Rapids, MI; ISBN 0-8254-2178-0; Appendix 120; pg. 159

Though the LXX does not refer to them as synagogues, it's clear from the scriptures noted in Bullinger's text that men of God did assemble at these places.

It's commonly understood that the synagogue system formally began sometime in the 5th century BCE either during the Babylonian captivity or shortly thereafter as many of the Jews returned to the land. Because there was no Temple with its surrounding courtyards, the synagogue soon became the center of Jewish social life. It became the place to praise God, pray, read the Torah, the Psalms, and the Prophets, and to study the Torah.

Yeshua and His Followers

After the Temple was rebuilt and the services restored, the worship of God migrated away from the synagogue and back to the Temple, leaving the primary function of the synagogue to be the place to study. In fact, at most synagogues there was an adjoining structure called the "beit midrash" or "house of study". Unger's Bible Dictionary⁴ states –

It must be understood that the main object of these Sabbath day assemblages in the synagogues was not public worship in its stricter sense, but religious instruction, in which to an Israelite was, above all, instruction in the law.

That teaching God's word was the focus of the synagogue is clearly illustrated in numerous NT examples. For instance, Yeshua used the synagogue as one of His primary platforms for spreading the "good news".

^{ESV} **Mark 1:21-22** And they went into Capernaum, and immediately on the Sabbath he entered the synagogue and was teaching. ²² And they were astonished at his teaching, for he taught them as one who had authority, and not as the scribes.

Yeshua's disciples followed in His footsteps, using the vast synagogue system of their day to spread the gospel throughout Asia Minor –

^{ESV} **Acts 17:1** Now when they had passed through Amphipolis and Apollonia, they came to Thessalonica, where there was a synagogue of the Jews. ² And Paul went in, as was his custom, and on three Sabbath days he reasoned with them from the Scriptures, ³ 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."

The synagogue and the community were so interrelated that many functions in the synagogue spilled over into the community. Those who were considered elders in the synagogue (because of their understanding of the Torah) were called upon for input not only in religious matters but also for things pertaining to the community. The deacons not only had responsibilities to the synagogue congregation, but also to the community as a whole. Thus, a person chosen to fill those responsibilities within the synagogue had more than likely already shown his devotion to that service within the community. In the same manner, a person who was corrected by the leaders of the synagogue was also deemed to have sinned against the community.

Jewish synagogues were, and still are, both democratic and autonomous. Though similar in structure and traditions from town to town, they were not controlled by a central authority in Jerusalem, but instead, were raised up and governed by the local community. In his book Our Father Abraham, Marvin Wilson says:

"Like Israel of old, the Church is called 'the people of God' (1 Peter 2:10) and is expected to function with communal self-awareness. Whenever the Church has forsaken this aspect of its Jewish roots -- the so-called democracy of the synagogue -- and become

⁴ Unger's Bible Dictionary; Merrill F. Unger; Moody Press; Chicago, IL; 1988; ISBN 0-8024-9037-9; pg.1229a

authoritarian and hierarchically centered, rather than lay- or people-centered, its social consciousness has been greatly blunted"⁵.

Thus, the synagogue was a self-governing entity, just like the community in which it was centered. Though there were responsibilities and roles within the system, it was run by the people. In fact, even the rabbi was considered a layperson. Quoting again from the Unger's dictionary⁶ –

“The general direction of affairs was committed to elders, whereas special officers were appointed for special purposes. But the peculiarity here is that just for the acts proper to public worship - the reading of the scripture, preaching, and prayer – no special officials were appointed. These acts were, on the contrary, in the time of Christ still freely performed in turn by members of the congregation.”

This type of system enabled a more open flow of information and understanding than what one would normally find in a typical Christian church. Thus those who were somewhat “out of the mainstream” in regards to their interpretation of scripture (such as Yeshua and Paul) were given a platform as well as those who towed the party line. Thus when the disciples traveled from town to town, they could expect to be given an audience at the local synagogue –

^{ESV} **Acts 13:13-16** Now Paul and his companions set sail from Paphos and came to Perga in Pamphylia. And John left them and returned to Jerusalem, ¹⁴ but they went on from Perga and came to Antioch in Pisidia. And on the Sabbath day they went into the synagogue and sat down. ¹⁵ After the reading from the Law and the Prophets, the rulers of the synagogue sent a message to them, saying, "Brothers, if you have any word of exhortation for the people, say it." ¹⁶ So Paul stood up, and motioning with his hand said: "Men of Israel and you who fear God, listen . . . “

The services in most synagogues were well developed and included⁷:

- recitation of the Shema
- reading of that week's Torah “parasha”
- reading of that week's “haftara” portion (reading from the prophets)
 - followed by a short teaching on what was just read
- a lecture or sermon
- the Priestly Blessing

Somewhere in history portions of the Shemoni Esre (the Amidah) was added to the service.

