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# Synagogue Structure

*by Tim Kelley*

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From time to time, our lives are filled with hurt and pain because someone has wronged us. We may have been wronged from something as little as a person failing to return something they borrowed, but it could also be that someone has not paid you for a job you've done, or even that they have said something about you that is false or misleading. In either case, these are legitimate wrongs, and because they may have caused a rift in an otherwise good relationship, there needs to be a vehicle by which these wrongs can be made right.

The vehicle by which an attempt is made to right the wrongs between people, businesses, and even nations, is the court system. In those cases, a person or persons who supposedly know the laws of the land, attempt to persuade others that their client has been harmed or that their client has not caused harm. In many cases, a just verdict is reached, and a remedy is prescribed that is supposed to enable the two parties to "balance the scales" so to speak. This is fine and dandy when the parties do not claim to be spiritual brothers, but when they do, what is the remedy for offense?

Paul discusses that in his letter to the Corinthians where he makes a point of showing that issues between spiritual brothers should be handled within the assembly –

<sup>ESV</sup> 1 Corinthians 6:1 When one of you has a grievance against another, does he dare go to law before the unrighteous instead of the saints? <sup>2</sup> Or do you not know that the saints will judge the world? And if the world is to be judged by you, are you incompetent to try trivial cases? <sup>3</sup> Do you not know that we are to judge angels? How much more, then, matters pertaining to this life! <sup>4</sup> So if you have such cases, why do you lay them before those who have no standing in the church? <sup>5</sup> I say this to your shame. Can it be that there is no one among you wise enough to settle a dispute between the brothers, <sup>6</sup> but brother goes to law against brother, and that before unbelievers?

Paul understood that there would be offenses between spiritual brothers. He also understood that there was already in place a means by which these offenses could be remedied without going to the "gentile" courts. The Torah often speaks of judges and judgment. Shortly before Moses died, he instructed the Israelites to set up a system of judges, and he set guidelines by which the judges should judge.

Deuteronomy 16:18-20 <sup>18</sup> "You shall appoint judges and officers in all your towns that the LORD your God is giving you, according to your tribes, and they shall judge the people with righteous judgment. <sup>19</sup> You shall not pervert justice. You shall not show partiality, and you shall not accept a bribe, for a bribe blinds the eyes of the wise and subverts the cause of the righteous. <sup>20</sup> Justice, and only justice, you shall follow, that you may live and inherit the land that the LORD your God is giving you.

Moses goes on to discuss how to qualify witnesses<sup>1</sup>, how to gather evidence, and even how punishment should be applied<sup>2</sup>. The example Moses laid down is the basis for much of the judicial system here in America, and has

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<sup>1</sup> Deut. 19:15-21

<sup>2</sup> Deut. 25:1-3

served this country well for over 200 years. So, if God gave Moses the framework for a judicial system, and Paul admonished believers to not go to "gentile" courts, what then was the system by which a person could find justice if he had a grievance with his brother? It was the synagogue system.

Just as in our court system today, God's system of government is based on the knowledge, understanding, and application of law, specifically the Torah. Without people who had a good knowledge of the Torah and how it should be applied, it is impossible to have righteous justice. The eleventh petition in the Amidah is titled "Birkat Hamish'pat" – Restore Justice. It goes like this –

*Restore our judges as in former times and our counselors as at the beginning; and remove from us sorrow and sighing. Reign over us, you alone, O Lord, with loving kindness and compassion, and clear us in judgment. Blessed are you, O Lord, the King who loves righteousness and justice.*

The Jewish people pray daily for justice to be restored. They know that one of the major factors causing such injustice in the land is a lack of Torah knowledge. If you're going to have godly justice, you have to have a working knowledge of God's laws. The synagogue system was designed to provide and instill into the minds of the Jewish people a good working knowledge of His Torah.

Thus, we're going to talk a little more about the synagogue system. We discussed the synagogue about 20 months ago, but never got to the structure of the synagogue. This study will focus on how the synagogue operated, especially the roles of those who participated in it, and how it fit into the Jewish lifestyle.

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

<sup>ESV</sup>Hosea 4:6 <sup>6</sup> 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 Jerebaom, the people lost sight of God and fell into idolatry. This, of course, led to the captivity of Ephraim 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. <sup>8</sup> 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. One of the results of their determination to avoid future captivity was the return to Torah. Ezra the priest is given much of the credit for the Torah restoration among the returning exiles, and his tool was the Knesset ( כנסת ) – the assembly, later referred to as the synagogue. By this time in Jewish history, the priests had lost their platform – the Temple – and the people turned to the rabbis – the teachers – for instruction in Torah.

At this point, it's important to bring out one important characteristic of the Hebrew, especially the Jewish, people. The Hebrews generally look at themselves as a collection of people, not as individuals. The people always considered themselves part of a greater community, and in Judaism the community was as important as the family, and often the two are intermingled. Thus it was important to stay in good standing within the community. The center of Jewish social life was the synagogue. Without the Temple, the synagogue became the place to praise God, pray, read the Torah, the Psalms, and the Prophets, and to study God's instructions, the Torah. In fact, at most synagogues was an adjoining structure called the "beit midrash" or "house of study".

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.

With that in mind, we can begin to understand the role the synagogue had in resolving issues between spiritual brothers, but before we go further we need to understand the various functions performed by many people who made up a successful synagogue. Jewish literature provides much information about the governmental structure of the early synagogues, especially those of the first century. As we will see, the early synagogue structure carries a striking resemblance to the supposed "church" structure of Ephesians 4:11-12, but with some important differences.

