

Paul and the Synagogue

Elazar Brandt

It is Shabbat morning in Rome, or Corinth, or Antioch, or Alexandria, or Ephesus or any number of other cities or towns throughout the empire, and wherever there were enough Jews to constitute a community, they would be assembled for prayer and study in the synagogues. For Saul of Tarsus, or Paul the Apostle as he is better known, the synagogue was a natural forum for bringing the good news of Messiah Yeshua to the Jewish people scattered about the known world, as well as to the Gentiles. Saul was a Jew and a Roman citizen, born in the Diaspora and educated in Jerusalem at the feet of Gamaliel (Acts 22:3), the leading authority among the Pharisees of his day. Saul was literate in Greek and in Hebrew, at home in the Jewish world as well as in the most “civilized” cultures then in existence. So why did the “Apostle to the Gentiles” choose the synagogue as his forum for bringing the Gospel to the world? How did his proclamation of the Gospel fit into the context of the synagogue? To understand this we must understand the role of the synagogue for the Jews and for the world at large.

The History of the Synagogue

In Saul’s day, the synagogue was already a well established institution in the Jewish world -- both in the Diaspora and in the Land of Israel. Its roots reach back to the days of the Babylonian captivity, when exiled Israelites gathered for prayer, and perhaps to hear the words of a prophet, or to read the Torah. Unlike the ancient high places where Israelites practiced idolatry, the synagogue grew up as a supplement to the worship in the Temple, rather than in competition with it. In the cities of the Diaspora, and later in the parts of Israel more distant from Jerusalem, there was a need for a center for Jewish spiritual and community life that was compatible with the Temple. At first the people used to assemble in homes or other available facilities. Eventually they built buildings for the purpose of religious or public assembly. The assembly itself is called a *k’nesset* in Hebrew, and the place of assembly, the *bet k’nesset*. Our familiar word “synagogue” comes from the Greek word *sunagogei*, meaning, “to come together”. Since the synagogue is primarily a product of the Diaspora, it is understandable that it is commonly called by its name in Greek -- the language of the Diaspora in Second Temple times.

A fascinating historical process linked the synagogues to the Temple in Jerusalem. In the Second Temple period, the ministry of the priests was organized into 24 regiments, according to the 24 families of priests listed in the Bible (Mishnah Ta’anit 4:2). Each regiment would come up to Jerusalem and serve in the Temple for two weeks every year. As they came up from the various dispersed communities, they would bring with them the offerings of their communities, accompanied by any Levites and laymen from the community who were able to join them. Those who remained behind used to gather in the synagogues and pray the same prayers that accompanied their offerings in the Temple, at the times the offerings were being presented. When the contingents later returned from Jerusalem, they brought with them prayers and songs from the Temple, which they taught the people. Thus the synagogue service developed parallel to the Temple without becoming a rival to it.

Structure of the Synagogue Services

The order of prayers in the synagogue service are therefore based upon the practices of the Temple. A service would begin with opening songs, hymns and psalms as the people assembled. When the requisite number of adult males (the *minyan*, or 10 men according to Jewish law) was present, the call to worship could be given, followed by the recital of the *sh'ma* (Deut. 6:4-9; Deut. 11:13-21; Num. 15:37-41) in the morning and evening, with benedictions before and after it. The rabbis conceived of the set of daily prayers known as the Eighteen Benedictions (Hebrew, *sh'moneh esrei*) as corresponding to the sacrifices offered on the altar. These are therefore prayed three times daily -- morning, afternoon and evening -- with additional recitations on Shabbat and festivals according to the additional sacrifices that were offered on those occasions. The *qaddish*, another ancient prayer similar in content to the Lord's Prayer, was prayed, possibly several times, during the services. Meetings would be dismissed with closing hymns after the reading from the Torah and the Prophets.

The reading of the Torah was, of course, one of the focal points of the service. Today we are familiar with an annual cycle according to which the Torah is divided into 54 portions, each one to be read in succession every week throughout the year. In Talmudic times, the Torah was read according to a three year cycle (Meg. 29b). It is uncertain, but often assumed, that the three year cycle was in use in Second Temple times. In either case, the reading from the Torah was followed by a reading from the Prophets which was selected (and later standardized) because it corresponded in some way with the prevailing theme of the weekly Torah reading. If there were Priests or Levites present, they were summoned first to read from the Torah, after which the readings would be continued by laymen. Each reader recited a benediction before and after his turn to read. When the Torah reading was finished and the scroll returned to the Ark, the selection from the Prophets was read.

