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The Role and Purpose of Synagogues in the Days of Jesus and Paul

Taylor Halverson

Abstract: *This article explores why Jesus so often healed in synagogues. By comparing the uses and purposes of Diaspora and Palestinian synagogues, this article argues that synagogues functioned as a hostel or community center of sorts in ancient Jewish society. That is, those needing healing would seek out such services and resources at the synagogue.*

What were synagogues like in Palestine[1] during the time of Jesus? What were synagogues like in the Roman world during the time of Paul? Why is the synagogue a place where people can be healed? Why does Jesus do so much healing at the synagogue? Why not do the healings elsewhere? This article explores why Jesus so often healed in synagogues.

A careful reading of the New Testament suggests that synagogues played an important role in the ministries of Jesus and Paul. Synagogues provided the contextual backdrop for Jesus's stunning Messianic announcement and his acts of healing and teaching. For Paul, synagogues constituted a staging ground for preaching the gospel message and may have been a place of lodging when first arriving to town. Hence, understanding more fully the physical configuration and social purpose of ancient Palestinian and Diaspora synagogues will provide contextual meaning of synagogical references in the New Testament, specifically why Jesus healed at synagogues.

1. My use of the words "Palestine" or "Palestinian" are not technically accurate since the area we call Palestine was only so named by the Romans after the time of Jesus. However, for ease of communication, I use that phrase because most readers recognize that Palestine refers, roughly, to the geographical area of ancient Israel, such as it was used in the document "The Living Christ: The Testimony of the Apostles of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints."

Jesus and Palestinian Synagogues

When we think of Judaism, synagogues are a natural component. Though we may have a general familiarity with these Jewish houses of worship as they exist in our own day, the picture in Jesus's day was quite different.[2]

Throughout the Gospels we hear stories of Jesus entering into synagogues to read scriptures, to teach, and to heal. Indeed, the Gospel of Mark records that Jesus's first act after making the announcement of his missionary purpose[3] was to go to the synagogue to teach and to heal (see Mark 1:21-27). Similarly, the Gospel of Luke teaches that Jesus first revealed his divine mission while at a synagogue after reading a passage from Isaiah. Because the synagogues were central to Jewish community life during the time of Jesus and during the time of the synoptic writers, we see the gospel writers share a variety of crucial stories about Jesus that are situated at the synagogue. Given the prominence of synagogues in the world of Jesus, we would do well to learn more about them.

Studying synagogues in first century Palestine (or in the first century Diaspora, for that matter) is not a simple and straightforward undertaking. Though the institution today is synonymous with Judaism and has been for more than 1800 years, the available evidence on first century Palestinian synagogues is not abundant. Nevertheless, we do have sufficient evidence about ancient synagogues to paint an intriguing and valuable contextual picture through which we can enhance our understanding of Jesus's activities associated with them. Even though the temple was the focal point of Jewish religious life during the time of Jesus, synagogues played an essential role in Jewish communities and an important role in the lives of Jews who lived in gentile communities.

Before we turn our eyes to the first century evidence on synagogues, it may be helpful to consider what we know about the origins of synagogues prior to the time of Jesus.[4] This question entails a definition of the word

2. The best and most recent work on ancient synagogues is Lee I. Levine, *The Ancient Synagogue: The First Thousand Years*, 2nd ed. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2005).

3. According to Mark 1:14-15, Jesus's message consisted of a proclamation that the Kingdom of God is near, therefore repent and believe.

4. Joseph Gutman, ed., *Ancient Synagogues: The State of Research* (Chico, CA: Scholars Press, 1981); Lee I. Levine, ed., *Ancient Synagogues Revealed* (Jerusalem: The Israel Exploration Society, 1981); Anders Runesson, *The Origin of the Synagogue: A Socio-Historical Study* (Stockholm, SWE: Almqvist & Wiksell International, 2001); Birger Olsson and Magnus Zetterholm, eds., *The Ancient Synagogue from Its Origins until 200 C.E.: Papers Presented at an International Conference at Lund University, October 14-17, 2001* (Stockholm, SWE: Almqvist & Wiksell

