Temple and Synagogue

The temple and the synagogue performed complementary functions in first century Judaism, although the nature of those functions is not always as clear cut as it may first seem. This essay sets out to discuss the contrasts between the two institutions by proposing three generalisations, following each in turn with further discussion that suggests common threads.

1. There was only one recognised temple with unique functions, while synagogues were common and scattered throughout the Jewish world.

While this seems to have largely held true with the centralisation of cultic worship in Jerusalem, the existence of at least three parallel institutions can be noted; the Samaritan temple on Mount Gerizim, the Jewish temple at Elephantine on the Nile, and the temple at Leotopolis near Alexandria.[1] While the Samaritan structure was seen as belonging to a distinct but related people, the Elephantine sanctuary appears to have been administered by priestly families having some contact with Jerusalem, while the Leotopolis temple was established by no less a person than the deposed High Priest Onias,[2] who apparently found the case for an exclusive temple at Jerusalem no longer convincing following the Hasmonean reforms.[3]

Individuals such as Philo, and groups such as the Essenes, seem to have treated the temple with great deference despite philosophical, cultic or administrative concerns. The national significance of the institution, and an antiquity stretching back in one form or another for a thousand years, must have been as hard to ignore as the sheer size of the Herodian structure. However, issues such as the legitimacy of the high priesthood, the calendar in use and details of the rituals appear to have been contentious. The adoption of

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[1] Simon Goldhill, *The Temple of Jerusalem* (London, Profile Books, 2004), 87.

[2] Stephen M. Wylen, *The Jews in the Time of Jesus: An Introduction* (New York, Paulist Press,1996), 55

[3] Paula Fredriksen, *Jesus of Nazareth: King of the Jews*, (New York, Vintage Books, 1999), 63.

what may seem to be a minor variant practice (in the pouring of a libation during the Feast of Tabernacles) by High Priest Alexander Jannaeus in 94 BCE, led to a slaughter of protesters in the temple courtyard.[4] For at least some this sort of critique may have led to a rejection of the second temple itself as a symbol of apostasy from the idealised first temple model.

> Thus in Malachi 3 the 'messenger of the covenant' will 'purify the sons of Levi' until they present 'right offerings' ... the thrust of the chapter itself is that the Levites were impure (3.3) ... The author[s] of the Psalms of Solomon also... accused [the priesthood] of committing adultery, robbing the sanctuary, and offering sacrifice when impure...[5]

Margaret Barker suggests that views like these also underlie much of the New Testament discussion of the temple and the later Christian reaction to its destruction (e.g. Rev. 19: 1-4). She argues that Isaiah's complaint about blind watchmen (Is. 56) and the "harlot on a hilltop" (Is. 57) are references to the second temple administration.[6]

2. While there was one Temple, synagogues were scattered throughout both the Diaspora and Palestine during the first century.

The synagogues do not seem to have attracted the degree of passion and partisanship that the temple did. However there is debate about whether they were found in Palestine itself before the destruction of the second temple. Evidence such as the Theodotus inscription (originally dated pre-70 CE) has been contested by Howard Kee and Richard Horsley. Stegemann and Stegemann follow the earlier consensus,[7] while Crossan and Reed, writing specifically of Galilee, note:

> In fact, not a single synagogue from the first century or earlier has been found in Galilee. Only one synagogue from a Jewish village or town has been found from the time of Jesus, at Gamla in the Golan. [8]

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[4] Michael O. Wise. *The First Messiah: Investigating the Savior Before Christ,* (San Francisco, HarperCollins, 1999), 37-39.

[5] E.P. Sanders, *Jesus and Judaism,* (London, SCM Press, 1985), 64.

[6] Barker, Margaret. *Temple Theology*, (London, SPCK, 2004), 3.

[7] Ekkehard W. Stegemann and Wolfgang Stegemann, *The Jesus Movement: A Social History of its First Century,* (Minneapolis, Fortress Press, 1999), 141.

[8] John Dominic Crossan and Jonathan L. Reed. *Excavating Jesus: Beneath the Stones, Behind the Text,* (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 2001), 25.