As a working knowledge of Hebrew diminished among the people, it became customary to provide a running translation into Aramaic. These translations were free-form, often including explanatory comments by the translators. In addition to the translations, it was common for learned men in the synagogue to expound the passages read, since the purpose of the synagogue was as much for study as it was for prayer.

Synagogue Furniture and Staff

The synagogue facilities were sometimes magnificent, often Spartan, but always included seating for the people, a reading desk from which to read the Torah, and a cabinet called an "Ark" in which to store the scrolls. The location of choice for a synagogue building was either on a high hill in the town, or near a river (cp. Acts 16:13). The river would provide a ready source of water for ritual cleansing as needed according to Jewish laws. Each congregation had one or more "rulers of the synagogue" (Greek, *archisunagogos*; Hebrew, *rosh k'nesset* or *rosh kehila*, cp. Mark 5:22, Luke 13:14). This ruler was not necessarily the rabbi, but rather a community leader, like a president. His duty was to see to the administration of the synagogue. There was also a *chazzan*, or sexton, to care for the facilities, to take care of the scrolls (cp. Luke 4:20), and to announce the beginning of Shabbat and festival days, and times for prayer. At each service, someone was designated *sh'liah tzibbur* -- representative of the congregation -- to lead the prayers. This was not an official position, but a function to be performed by anyone competent to do so.

Saul in the Synagogue

Anyone who has ever attended a synagogue service will realize that he falls into one of two categories: 1) he is an educated Jew who is familiar with the synagogue and its proceedings and therefore “belongs”, or 2) he is a stranger, a visitor, a spectator, one who comes to observe, and perhaps to haltingly participate as he finds bits and pieces of similarity with his own background and experience. Someone from category 2 will peer through the entrance hoping to be greeted by a friendly usher who will hand him a Siddur already opened to the right page, offer him a *kippah*, show him where he may get a *tallit* if he wishes to wear one, and lead him to a suitable seat. Someone from category 1, on the other hand, will walk right in, take a Siddur and a Chumash (Bible) and find the page himself, usually has his own *tallit* and *kippah*, and will utter the traditional greetings to the usher, rabbi or anyone he happens to pass on the way to his seat, where he will sit down and join in the congregational prayers. Synagogue visitor from category 1 will customarily invite the visitor to read from the Torah, or sometimes to lead a portion of the public prayers. Most people today, including most Jews and most Messianic Jews, are in category 2.

Saul was in category 1. Saul knew that he could go anywhere in the world where there were Jews, find the synagogue, and be at home. As a student of Gamaliel from Jerusalem, it is conceivable that members of the synagogue might even know his name or have heard something about him. Saul certainly would have had the stature and bearing, and perhaps the reputation, that would cause people to invite him to participate or even teach in the synagogue. Most of us do not. With this background in mind, let us now take a look at what Saul actually did in the synagogues he visited during the course of his ministry.

From Persecutor to Proclaimer

Just before his life-changing encounter with Yeshua, Saul was on his way to Damascus with letters from the High Priest to the synagogues of Damascus authorizing him to arrest any followers of Yeshua he might find there and bring them to Jerusalem (Acts 9:1-2). He appears to have been acting in some official capacity as a representative of the Jerusalem establishment, and not merely as some wild fanatic. Even in his persecution of the believers, he saw the synagogue as the place to start. Soon after Saul had encountered Yeshua, he turned to the same synagogues of Damascus and started to proclaim Yeshua as the Son of G-d (Acts 9:20). This sudden reversal perplexed the Jews, and the believers. In Damascus, and later in Jerusalem, they suspected that Saul was up to something (Acts 9:26). Even today when we hear of a religious Jew who professes faith in Yeshua, our joy is tempered with caution, as more than one has pretended to believe in order to find and persecute the Jewish followers of Yeshua. But this was not the case with Saul, who quickly became such a powerful advocate of Yeshua that he drew death threats from the Jews. The apostles thought it best to dispatch him home to Tarsus for a season until his time for service would come (Acts 9:28-30).