synagogue. "Synagogue" is formed from the Greek word *ago* (to lead, bring along) and the preposition *sun-* (together). When these two words are combined, they create the word "synagogue," which in its technical sense means "to gather in, collect, assemble." In Greek literature, "synagogue" refers to a gathering of things (e.g., boats, produce, ideas, etc.) or people (e.g., an assembly or meeting). What is important to recognize here is that "synagogue" in its earliest usages did *not* refer to a physical location, especially not to a building. In fact, it was as a result of the gathering of Jews into assemblies, for which purposes they only later built structures, that the word "synagogue" eventually evolved from indicating the act of gathering together to referencing the physical location or building where the gathering took place.[5] Though the Jerusalem temple, before the Romans destroyed it, was the major focal point of Jewish religious life, synagogues functioned as community centers that could support the spiritual and physical needs of those in the community.

The earliest evidence we have of synagogues is from inscriptional references in Egypt from the second and third century BCE.[6] Now, these assemblies were not always necessarily for religious purposes. In fact, at this early period, the term *synagogue* referred to a gathering for the purpose of conducting community or public affairs. Centuries later the primary purpose of synagogues centered on religious activities. Originally, synagogues were multi-purpose public community gatherings.[7]

International, 2003); Howard Clark Kee and Lynn H. Cohick, eds., *Evolution of the Synagogue: Problems and Progress* (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, 1999).

5. E. Jan Wilson, "The Masada Synagogue and Its Relationship to Jewish Worship during the Second Temple Period," in *Masada and the World of the New Testament*, eds. John W. Welch and John F. Hall (Provo, UT: BYU Studies, 1997), 269-76.

6. J. Gwyn Griffiths, "Egypt and the Rise of the Synagogue," in *Ancient Synagogues: Historical and Archaeological Discovery*, eds. Dan Urman and Paul V. M. Flesher (Leiden, NLD: Brill, 1995), 3-16.

7. Mordechai Aviam and William Scott Green, "The Ancient Synagogue: Public Space in Judaism," *Judaism from Moses to Muhammad: An Interpretation*, eds. Jacob Neusner, William Scott Green, and Alan J. Avery-Peck (Leiden, NLD: Brill, 2005), 183-200; Zeev Safrai, "The Communal Functions of the Synagogues in The Land of Israel in the Rabbinic Period," in *Ancient Synagogues: Historical and Archaeological Discovery*, eds. Dan Urman and Paul V. M. Flesher (Leiden, NLD: Brill, 1995), 181-204. Intriguingly, Philip A. Harland argues that ancient synagogues in the Roman Empire served an analogous social role for Jews as did "guilds, or 'associations' (*koina*, *synodoi*, *thiasoi*, *mystai*, *phratores*, *synergasiai*, *collegia*)" (p. 2) for non-Jews. Philip A. Harland, *Associations, Synagogues, and*

Fortuitously, physical evidence of Palestinian synagogues near the time of Jesus exists.[8] Four locations in Palestine present unmistakable archaeological evidence that they once contained a first century Jewish synagogue: Jerusalem, Gamla (in the Galilee), Masada (the Herodian fortress near the Dead Sea), and Herodium (another Herodian fortress about 7.5 miles south of Jerusalem).[9] Though other archaeological sites suggest the existence of first century Palestinian synagogues, the evidence is not as certain.[10]

What do the archaeological reports tell us about each of these sites? Architecturally, they have shared features. First, these sites are built in rectangular fashion with seats lining the walls so everyone is essentially facing the center of the synagogue. This configuration enables the congregants to clearly see anyone who stands to read or speak and have immediate visual access to all other congregants. Second, the door of the synagogue is oriented toward Jerusalem, so as worshippers leave the synagogue, they do so as if embarking upon a pilgrimage to the Holy Temple in Jerusalem. Third, these sites have Mikvaot (ritual washing areas) associated with the synagogue building. And fourth, rudimentary genizahs, which are repositories for old and worn-out scriptures, have been found at these sites.[11]

Congregations: Claiming a Place in Ancient Mediterranean Society, 2nd Edition (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2013); Birger Olsson, "'All my teaching was done in synagogues…' (John 18, 20)," in *Theology and Christology in the Fourth Gospel: Essays by the Members of the SNTS Johannine Writings Seminar*, eds. G. van Belle, J. G. van der Watt, and P. Maritz (Leuven, BEL: Leuven University Press, 2005), 203-24.