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. The Jews are believed to be the first people to democratize religion. 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 authoritarian and hierarchically centered, rather than lay- or people-centered, its social consciousness has been greatly blunted"<sup>3</sup>. 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 laypeople. In fact, even the rabbi was considered a layperson. Those who performed the various services and responsibilities were given titles that matched their responsibility, and their title stayed with them only as long as they were performing the specific function that matched the title.

Let's look at the "five-fold" ministry structure of Ephesians 4 and compare it to the same roles found in the synagogue:

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<sup>3</sup> Our Father Abraham, Marvin Wilson, Pg. 190

Ephesians 4:11-12 <sup>11</sup> And he gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the pastors and teachers, <sup>12</sup> to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ,

- **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 Yeshua<sup>4</sup>. 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, such as Paul, to offer words of exhortation on the Sabbath as can be seen during one of Paul’s many visits:

Acts 13:14-15 <sup>14</sup> 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. <sup>15</sup> 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."

- **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:

<sup>ESV</sup> 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. <sup>2</sup> 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." <sup>3</sup> 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 community. Yeshua sent His disciples out two-by-two<sup>5</sup> as was the Jewish custom of the day. 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 synagogue<sup>6</sup>. We’ll find that the subsequent roles are listed the way they are for that same reason. To reiterate an earlier point - - an apostle was only an apostle while he was sent out. Once he returned, he was no longer an apostle.

- **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:

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<sup>4</sup> John 3:1-2

<sup>5</sup> Mark 6:7

<sup>6</sup> This is also the case in 1 Corinthians 12:28

<sup>KJV</sup> 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 YHWH 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 called 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 often an older, wiser rabbi whose purpose was to provide counseling and to visit the sick. This was not an administrative office and was usually reserved for the “retired” rabbis and priests.
- **Teachers** – The teachers were often rabbis. The synagogue term was “batlanim” which in Hebrew means “men of leisure”. These were 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”.

Along with the various roles within the synagogue there were certain offices. Every synagogue had a “beit din” ( בית דין ) (house of judgment) composed of at least three of the batlanim. These men were responsible for making decisions pertaining to the synagogue, and for making judgments in disputes between the congregation members. One member of the Beit Din was chosen as the “Nasi”, the president of the synagogue. He was charged with making final decisions. James, the brother of Yeshua, was considered the Nasi of the main Jerusalem synagogue and was thus responsible for handing down the decision concerning the new converts in Acts 15.

So what did this have to do with providing justice in the community? The beit din was the basis for the legal system in Israel. It was based on the Exodus 18 admonition of Jethro to establish a system of judges. Each community had a beit din of at least three men. Larger communities had a beit din of at least 23, and the final authority rested in the great beit din called the Sanhedrin, a body composed of 71 men and centered in Jerusalem. The leader of the Sanhedrin was called the Av Beth Din or Father of the Court. Most cases between brothers never made it to the Sanhedrin, but were resolved in the local Beit Din.

As mentioned earlier, God expected disputes within the Hebraic community to be resolved within the community. In the first century, the synagogue was the vehicle by which this took place. Unlike churches today, the synagogue was open seven days a week. It was just as much a part of the community as the

grocery store or post office. Thus, to be separated from the synagogue was as if you were barred from buying groceries or mailing a letter. The synagogue was a part of your life. Thus, when a decision was made by the elders of the synagogue, specifically the beit din, you were expected to abide by the decision. Yeshua makes this very clear:

Matthew 18:15-18 <sup>15</sup> "If your brother sins against you, go and tell him his fault, between you and him alone. If he listens to you, you have gained your brother. <sup>16</sup> But if he does not listen, take one or two others along with you, that every charge may be established by the evidence of two or three witnesses. <sup>17</sup> If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church. And if he refuses to listen even to the church, let him be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector. <sup>18</sup> Truly, I say to you, whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven.

Remember – there was no “church” at the time Yeshua made this statement. The Greek word used here is “ekklesia” which could in Hebrew be considered the “kahal” or congregation. In His day, the congregation was the synagogue.

Yeshua even goes on to make reference to a particular institution within the synagogue – the “seat of Moses”. Going back to the Jethro story we read that “The next day Moses sat to judge the people . . . (ESV Exodus 18:13). Since Moses “sat” when making judgments, it was part of the synagogue furnishings to have a “seat of Moses”. In fact, in the still standing synagogue in Capernium, the seat of Moses is still there, a stone chair situated at the west end of the synagogue opposite the ark. When Yeshua made the following statement, the people knew exactly what He was saying:

Matthew 23:2-3 <sup>2</sup> "The scribes and the Pharisees sit on Moses' seat, <sup>3</sup> so practice and observe whatever they tell you- but not what they do. For they preach, but do not practice.

In effect, He was saying that the Pharisees (the rabbis, those knowledgeable in Torah) are the ones who are to make judgments between the people of God. For the sake of the community, you must follow their judgments, but you don't have to follow their practices. How could Yeshua make such a statement in light of the fact that He had problems with some of what the Pharisees taught? Because Moses had stated that judgements based on Torah were “of God” –

Deuteronomy 1:17 <sup>17</sup> You shall not be partial in judgment. You shall hear the small and the great alike. You shall not be intimidated by anyone, for the judgment is God's. And the case that is too hard for you, you shall bring to me, and I will hear it.'

Justice among the Hebrew people should be brought within the community of Israel. Our current system of secular courts does not provide true justice if they're not based on Torah. If God's people are ever going to grow as a community, we will have to re-establish some system of judgement that we can all agree to. Though imperfect, Yeshua supported judgement system within the synagogue. Hopefully, we can return to that system in the near future.

Shalom Alecheim.

