SYNAGOGUE AND SANHEDRIN IN THE FIRST CENTURY

Lester L. Grabbe

The synagogue and the Sanhedrin are two Jewish institutions that the gospel tradition associates in one way or another with Jesus. Yet each had its own origin, history, and place in first-century Jewish society. Each will, therefore, be treated in a separate section in this article. Yet it should be kept in mind that each has been controversial in recent scholarship, with a variety of interpretations.

1. Synagogue

It was once common to believe that the synagogue was a central institution in the Jewish community already at an early time, perhaps as early as the exilic period or even during the time of the Judahite monarchy. Many standard references continue to perpetuate such views as if they were axiomatic, yet already a quarter of a century and more ago, voices began to be raised questioning this view.1 Although one still sees more than one substantial reconstruction, recent studies2

---

1 My own objections to this interpretation were presented publicly in the mid-1980’s (though when the paper was first read, it received a good deal of oral criticism): “Synagogues in Pre-70 Palestine: A Re-assessment,” JTS 39 (1988): 401–410. A collection bringing together some of these early studies is Dan Urman and Paul V. M. Flesher, eds., Ancient Synagogues: Historical Analysis and Archaeological Discovery, Studia Post-Biblica 47 (Leiden: Brill, 1995).

have had a common framework of understanding which is also argued for here.

The importance that the synagogue acquired for Jewish communities in the early centuries of the Common Era is not in question. The synagogue is attested both literarily and archaeologically from the second or third centuries CE as playing a central role in most Jewish communities, functioning not only as a center of worship but also of community life, whether in Palestine, Egypt, the Greco-Roman world, or Babylonia. There are two questions: when and where did the synagogue originate and, if that was not in Palestine, when did it become a major institution in the Jewish homeland? The following relevant points have become recognized: (1) for many centuries the temple seems to have been the center of public worship, and the substitute of some other form of public worship is not likely to have come about very suddenly; (2) when worship outside the temple is mentioned in early sources, the references are to prayer and the like in the context of the home; (3) no source refers to the synagogue or anything like it until the third century BCE; that is, there is no archaeological, epigraphical, or literary attestation to the existence of the synagogue before that time. Let us look at these points in more detail:

1. For many centuries the temple seems to have been the center of public worship, and the substitute of some other form of public worship is not likely to have come about very suddenly.

The biblical literature gives a consistent picture that the proper place of worship was a temple, usually the Jerusalem temple.3 Even after the temple had been destroyed and left in ruins for many decades, the paramount concern was presented as rebuilding it (Hag 1:1–8; Zech 4; Ezra 1–6), not in establishing other meeting places or places of worship. The Greek writer Hecateus of Abdera, in a treatise on the Jews (or at least including the Jews) in about 300 BCE, makes the society of the Jews in Palestine revolve around the temple and its priesthood.4 In the time of the Maccabees, what caused the Jews to rise up in revolt in an unprecedented way was the desecration of the temple. The restoration of the temple to its former status was demanded at a painful price, but the Palestinian community was willing to pay it. In none of these

---

3 Here and there are passages that admit—often tacitly—that other places of worship or altars existed (e.g., 1 Kings 12:26–31; 18:30; 2 Kings 12:4; 15:4).
4 See further n. 26 below.