8. Lester L. Grabbe, "Synagogues in Pre-70 Palestine: A Re-assessment," in *Ancient Synagogues: Historical and Archaeological Discovery*, 17-26; Paul Virgil McCracken Flesher, "Palestinian Synagogues Before 70 C.E.: A Review of the Evidence," in *Ancient Synagogues: Historical and Archaeological Discovery*, 27-39.

9. Incidentally, the synagogues at Masada and Herodium had originally been built as Roman atriums during the time of Herod but were repurposed as synagogues during the first Jewish revolt against Rome, ca. 70 CE. Doran Chen, "The Design of the Ancient Synagogues in Judea: Masada and Herodium," *Bulletin of the American Schools of Oriental Research* 239 (Summer 1980): 37-40.

10. Other possible first century Palestinian synagogue sites include the following: In the Galilee region Capernaum, Migdal, and Chorazim, northern Jerusalem, Jericho (just north of the Dead Sea), and Qiryat Sefer (not far from Modi'in, famous from the era of the Maccabean revolt). See Levine, *The Ancient Synagogue*, 45-80.

11. Marilyn Chiat, "First-Century Synagogue Architecture: Methodological Problems," *Ancient Synagogues*, 49-60; Kenneth Atkinson, "On Further Defining

What do we know of the activities that occurred in the synagogues? The Theodotos inscription, which likely predates 70 CE, discovered in a 1913–1914 archaeological dig of the City of David (just south of the Jerusalem Temple Mount), offers an interesting list of purposes and activities provided at the synagogue. According to that list, activities in synagogues included reading the law and instructing, and the structure provided lodging for strangers, facilities for dining and water, and hostel services.[12] The first two activities are unremarkable to us as they relate to what we commonly imagine Jesus doing in the synagogues. I already noted that Jesus instructs the crowd gathered at the synagogue concerning his mission after reading from the scriptures (see Luke 4:15–21).

What is remarkable about this inscription is the other activities listed, which are seldom if ever associated in our minds with the synagogue, namely the stranger's lodgings, hostel services, and dining and water facilities. Jesus's work of healing and miracles at synagogues becomes unquestionably clear and expected if we listen to the words of the Theodotos inscription.[13] A study of the Gospels indicates that on several occasions Jesus heals people *at* the synagogue.[14] No one disputes that healing in the synagogue is an appropriate and legitimate activity. Notice that no one gets upset with Jesus for *where* he heals, such as the synagogue. However, *when* Jesus conducts his healings is a matter of dispute. Healing on the Sabbath is a sacrilege according to some (see John 5:1–18). Similarly, in the Gospel of Luke the ruler of the synagogue angrily told the people to return to the synagogue on a day *other than the Sabbath* to be healed, "And the ruler of the synagogue answered with indignation, because that Jesus had healed on the sabbath day, and said

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the First-Century C.E. Synagogue: Fact or Fiction? A Rejoinder to H.C. Kee," *New Testament Studies* 43 (1997): 491-502; James F. Strange, "Archaeology and the Pharisees," in *In Quest of the Historical Pharisees*, eds. Jacob Neusner and Bruce D Chilton (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2007), 237-51, 462-64.

12. In my translation of the text, the Greek inscription reads "as an inn for the needy from foreign lands." See also, John S. Kloppenborg, "Dating Theodotus (CIJ II 1404)," *Journal of Jewish Studies* 51 (2000): 243-80; John S. Kloppenborg, "The Theodotus Synagogue Inscription and the Problem of First-Century Synagogue Buildings," in *Jesus and Archaeology*, ed. James H. Charlesworth (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 2006), 236-82.

13. According to Levine, the primary function of ancient synagogues included prayer, study, sacred meals, repository for communal funds, courts, general assembly hall, hostel, and residence for synagogue officials. Levin, *Ancient Synagogues Revealed*, 3-4.

14. Some examples include Mark 1:21-27; Mark 3:1-5; Mark 6:2-5; and Luke 13:10-13.

unto the people, There are six days in which men ought to work: in them therefore come and be healed, and not on the sabbath day" (Luke 13:14).