It was considered appropriate to stand while reading the portions from scripture, but it was customary to sit while teaching or giving a sermon. Once the reader was finished reading, he would take a seat next to the “bimah” (the podium from which he read) and facing the audience, give his discourse on the reading⁸. This is clearly illustrated in Yeshua's visit to the synagogue in his boyhood home of Nazareth –

^{ESV} **Luke 4:16-20** And he came to Nazareth, where he had been brought up. And as was his custom, he went to the synagogue on the Sabbath day, and he stood up to read. ¹⁷ And the scroll of the prophet Isaiah was given to him. He unrolled the scroll and found the place where it was written, ¹⁸ "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim liberty to the captives and recovering of sight to the blind, to set at liberty those who are oppressed, ¹⁹ to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor." ²⁰

⁵ Our Father Abraham, Marvin Wilson, Pg. 190

⁶ Ibid pg.1229b

⁷ ibid

⁸ Sketches of Jewish Social Life; Chapter 16 Synagogues: Their Origin, Structure and Outward Arrangements; Alfred Edersheim;

And he rolled up the scroll and gave it back to the attendant and sat down. And the eyes of all in the synagogue were fixed on him.

What this tells us is that Yeshua was sitting in the front of the synagogue, facing the audience, and that the audience was expecting Him to expound on what He had read. Unfortunately, they didn't like what He said and thus broke synagogue protocol by not only breaking up the synagogue service, but by dishonoring a visiting rabbi.⁹

Structure

As we've seen, the synagogue was well established by the time of Yeshua and His disciples. It's also clear that Yeshua and the apostles used the synagogue as a springboard for their message of redemption and restoration. Since it's widely understood that the earliest believers in Yeshua were Jewish, it would stand to reason the assemblies formed by these Jewish believers would resemble what had been previously established and what had been working effectively for hundreds of years.

Never-the-less, some believe that in Ephesians 4, Paul provided a new structure that was to govern a totally new system called "New Testament Church". Yet this "new" structure has a striking resemblance to the previously well established structure of the first century Jewish synagogue.¹⁰ Let's compare the "five-fold ministry" spoken of by Paul with the structure of the first century Jewish synagogue.

^{ESV} **Ephesians 4:11-12** ¹¹ And he gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the pastors and teachers, ¹² to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ,

The first thing we should notice is that even though they were spoken of quite often in scripture¹¹, Paul leaves out the role of the elders. The reason for this is very simple - the elders (ziquie - זִקְנִי - 2205) were the ones who filled most of the roles within the synagogue. They were the backbone of the synagogue structure. Paul said that if a person desired to be an elder, he desired a good work.¹² This was quite true since if you were an elder, you could be called on to serve in many areas.

The elders typically were older men who because of their age were considered to be wiser. Due to the various roles they would play, it was important that they be very knowledgeable of the scriptures as well. Thus it was the elders would fill many of the following roles:

Apostle – The apostle is the first of the five-fold ministry outlined in Ephesians 4. An apostle is simply a person who is "sent out" as shown in Acts 13:

^{ESV} **Acts 13:1** Now there were in the church at Antioch prophets and teachers, Barnabas, Simeon who was called Niger, Lucius of Cyrene, Manaen a member of the court of Herod the tetrarch, and Saul. ² While they were worshiping the Lord and fasting, the Holy Spirit said, "Set apart for me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them." ³ Then after fasting and praying they laid their hands on them and sent them off.

The Hebrew term would be "**shaliach**", which simply means "to send". There are numerous examples of this in the Tnakh. Apostles were sent out on behalf of a synagogue congregation or on behalf of a specific rabbi for the purpose of setting up new synagogue congregations in a distant

⁹ Yeshua's message was that the prophesied Messiah would come to the northern exiled tribes instead of these who considered themselves "Jewish". would greet the Messiah when he came

¹⁰ Evidence of the Jewish Background of the Early Church; Ron Moseley, PHD.;

<http://www.haydid.org/yeshron1.htm>

¹¹ 1 Peter 5:1; 1 Tim. 5:19

¹² 1 Timothy 3:1

community. Yeshua sent His disciples out two-by-two¹³ as was the Jewish custom of the day. Once the apostle finished his mission, he was no longer an apostle.

It's important to understand that the role of apostle was listed first in the Ephesians passage simply because it was the first step in setting up a synagogue¹⁴. We'll find that the subsequent roles are listed the way they are for that same reason.

Though an apostle could be anyone sent with a message, that person would oftentimes be considered a **Rabbi**. Rabbi means "great one". The term "rabbi" was an honorary title bestowed upon a man who was considered an important teacher in Israel. Israel's history includes a number of "great ones" including Moses, Solomon, and Rabbi Yeshua¹⁵. Rabbis were normally not attached to any specific synagogue, but were itinerant teachers who moved from town to town offering teachings and unique understanding to whoever would listen. The custom in the first century synagogue was to invite a visiting rabbi to offer words of exhortation or to bring news of what might be happening in Jerusalem.

Prophet – The Hebrew word for prophet is "**Navi**" (נביא). The prophets of old, those who wrote various parts of the Tnakh are called "Navaim". A prophet is one who "speaks forth" as in the case of Aaron, who spoke for Moses:

^{KJV} Exodus 7:1 And the LORD said unto Moses, See, I have made thee a god to Pharaoh: and Aaron thy brother shall be thy prophet.

