

**THE FIRST CENTURY CHURCHES OF GOD:
In Cultural Context With The Synagogue**

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June 7, 1995 b

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INTRODUCTION

Several years ago, I retraced the journeys of the Apostle Paul through Israel, Turkey, Greece and Italy. My objective was to expand my understanding of the Roman world and its relevance to the biblical narrative. Touring often without a guide, I quickly discovered that my understanding of classical mythology was inadequate to fully decipher the ruins I was observing. Preconceptions of simple geographic features were challenged. While in Phillipi, I searched for the "river" by which Paul met with some of Europe's first converts. I soon realized that my idea of a "river," coming from Maryland, was different from that of Luke or his translators. Indeed, my visualization of the New Testament world was forever changed, one piece at a time.

So it is today that many read the Scriptures without the proper knowledge of the societies and cultures in which they were written. Many treasures of understanding are buried beneath centuries of religious and scholarly prejudice that too often obscures fundamental truth. This paper explores the Jewish religious community that gave birth to and so profoundly influenced the Christian Church. It is only with this background that a culturally and historically accurate perspective of the Church of God during the first century can emerge.

There are several books and key authors that have not been incorporated into this work as of this writing. The evidence presented in this paper is presented neither to legitimize nor criticize any current Church structure, customs or liturgy. My objective is to honestly illustrate the harmony that exists between the scriptural narrative and its cultural context. I welcome all comments and additional source material that might further develop this theme.

PART I “THE SYNAGOGUE..., CRADLE OF THE CHURCH”¹

WEIGHING THE EVIDENCE

A proper understanding of the first century Church of God, its purpose, structure and activities is dependent upon one’s knowledge of its roots in the Jewish synagogue. The synagogue, even its physical structure and layout, “seems to have been adopted as the model for the earliest Christian churches.”² There is the archaeological evidence, including various first century synagogues such as those found in Masada, Heropdium, Gamla, Magdala, Chorazim and Jerusalem. Also, a growing number of scholars acknowledge the inseparable ties between the synagogue and the Church. More importantly, the numerous scriptural illustrations of the Church of God during the first century document this relationship.

Religious practice of God’s people in Scripture derives from three possible sources, beginning with the divine revelation of Scripture itself. In addition, the Eternal has, at times, directly communicated His will through His Spirit. It is the premise of this paper that these are the only *valid* considerations. Pagan cultures (human reasoning devoid of divine revelation) have been another influence on the Old and New Testament congregations. Scholars assign differing weights to these influences, and the issue is further complicated by their legitimization of post-apostolic syncretism.

There is no doubt that Christ and the gift of the Holy Spirit revolutionized the church in many respects. The contention that Paul’s contribution to the church’s development was contrary to the existing structure in Palestine must be evaluated. Most modern interpretation exaggerates these changes because it fails to see how much of the church and its work was already a familiar part of Jewish thought at the time. Many of the laws, traditions and concepts that were a part of Judaic understanding can be found in Church.

THE BIBLICAL RECORD VS. SCHOLARLY PREJUDICES

The generalization (and rejection of) of traditions associated with Jewish worship has served as an inaccurate premise for many scholars.³ The Messiah as well as the Apostle Paul addressed these issues repeatedly in their ministries. The problem did not lie in God’s revelation to His people, but rather in how they added to and took liberty with that revelation. The adversarial position of many Jews exposed an obvious veil over their understanding. Once that veil was removed, their background gave them tremendous insight into the Messiah and the work of His Kingdom. Many moderns that pride themselves on centuries of “progressive revelation” still discount or ignore much

¹ Alfred Edersheim, *The Life and Times of Jesus the Messiah*, Henderson Publishers, Peabody, Mass., June, 1993, p. 299.

² Alfred Edersheim, D.D., Ph.D, *Sketches of Jewish Social Life in the Days of Christ*, Eerdmans Publishing Company, Grand Rapids, MI, May 1990, p. 258.

³ an excellent discussion of this and relevant issues can be found in “Christianity” *Encyclopaedia Judaica*, The Macmillan Co. 1971, Vol. 5, Col. 505-513

that was commonly understood in the first century. Rather, two thousand years of compromising anti-Semitic influences are superimposed on the picture of the early Church.

