Chapter Two

The Holiness of the Synagogue and its Figurative Decoration

There are several theories concerning the age and origin of the synagogue, and concerning the content and essence of the synagogue worship service, which it is not our purpose to investigate here in detail. Already in the third century the synagogue at Stobi in Macedonia (Yugoslavia) was described as ἡγιασμένος τόπος, 'holy ground'. This appellation gained such general acceptance that it can be described as characteristic for Late Antiquity. The Aramaic equivalent, found in the mosaic pavements of Palestinian synagogues, is כההנכם קדשים, and where Latin prevailed, we even find sacra sinagoga, 'holy synagogue'. The understanding of the synagogues as 'holy ground' probably resulted from the destruction of the Jerusalem Temple in 70 CE. The holiness formerly reserved for the Temple was henceforth transferred to the individual synagogues. The synagogue became in certain respects then the 'representative and esteemed replacement of the Temple'. The last traces of this in modern synagogues are contained in the words הַאֲרָרָן for the Tora shrine (ark), an allusion to the Ark of the Covenant, and הפרולת, the curtain shielding the Tora shrine, originally the Temple curtain.

The Temple-like worth ascribed to the synagogue was also strengthened by the sayings of third and fourth century Rabbinic scholars. In the opinion of some Rabbis, the Shekhina or the Divine Presence, whose place had until then been the Temple, forsook the Holy City and accompanied Israel into exile. Thus, in the saying of a second century scholar:

R. Shimon ben Yohai said: Come and see, how dear are the Israelites to the Holy One, blessed be He. Wherever they are in exile the Shekhina is with them. They were exiled to Egypt, the Shekhina was with them, for it says: "I appeared to the house of your father when they were in Egypt" (1 Sam 2:27). They were exiled to Babylon, the

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41 Hengel, 'Proseuche'; id, 'Synagogeninschrift'.
42 E.g., the fourth century synagogue at Hammath Tiberias; see Hüttenmeister-Reeg, Synagogen, 167.
44 Schrage, 'Synagoge', esp 821.
Shekhina was with them, for it says: “For your sake I sent to Babel” (Isa 43:14). Even when they are saved in days to come will the Shekhina be with them, for it says: “For the Lord your God will return with your captives” (Deut 30:3). It does not say, “He will bring back”, but, “He will return”. This teaches that the Holy One, blessed be He, will return with them from exile.45

After the destruction of the Temple then, the Shekhina was no longer regarded as attached to the Temple site. According to most Rabbinic teachers it could just as well be in one place as another, both in the Western Wall of the destroyed temple and the individual synagogues. For example, we read in Midrash Psalms:

As long as the Temple stood the Shekhina dwelled within; but after it was destroyed because of our sins it vanished into Heaven, for it says: The throne of the Lord is in Heaven. R. Eliezer ben Pedat [third century] said: Regardless of whether it is destroyed or not destroyed, the Shekhina does not depart from its place, for it says: The Lord is in His holy Temple. Although His throne is in Heaven, his Shekhina is in the Temple. R. Aha [fourth century] said: The Shekhina never departs from the Western Wall.46

The tradition we have just quoted, according to which the Shekhina accompanies Israel in exile as well as in her return from exile, continues: ‘Where is the Shekhina in Babylon? Abaye said: In the synagogue at Huzal and in the Shafveyatif synagogue at Nehardea. But do not say: Both here and there, but: At one time here, at another time there’.47 Even more clearly, the place of prayer is associated with the Shekina in the following tradition: ‘Whenever ten men come together in the synagogue to pray the Shekina is with them, for it says: “God is found in the assembly of God” (Ps 82:1).48 The Shekhina is found then wherever a minyan prays together in a synagogue.

The dispersion of Judaism therefore meant that the Shekhina was no longer conceived of as attached to the holy site. In the Diaspora the synagogues were considered its dwelling place because there the Tora scrolls were preserved and there the congregations met to pray. Certain statements by third and fourth century Rabbinic teachers place this beyond doubt. Thus we read in the Jerusalem Talmud:49

R. Huna said: Whoever in this world does not enter the synagogue, will not be able to enter a synagogue in the [eschatological] future.... R. Abba said, R. Hiya said in the name of R. Yohanan: A man must pray in a place that is especially determined for prayer.... R. Pinhas said in the name of R. Hoshaya: Whoever prays in a synagogue is as

45 bMeg 29a.
46 MidrPs 11,3 (49b). Cf Goldberg, Untersuchungen, 176-88.
47 bMeg 29a.
48 Mekh dRY, Bahodesh 11 (p243; Lauterbach 2, p287).
49 yBer 5, 8d below.