The prophets of old were given insight into events that were yet to happen, but they also warned the people of things they could clearly see happening at that moment, admonishing them to return to YHVH and forsake their evil ways in order to avoid the curses foretold by earlier prophets.

There were many prophets in the first century including Zacharias (Luke 1:67), Simeon (Luke 2:36), Anna the Prophetess (Luke 2:36-38), Paul and Barnabas (Acts 13:1-3) as well as others. These men (and women) were those who could edify, exhort, and comfort the assemblies in which they served.

Evangelists – An evangelist was a person who would seek new converts in the local community and outlying areas. In the synagogue he was call a "**Maggid**" (מגיד), a word that means "telling". He was oftentimes a rabbi with good speaking skills who could relate the various Biblical stories in such a way as to encourage a person to come back into synagogue fellowship. The Maggidim were considered itinerant in that he would often visit neighboring synagogues to bring good news.

Pastors – Pastors were appointed by the congregation once it had grown to the point that it needed one. The synagogue term was "**Zakin**". He was an elder who's purpose was to provide counseling and to visit the sick. This was not an administrative office and was usually reserved for the "retired" elders, rabbis, or priests. They were also considered 'shepherds' from the Hebrew word "ra'ah" (

רָעָה - Strongs 7462) which literally means "to pasture, tend, graze, feed".

Teachers – The teachers were often **elders** or rabbis. The synagogue term was "**batlanim**" which in Hebrew means "men of leisure". These were the men who had the free time to spend studying the scriptures. In order for a new synagogue to be established, there had to be at least ten batlanim available in order to form a "minion". In his commentary on the Talmud (*San.* 17b; *Meg.*

3b) Rashi defines the *batlanim* as "ten persons who abstain from all other work in order to be present in synagogue for morning and evening prayers".

¹³ Mark 6:7

¹⁴ This is also the case in 1 Corinthians 12:28

¹⁵ John 3:1-2

Along with the five roles listed by Paul, a typical synagogue had a “**chazen**” (from the root word Chaza - **חָזַן** – 2370 – “to see”) or overseer of the congregation. The “**chazen**” was equivalent to a minister or deacon. He was responsible to oversee the day to day affairs of the synagogue. Besides officiating at the Shabbat service, he would be responsible for making sure the building was kept clean inside and out; making sure the building was in good repair, and that it was set up for special occasions. He was sometimes referred to as the “Angel of the Congregation (church)”. Because of his continuing responsibilities, his was the only paid position within the synagogue structure.

When you take a serious look at the structure of the synagogue and compare it to what Paul taught, you can clearly see they are the same. Instead of starting something new, the first century believing congregations were simply a continuation of the Jewish synagogue system with the only exception being that they believed Yeshua was the promised messiah.

If indeed Paul was referring to the synagogue in Ephesians 4 (as well as 1 Cor. 12:27); and since the synagogue structure was already well established when Paul wrote his letters; why did – or even did he - have to explain it to Titus, Timothy, and the Ephesians? Let’s take a quick look and see.

Paul knew that it was important that the believers remain within the protection of the synagogue system as long as possible. Identification with the synagogue provided a certain number of protections from the Roman government since Judaism was a religion that was exempt from the requirement that people governed by the Romans had to worship the Roman gods. To be separate from the synagogue would mean certain death for those who refused to do so. That’s why Yeshua warned His disciples that there would be a time that they would be cast out of the synagogue – even likening to being put to death.

^{NKJ} **John 16:1** "These things I have spoken to you, that you should not be made to stumble.

²"They will put you out of the synagogues; yes, the time is coming that whoever kills you will think that he offers God service.

For the believer to be able to remain a part of the synagogue, they had to get along with their Jewish brothers. It just so happens that the central point of Ephesians 4 as well as 1 Corinthians 12 is “unity”¹. When Paul referenced the “5-fold ministry”, he was not doing so for the purpose of teaching how to set up an organization, but rather to remind his believing audience that the vehicle by which they had been brought into and nurtured in the walk was the synagogue. James made that very clear in Acts 15 –

^{NKJ} **Acts 15:19-21** "Therefore I judge that we should not trouble those from among the Gentiles who are turning to God, ²⁰ "but that we write to them to abstain from things polluted by idols, *from* sexual immorality, *from* things strangled, and *from* blood. ²¹ "For Moses has had throughout many generations those who preach him in every city, being read in the synagogues every Sabbath."

Paul probably wanted to remind the believers that they were called via the “Jewish” synagogue system, and for the sake of unity, should respect it. As for Titus and Timothy . . . it’s likely that both men were relative newcomers to the synagogue system, yet they were being sent to establish and support new (believing) synagogues in the area of Asia Minor. Paul was simply reminding them to uphold the qualifications for new leaders that had been a part of the system for hundreds of years.

As we continue to grow in understanding of Messiah Yeshua, we’re better able to withstand the attacks of those who would steal or faith by claiming that He forsook the traditions and prophecies of old by starting something new.

Shalom Alecheim