Why would people in need be at the synagogue? What better location to receive food, water, and lodging? Hospitals and care hospices as we know them did not exist in the ancient world. However, rudimentary hospitals (edifices dedicated to Asclepius), hospices, and ancient inns did exist throughout the Mediterranean world where people could receive such services. In ancient Jewish communities it may be that synagogues served as a gathering place not just for community purposes, but also for the community to care for those who required special assistance. What better location for Jesus to find the sick, the afflicted, the lame, and the downtrodden than at the ancient community center? Note, however, that Jesus also found and healed the sick, the afflicted, the lame, and the downtrodden at the Jerusalem temple. The temple of Jerusalem and the synagogues scattered throughout the land of Israel both seem to have attracted the needy in their respective communities. This may suggest why the Gospel writers often locate Jesus healing at a synagogue when he was not in Jerusalem, but when he was in Jerusalem, he healed at or near the temple instead of the synagogue.

Additionally, if ancient synagogues did function in part as a place for the needy, physically afflicted, and foreigners to gather for wellbeing, Jesus's announcement of his mission in Luke 4:16–21 becomes all the more remarkable.[15]

> And he came to Nazareth, where he had been brought up: and, as his custom was, he went into the synagogue on the sabbath day, and stood up for to read. And there was delivered unto him the book of the prophet Esaias. And when he had opened the book, he found the place where it was written, The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he hath anointed me to preach the gospel to the poor; he hath sent me to heal the brokenhearted, to preach deliverance to the captives, and recovering of sight to the blind, to set at liberty them that are bruised, To preach the acceptable year of the Lord. And he closed the book, and he gave it again to the minister, and sat down. And the eyes of all them that were in the synagogue were fastened on him. And he began to say unto them, This day is this scripture fulfilled in your ears. (Luke 4:16–21)

15. Jesus's announcement is based on Isaiah 61:1-2.

Of significance is that Jesus's mission is to "preach the gospel to the poor" and to "heal the brokenhearted, to preach deliverance to the captives, and recovering of sight to the blind, to set at liberty them that are bruised." Jesus's healing miracles *at* the synagogue fulfill this mission statement. Again, if anciently, synagogues played a role as a gathering place for the needy, both spiritually and physically, it is therefore perfectly appropriate contextually that Jesus first proclaims his mission to the needy at the synagogue and performs many of his acts of compassions on behalf of the needy at the synagogue — the ancient Jewish community center.

A few final notes on ancient Palestinian synagogues as physical structures provide intriguing possibilities. Recently, it has been proposed that synagogues, in addition to the other purposes highlighted above, were built as a geographical and symbolic extension of the Jerusalem temple.[16] The temple was rectangular in shape; so too were the synagogues. The outer walls of the temple enclosure (not the temple itself) contained step seating; so too did the synagogues. The temple was ringed by columns through which a worshipper could observe the procession of the sacrifice he had handed over to the temple priest; so too in the synagogues, congregants viewed the proceedings from between the columns that ringed the synagogue. Finally, the location within the synagogue where individuals read from the scriptures may have been physically analogous to the location of the altar at the temple. Just as one found communion with God in the temple at the altar of worshipful sacrifice, so too, reading the word of God was an act of worship that brought communion with Him.

In summary, the physical presence of a building for the Jewish community to gather served important purposes in the ministry of Jesus. It was at the synagogue that Jesus found an immediate audience accustomed to the procedures of public scripture reading and exposition. But even more surprisingly to us, perhaps, it was at the synagogue that Jesus found those in great need through whom he could publicly display with miracles that the Kingdom of God had indeed arrived.