Missionary Journeys and Strategies

Some time later, when Barnabas saw how the Gentiles had begun to come to Yeshua in Antioch, he went to Tarsus to get Saul and brought him back to Antioch, where they taught the believers. It was from Antioch that the Spirit sent out Barnabas and Saul on their first mission to Asia Minor. From the beginning it was Saul’s practice wherever he went to go directly to the synagogues and to proclaim the good news there first. In most cases he found a willing and responsive audience (but not without opposition, which

was often fierce). The account of Saul's experience in Antioch of Pisidia (Acts 13:14ff) provides us with some details that help us see why Saul was invited to speak. Acts 13:15 tells us that after the Torah and Prophets were read, the rulers of the synagogue asked them to give a word of encouragement to the people. As we have seen, this practice would have been completely normal and expected in such a case. A visitor with a Jerusalem background -- perhaps known to the local leaders and perhaps not -- would have routinely received such a welcome. Oh wouldn't we love to know which Torah passage was read that Shabbat morning, upon which Saul built his message! This writer loves to speculate about such things, but knows of no means to gain certainty, and so will confine his speculation to the likelihood that Saul would customarily launch his messages about Yeshua from the current weekly Torah passage, so as to engage the attention of the congregants, and not disturb the normal progression of the service.

Reaching Gentiles Through the Synagogue

There in Antioch of Pisidia, as well as in other cities on his tour, Saul found not only Jews, but "devout converts" (13:43) and "fearers of G-d" (13:16), in other words, people who were not born Jews, but who were in various degrees of relationship with the G-d of Israel, and with the people of Israel. At Iconium (14:1) he found hearers and followers among "both Jews and Greeks". For Saul, the synagogue served as a bridge via which the Torah -- and the Gospel -- could go forth from Zion. Over this bridge, the message of recent events in Judea could pass to the Jews of the Diaspora. Meanwhile, Gentiles who were beginning to take interest in the biblical G-d already had begun crossing the bridge from the other side as they looked to the synagogues as sources of truth. These had already abandoned their searching through the pagan marketplaces for spiritual life. There they found only idols. Trying to peddle the Gospel in the pagan marketplace would have been like trying to sell fresh fruit in a hardware store. People come to the hardware store looking for hardware; those who want to buy fruit go to a grocer. To be sure, the message Saul proclaimed exploded out of the doors of the synagogues and into the streets and marketplaces and even courts of the pagan world. However, it did so only after the initial foundation was laid establishing the Gospel as a message from the G-d of Israel, via the people of Israel, to the whole world.

Even Saul's abortive evangelistic effort at Mars Hill in Athens was not his first move in that city, but rather came about as a result of his proclamation in the synagogue and then the marketplace. Similarly, his opportunity to appear before Caesar developed only after he was arrested and prosecuted by the Jewish authorities from Jerusalem; he did not go directly to Rome on his own. He chose to arrive in Rome as a prisoner on trial for violations of local Jewish law of the land of Israel, giving him a legal basis for proclaiming the news even to Caesar. Seeing the home turf of the synagogue as his starting point was Saul's *modus operandi* from beginning to end.

Did Saul Abandon the Synagogue?

This begs the question, "What of Saul's grand epochal abandonment of efforts to evangelize Jews and choosing to go rather to the Gentiles, whom, he says, will listen to the Gospel?" The clear biblical facts are that Saul never made such a grand pronouncement. He made local, temporal statements of this nature numerous times -- three of which are recorded in the Acts of the Apostles (13:46, 18:6, and 28:28). Saul never rejected his own people. He merely reached a point in his work among some Jewish communities where they had heard and officially rejected the message, indicating that it was time for Saul to cross the bridge and continue his work at that locality among the Gentiles. There was no watershed rejection of

Jews by Saul or anyone else. Until the end he always went to the synagogue first, even when he arrived in Rome in chains (28:17).

Near the end of his recorded ministry, Saul was able to stand before the leaders of the Jewish community in Rome and say, "Brethren, though I had done nothing against the people or the customs of our fathers, yet I was delivered prisoner from Jerusalem into the hands of the Romans" (Acts 28:17). The "customs of our fathers" include participation in the life and prayers of the synagogue. Like Yeshua (Luke 4:16), Saul customarily attended synagogue. He did not just go when he wanted to preach the Gospel. Saul was a part of the community, and as such he had a legitimate forum for bringing the message of Yeshua the Messiah to his people, and through them, to the rest of the world.