The chief evidence in favour seems to be literary, especially the New Testament.[9] A Talmudic tradition reported 394 Jerusalem synagogues prior to 70 CE.[10] Stephen Wylen makes the more modest claim that "By the time of the Great Revolt, Jerusalem alone contained over a hundred."[11] Complicating factors include the use of the term to simply describe a gathering rather than a dedicated structure (similar to the use of the word church) and the "secular" nature of the early synagogues. Lee Levine suggests that the Palestinian synagogue developed from the ancient practice of gathering for discussion and judgement at the city gates.[12] Hershel Shanks notes that they were closely related in form to the Greco-Roman *collegea*.[13]

3. The temple had a cultic focus while the synagogue had a wider cultural role focusing on instruction.

The temple centred on sacrifice: "The notion that the temple should serve some function other than sacrifice would seem to be extremely remote from the thinking of a first-century Jew."[14] However the temple district also had a teaching and assembly focus, usually associated with the synagogue. In Luke, Jesus is portrayed as a teacher there, and Rabbi Jochanan ben Zakkai is said to have sat and taught all day long in the temple's shadow.[15]

The distinction seems particularly relevant for the period leading up to 70 CE as the religious role of the first synagogues seems to have been limited.

> All those features that later came to be associated with the synagogue and reflected its predominantly religious character were absent from these earlier buildings... For Jewish authors, the unique feature of synagogue worship was not the recitation of prayers, hymns, or psalms

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[9] Hershel Shanks. "Is It or Isn't It—A Synagogue?" *Biblical Archaeology Review*, Nov/Dec 2001.

[10] Geoffrey Wigoder, *The Story of the Synagogue: A Diaspora Museum Book*, (London, Wiedenheft and Nicolson, 1986), 11.

[11] Wylen, *The Jews in the Time of Jesus*, 87.

[12] Lee I. Levine, "The Nature and Origin of the Palestinian Synagogue Reconsidered." *Journal of Biblical Literature*, Fall 1996, 432-436.

[13] Shanks. "Is It or Isn't It—A Synagogue?"

[14] Sanders, *Jesus and Judaism*, 64.

[15] Stegemann and Stegemann, *The Jesus Movement*, 140.

> – activities no less familiar in pagan religious settings – but rather the public recitation and expounding of Holy Scriptures.[16]
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> [T]here is no evidence that the synagogue – even as late as the first century CE – was anything more than a community centre.[17]

After this the synagogue took on enhanced religious functions with the development of public communal prayer and gradual standardisation of liturgy.[18] Prayer became part of the synagogue function, something not evident at the time of the (late?) first century Theodotus Inscription.[19] This increasing sanctity is evident in Jewish literature. In the third century the Jerusalem Talmud would record: "He who prays in the synagogue is like one who sacrifices a pure meal offering."[20] Another text preserved in the Cairo synagogue reads: "Though by our sins the Temple Mount is not ours, we do have the 'small temple [the synagogue],' and we are obligated to behave [toward it] with sanctity and awe."[21]

Even with the increased significance of the synagogue for worship, many of the attributes of the temple were never transferred. While the annual holy days continued to be observed locally, pilgrimages were not possible for "the place where the LORD your God will choose to set his name" no longer stood, nor could synagogues legitimately receive mandated tithes, whether agrarian or financial (Deut. 14: 22-29). Without the sacrificial system the rationale of much of the purity legislation was also made redundant, and "the priestly atonement rituals of the Temple evolved into a private rite of intense introspection, prayer and confession…"[22] Oskar Skarsaune notes that it was matters of ritual purity that had separated the various religious factions during the second temple period.

> [A]ll three leading religious "parties" in the late Second Temple period – Sadducees, Pharisees, Essenes – defined themselves in one way or

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[16] Levine, "The Nature and Origin of the Palestinian Synagogue Reconsidered," 431, 432.

[17] Ibid., 441.

[18] Ibid., 444.

[19] Hershel Shanks. "Is It or Isn't It—A Synagogue?" *Biblical Archaeology Review*, Nov/Dec 2001.

[20] Ibid.

[21] Ibid.

[22] Wylen, *The Jews in the Time of Jesus*, 100.

> another through their relation to the temple, the temple service and the temple as the area of purity… the temple was essential to their self-understanding, positively or negatively. That is why the "parties" belonging to the late Second Temple period ceased to exist when the temple disappeared.[23]

However purity regulations could also be associated with the synagogue, at least by analogy. Paula Fredriksen notes Philo's reference to "nonbiblical sprinklings done for purification after a funeral or after sexual relations; perhaps before entering the synagogue…" along with the tendency to gather for prayer near bodies of water (as in Acts 16:13); water being seen as a purifying medium.[24] Both practices predate the temple's destruction.

In conclusion one can note that certainty in discussing the nature of these two institutions is elusive given the gaps in the historical record, however, even though the boundaries may seem hazy at times, they seem to have had separate, complimentary roles. It was only after 70 CE that the synagogue began to develop a visible shadow of the temple's sacredness.

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[23] Skarsaune, Oskar. *In the Shadow of the Temple: Jewish Influences on Early Christianity*, (Downers Grove, Illinois; InterVarsity Press, 2002), 96.

[24] Fredriksen, *Jesus of Nazareth*, 62.

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