Paul and Diaspora Synagogues

Similar to the evidentiary challenges we face when trying to reconstruct knowledge concerning first century Palestinian synagogues, so too is our experience when we cast our attention to first century Diaspora

16. Donald D. Binder, *Into the Temple Courts: The Place of the Synagogues in the Second Temple Period* (Atlanta, GA: Society of Biblical Literature, 1999), see especially 204-26.

synagogues. Despite meager evidence, we do have sufficient to build a case for what Diaspora synagogues looked like and how they were used.[17]

We can produce our summary from the two most ancient Diaspora Jewish synagogues for which we have physical evidence. They are located first on the Greek island of Delos[18] and second at ancient Ostia,[19] on the Tyrrhenian coast of Italy, not far from Rome's modern day Leonardo da Vinci-Fiumicino International Airport.[20] Some of the remarkable physical features of the earliest Diaspora synagogues are the stepped seating built into three of the four walls and the Jerusalem-oriented entrance. Though a universal architectural plan for ancient synagogues never existed, the synagogues at Ostia and Delos share striking resemblance to synagogues in Palestine. Therefore, what we learned from first century synagogues in Palestine applies to Diaspora synagogues as well. The seating arrangement provided everyone unobstructed visual access to each other, truly creating a sense of community and brotherhood. Additionally, the entrance facing toward Jerusalem served as a constant reminder that the synagogue represented a geographical and symbolic extension of the holy temple in Jerusalem, similar to the first century Palestinian synagogues.

In addition to sharing physical features, Diaspora synagogues shared purposes similar to their counterparts in first century Palestine: ritual bathing, scripture reading and exposition, prayer, festivals, holy-day and communal dining, treasury, museum, documentary archive and school, refuge, manumission, council hall, court, and society house.[21] Notice that only a small portion of the synagogue's purposes constituted what we would consider to be religious activities. As a friend helpfully reminded me as I wrote this, in the ancient world there was no distinction between

17. Stephen K. Catto, *Reconstructing the First-Century Synagogue: A Critical Analysis of Current Research* (New York: TT Clark, 2007).

18. In addition to the Jewish synagogue on Delos, apparently Samaritans even had a synagogue on the island. A.T. Kraabel, "New Evidence of the Samaritan Diaspora has been Found on Delos," *Biblical Archaeologist* 47 (1984): 44-46. For a view arguing against a synagogue on Delos see Lidia Matassa, "Unravelling the Myth of the Synagogue on Delos," *Bulletin of the Anglo-Israel Archaeological Society* 5 (2007): 81-115.

19. *The Synagogue of Ancient Ostia and the Jews of Rome: Interdisciplinary Studies*, eds. Birger Olsson, Dieter Mitternacht and Olof Brandt (Stockholm, SWE: Forlag, 2001).

20. In fact, the ancient Jewish synagogue at Ostia was discovered in the 1960s when construction crews were building the highway that would link the international airport to Rome.

21. Binder, *Into the Temple Courts*, see especially 297-317, 322-36, 389-450.

the secular and religious. Everything was on a continuum of a religious spectrum. Therefore, these synagogue buildings, like their Palestinian counterparts, truly were multi-purpose community centers.

In our day it would strike us as strange to have an itinerant preacher from a different religious sect show up at one of our religious meetings and there be granted carte blanche to speak. When we recognize the centrality of the synagogue in Jewish Diaspora community life, it is only natural that we find Paul and other early Christian missionaries integrating themselves among established Jewish communities by means of the public synagogue.[22] As a community center, it may be possible that Paul and others made use of the synagogue's lodging services when they first arrived at the town as they sought to establish more permanent housing and income.[23]

That synagogues were more community centers than religious centers helps us also to understand why non-Jewish Greeks are in the audience when Paul preaches in the Jewish synagogue at Iconium (see Acts 14:1–5). Additional evidence unearthed by archaeologists reveals dedicatory inscriptions for synagogues made on behalf of "God-fearing" gentiles, non-Jews who believed and worshiped God as did the Jews but never fully converted to the practices of Judaism (such as being circumcised). Though it may sound strange to our ears that a non-member would provide the monetary means to build and support a church building, synagogues were esteemed as community cultural centers, and so it was a badge of pride to be named as patron of such an important community institution, regardless of one's religious sentiments.[24]

There is one final feature characteristic of some early Jewish Diaspora synagogues that needs to be considered — they were built or modified from pre-existing non-public structures or private homes.[25] A similar

22. Incidentally, many of the early Christian missionaries at this time still considered themselves Jews — Jews who believed that the Messiah had come in the person of Jesus of Nazareth — and hence all the more reason to share their message of Jesus at the community center.

