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## THE SYNAGOGUE.

- A. The origin of the synagogue is difficult to determine, but it is generally held that it arose during the time of the Babylonian exile. It did not become common until the intertestamental period.
1. "With the destruction of the Temple (586 BC), sacrifices ceased. Prayer and the study of the sacred Scriptures, however knew no geographical limitations. The Book of Ezekiel describes the elders of Israel gathering in the prophet's house (8: 1; 20:1-3)" (Pfeiffer 59).
  2. The word synagogue is of Greek origin (Greek, *oovaycnyi*). It simply refers to a gathering of the people, or a congregation. "The Hebrew word for such a gathering is *keneseth*, the name used for the parliament in the modern state of Israel" (Pfeiffer 59).
  3. After the rebuilding of the Temple (520—516 BC), the synagogue continued to fill the spiritual needs of the Jews of the Diaspora.
    - a. There were synagogues in many of the cities visited by Paul: Damascus (Acts 9:2); Salamis (13:5); Antioch of Pisidia (13: 14); Thessalonica (17: 1); Corinth (18:4); Ephesus (19:8), and others. Only ten families were needed to compose a synagogue.
    - b. One rabbinic tradition has it that there were 480 synagogues in Jerusalem alone.
    - c. Even the small villages of Galilee had synagogues at the time of Jesus (Mt. 4:23; 9:35).
- B. The Building and the Service.
1. "The typical synagogue was a rectangular auditorium with a raised speaker's platform, behind which rested a portable chest or shrine containing Old Testament scrolls. The congregation sat on stone benches running along two or three walls and on mats and possible wooden chairs in the center of the room. In front, facing the congregation, sat the rulers or elders of the synagogue. Singing was unaccompanied. To read from an Old Testament scroll, the speaker stood. To preach, he sat down. For prayer, everyone stood" (Gundry 41).
  2. The synagogue was a place of instruction and worship, but not a place of sacrifice.
    - a. The service consisted of recitation of the Shema (the Hebrew word for "hear") (Dt. 6:4ff.), and praise to God, prayer, singing of psalms, reading from the Hebrew Old Testament, with a Targum (an oral translation into Aramaic or Greek), a sermon (if a competent person was present), and a blessing or benediction" (Gundry).
    - b. There are several graphic descriptions of synagogue services in the New Testament.
      - (1) Jesus at Nazareth (Lk. 4:16-30).
      - (2) Paul at Antioch of Pisidia (Acts 13:14-16).
- C. Archaeologists have uncovered several synagogues dating from the first to the fifth centuries AD.
1. A first century synagogue was discovered at Masada (1963—1965).
  2. Several 2nd to 5th century synagogues are to be seen in Israel: Capernaum, Meiron, Beth Alpha, et al. See *Biblical Archaeology Review*, Nov./Dec., 1983.
  3. One of the most spectacular synagogue finds is that of Dura Europos in Syria. It was excavated by M. I. Rostovtzeff of Yale (1932—1935), and has been reconstructed in the Damascus Museum. It has elaborate murals depicting Old Testament events and is dated about AD 250.
  4. Archaeologists found a Greek inscription from a synagogue on Mount Ophel, not far from the Temple precinct, in Jerusalem. The Theodotus Inscription states that the building was for "reading of the law." This inscription is in the Rockefeller Museum in Jerusalem.
  - 5- In the small museum at ancient Corinth one may see a broken lintel with the inscription "synagogue of Hebrews."