

From Temple To Synagogue

A certain spiritual romance permeates the story of the Temple of Solomon. Its beginnings gain breath in the desert with the Tent of Meeting. A Godly guidance carries it through to a beautiful building and courtyard in Jerusalem. Not only set up by Divine directions but confirmed as well. A cloud appears at its dedication and fills the building, indicating God's pleasure with what has arisen. And then it was gone. All destroyed. Not heeded were lessons experienced at Shiloh, which should have taught believers the Ark must not be entertained as an object of superstition. Its presence never implied Divine protection against foreign enemies. The first loss at Shiloh was bad, the second devastating. The second time did not involve Philistines. They captured the Ark but eventually returned it. The Babylonians swept in and destroyed what they found.

This time the Chosen People were thrown into exile. No Samuel came forth to support them. Their worship system collapsed. No Temple remained standing. Forced by circumstances, people were led to settle for gathering together to remember their faith and their revelational stories. God's Word was shared to confirm their identity in the midst of an alien country — stories of Moses and Aaron and the escape from Egypt. They recalled the romanticism of a past that could fill their imagination with trust in a God who once moved the course of their history from Tent to Temple.

Rebuilding a second Temple followed another path — less romance. The Babylonians finally allowed Israel to return home. But home had been devastated by a war that brought them exile. They had adjusted to living among strangers. Demolished by enemies, the land of Israel held no human attraction as a way of life. To return would mean beginning at the beginning. A similar attitude seemed to accompany efforts to inspire work required to build another Temple. At the urgings of prophetic voices, a Temple complex eventually stood tall. But this time, it lacked the holding hand of God. No Divine instructions and no Divine seal appeared when all was begun and all was finished. No cloud filled this building to confirm its holiness.

The priesthood also seemed changed. Politics infiltrated religious ministry. Temple leadership slipped gradually into political expressions. Power began to duel with piety. But what might have been of greatest importance was the thundering silence concerning the Ark of the Covenant. The Ark seems to have disappeared into the darkness of mystery. The King of Kings may have remained present in the Holy of Holies but his royal throne, the tablets of his ten commandments, the protecting cherubim facing each other; all were now missing. The God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob; the God of Moses and Aaron was now present in an empty room, still called the Holy of Holies. It was another kind of Temple.

Origins of the synagogue appear unknown. Some think them a carryover from days of exile when home practices and home teaching became the only evidence of faith. Synagogues at the beginning functioned as local meeting places for people of like

origins. They contributed a support system for those living in a foreign land. Nothing religious was understood in these buildings at first. They functioned as a space for many purposes, one of which was religious. The synagogue supplied a location where the People of God could mingle to remember who they were — and that entailed a people still chosen. Confessions of that sort could occur at anyone's home. As exiles, people began to use these places to host prayer moments and to study God's Word. Transitioning from remembering Israel's religious past to the Divine Word which directed that past seemed inevitable. These informal buildings evolved into houses of prayer and the sharing of the Word of God.

Return to the Holy Land, after the new Temple had been built, never indicated these meeting houses would compete with worship in Jerusalem. The synagogue remained. They provided another center of faith for those who wished to gather with others who also believed. The Temple, people still revered. Oneness of the Temple continued to express faith in the oneness of God. But prayer houses introduced a new spirituality. They became a spiritual home to pray along with others rather than merely observe sacrificial rituals. They introduced a new worship system. These sessions featured something very new: textual study as an expression of worship. The study of holy texts became a part of this new worship system,

The synagogue never copied the Temple. The two faith houses were very different. The Temple resided in Jerusalem, a city considered holy. Synagogues were located in no special place. Nor was there anything sacred about where it was set up. Holy ground was not a religious issue for synagogues. They might spring up anywhere. Nor were they involved in sacrificial rituals. Nor did priesthood characterizes their leadership. The organization of synagogues was democratic and administered by laity. Leaders of a synagogue might fall to someone because the gathering space happened to be in his house. The synagogue shaped a separate form of worship. Many prayed at the synagogue while also attending the Temple. They found no problem incorporating both into their lives.

Synagogues did supply things missing at Temple services: Scripture readings and a set form of communal prayer. The Temple provided music during services but missing were readings and congregational prayer while rituals were carried out. The priest may have prayed within himself but no prayer formula existed in which the laity could participate inwardly or outwardly. Instead, the air was filled with the sound of animals about to be sacrificed. In contrast, the synagogue provided an opportunity for people to pray out-loud together and listen to the Word of God. It becomes difficult finding any way in which the Word of God figuring into Temple worship. Training in the Law may have been a home issue. As Levites were taught at home so possibly were the sons and daughters of Israel.

Few descriptions can be found concerning what went on in synagogue services during this second Temple period. We today might call it a liturgy of the Word. Initially two prayers were said: one praising God and the other a list of blessings. Two readings then took place, one from the Law and the other from the prophets. An explanation or

homily followed. A last blessing ended the formal service. Something of this procedure is noticed when Jesus returns to the synagogue in Nazareth. He proclaims a reading from the Prophet Isaiah and then gives a short homily.

The relationship between Temple and synagogue saw little hostility. Synagogues populated Jerusalem itself. But the major service synagogues supplied was maintaining religious awareness for those living outside of Israel. These meeting houses featured moments to remind those living among strangers who they themselves were and where they came from. Within the synagogue there was what some called "a wall of orientation." It was the wall that faced Jerusalem. During times of prayer, members of the congregation would face that wall. Prayers were said facing the Temple.

The synagogue offered its most significant role when the Temple was destroyed. A profound gap opened up. Even among those who might have criticized the Temple. Most hostile remarks were aimed at how the Temple was run but not at its existence. It represented many things to people so that life without the Temple seemed impossible. This insistence remained even after suffering the destruction of the first Temple. During this time of emptiness, the synagogue stepped into a space left void and took over religious expressions for now an overwhelming number of people in exile. The synagogue had already functioned outside of Israel and so was well established. The religious life of Israelites, wherever they were, centered now on the synagogue and its form of piety. The Ark of the Covenant was replaced by the Ark of the Law.

With the growth of the synagogue, the teaching rabbis came upon the scene. Synagogue services seemed perfect for their talent and interest. They were teachers of the Law. They could bring to meetings a deeper appreciation of Scriptural texts. They were not priests or Levites. Their impact some see as the beginnings of rabbinic piety. Scribes and Pharisees may have begun this move back to Scripture texts but rabbis brought their services into various areas rather than concentrating their ministry in large cities. Their eventual position of leadership in synagogue services must have felt natural.