23. Some scholars believe that Paul was a manual laborer who set up shop with fellow Christian missionaries in *insulae* where they could work, live, and worship in a close-knit community atmosphere.

24. As one of this paper's anonymous peer reviewers insightfully noted, "Because of the institutions associated with *charis* (reciprocity) in the Greco-Roman world, the Gentile patron would now receive benefits from his Jewish clients. It was often a political/social arrangement to create and maintain relationships. For this reason so many Gentiles are associated with the synagogue."

25. These statements do not apply to the synagogue at Ostia, however, where we have compelling archaeological evidence that the original building was constructed

phenomenon occurred as Christianity spread throughout the Roman Empire. Early church members first met in private homes, often of a wealthy member or patron who may have also served in a leadership position. Over time as the Christian population grew, as meetings became more formal, and as church institutional structure became more pronounced, Christians began converting private homes into formal meeting places. I mention this phenomenon of early Christianity as a reference point to share that Diaspora Judaism followed a similar trajectory in many instances. As Jews settled throughout the Roman Empire, they would initially gather in private homes for community or religious activities. Then, as their population grew and their wealth increased, they would modify the existing private home used for meetings into a more formal community structure — the synagogue.[26] That Paul established Christian house-churches in various cities may simply be indicative of practices common in his day, especially among his Jewish contemporaries.

Conclusion

Though ancient Jewish synagogues scattered across the Roman Empire did play a religious role for community gatherings in the time of Jesus and Paul, perhaps similar to the way modern members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints view their meeting houses, ancient synagogues had multiple purposes and functions serving as a community center for local Jewish groups. In addition to their spiritual role of providing a location to pray and read and interpret scriptures, ancient synagogues also provided services to meet the physical needs of people, offering them shelter and food while traveling, a place to gather for social events, and a place to receive healing. Recognizing the

first as a synagogue for religious purposes and *not* modified from a pre-existing structure. This suggests that the Jewish population at Ostia was sufficiently large, wealthy, and established in the Roman community from early in the first century CE to support a synagogue. Anders Runesson, "The Oldest Original Synagogue Building in the Diaspora: A Response to L. Michael White," *Harvard Theological Review* 92, no.4 (1999): 409-33.

26. L. Michael White, *Building God's House in the Roman World: Architectural Adaptation among Pagans, Jews, and Christians* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1990); L. Michael White, "The Delos Synagogue Revisited: Recent Fieldwork in the Graeco-Roman Diaspora," *Harvard Theological Review* 80 (1987): 133-66; L. Michael White, "Synagogue and Society in Imperial Ostia: Archaeological and Epigraphic Evidence," *Harvard Theological Review* 90 (1997): 23-58; L. Michael White, *The Social Origins of Christian Architecture,* vol. 2: *The Christian Domus Ecclesiae in its Environment* (Valley Forge, PA: Trinity, 1997).

multi-purpose nature of these buildings helps to provide a compelling context for New Testament passages depicting Jesus and Paul conducting their ministry activities. Synagogues, then, would have been the perfect place to fulfill Isaiah's Messianic prophecy, quoted when Jesus announced his Messianic mission, "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he hath anointed me to preach the gospel to the poor; he hath sent me to heal the brokenhearted, to preach deliverance to the captives, and recovering of sight to the blind, to set at liberty them that are bruised, To preach the acceptable year of the Lord" (Luke 4:18–19; see also Isaiah 61:1–2).

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Appendix

New Testament references to synagogues:

Matthew 4:23; 6:2, 5; 9:35; 10:17; 12:9; 13:54; 23:6, 34.

Mark 1:21, 23, 29, 39; 3:1; 5:22, 35-36, 38; 6:2; 12:39; 13:9.

Luke 4:15–16, 20, 28, 33, 38, 44; 6:6; 7:5; 8:41, 49; 11:43; 12:11; 13:10, 14; 20:46; 21:12.

John 6:59; 9:22; 12:42; 16:2, 18:20.

Acts 6:9; 9:2, 20; 13:5, 14–15, 42; 14:1; 15:21; 17:1, 10, 17; 18:4, 7-8, 17, 19, 26; 19:8; 22:19; 24:12; 26:11.

Revelation 2:9; 3:9.