The cultural context in which many see the apostolic church is full of Hellenistic and pagan contributions that were *not* an accepted part of that church's belief system. "Once the 'gentile Christian' won out, ...Jewish Christian groups were pushed to the margin and ultimately excluded as heretical. Being rejected both by normative Judaism and the Church, they ultimately disappeared. Nevertheless, several Jewish Christian sects (such as Nazarenes, Ebionites, Elchasaites, and others) existed for some time, and a few of them seem to have endured for several centuries."⁴ Gentilized Christianity slowly eroded the original identity of the church during the first century especially towards its close. The Churches "gentilization" was presaged by its predecessor, ancient Israel, who had also deliberately minimized the Law and Prophets. This very cycle of compromise and apostasy followed by spiritual renewal forms the foundation on which the synagogue evolved.

The synagogue, an institution of teaching, worship and humanitarian aid, is the response of a people that genuinely feared to repeat the sins that resulted in captivity. However, after several centuries of resisting Hellenistic influence, the Jews took increasing liberty in the oral interpretation of the Torah. Unfortunately, the "walls" (Eph. 2:14) or "hedges"⁵ built around the law for the protection of the Jewish faith became the basis for Jewish resistance to the Church's mission to assimilate gentiles into its assemblies. *This* was the dominant controversy in the early Church.

THE SYNAGOGUE'S ORIGINS AND PURPOSE

The first great assembly of Israel was Sinai, where Israel was given the Law. After the Conquest, community elders gathered for discussion at the gates of the city. The birth of the synagogue as a communal base began in the Captivity (punishment for apostasy). Its further development can be found in the subsequent Return (renewal).

The synagogue's rise to prominence was largely due to Ezra. Although remembered for the Temple restoration, Ezra's efforts to build the spiritual community through the synagogue far outlived the Temple. Prior to Hellenization, this institution was known by its Hebrew name, kneset, meaning "the assembly." Due to the Captivity the priesthood had lost some of its status. The second temple period marked the dawn of the "age of the rabbi."

Ezra's contributions were so monumental that the Jews refer to him as "the second Moses." His first steps dealt with the priesthood, the institution at whose door the Eternal placed much of the responsibility for the Captivity. The prophets scolded the priests for their moral laxity and failure to teach the people (Jer. 23, Eze. 22, Ho. 4, 6, Mal. 2). Malachi writes,

"And now, O priests, this commandment is for you. If you will not hear and if you will not take it to heart, to give glory to my name,' says the Lord of hosts, 'I

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Edersheim, *Sketches*, p.237.

will send a curse upon you, and I will curse your blessings. Yes, I have cursed them already, because you do not take it to heart. 'Behold, I will rebuke your descendants and spread refuse on your faces, the refuse of your solemn feasts; and one will take you away with it...' For the lips of a priest *should keep knowledge, and people should seek the law from his mouth*; for he is the messenger of the Lord of hosts. But you have departed from the way; you have caused many to stumble at the law. You have corrupted the covenant of Levi,' Says the Lord of hosts. *'Therefore I also have made you contemptible and base before all the people, because you have not kept my ways but have shown partiality in the law.'* (Mal. 2:1-4, 7-9 NKJ)

This passage squarely places the responsibility of Israel's demise upon its "spiritual" leadership. It also illustrates the spiritual crisis that led to the formation of the synagogue. The Eternal declared, *"My people are destroyed for lack of knowledge. Because you have rejected knowledge, I also will reject you from being priest for Me; because you have forgotten the law of your God, I also will forget your children"* (Hos 4:6, NKJ). Ezra begins to institutionalize the synagogue on the premise that, "study was seen as the highest form of worship."⁶ He realized that *the people would make the same mistakes unless a strong emphasis was put on instruction.*

In Ezra's reading of the law (Ne. 8), he re-establishes the scriptural foundation of true worship and leads Israel in a renewed covenant with God, often referred to as the "second Sinai." To avoid the errors of the past, Ezra moves to purify the nation of pagan influences (Ezr. 9, 10). He then trained scribes, who in turn taught in newly established academies. "As only a small portion of the people could become proficient in the study of the law under the scribes, ... it was desirable that all should have at least an elementary knowledge, thus the synagogues main object was the religious education of the people, Philo called them 'houses of instruction.'"⁷

The synagogue was largely a Pharisaic institution, the assembly of laymen. Sadducean control of the Temple helped fuel an increasing disparity between the Temple community and the synagogue. By the first century C.E., few could afford the increasing cost of sacrifice at the Temple (This highlights the magnitude of Paul's action on behalf of himself and four others in Acts 21). The synagogue's development was seen as a direct response to the message of the Prophets. "For I desired mercy, and not sacrifice; and the knowledge of God more than burnt offerings." (Ho. 6:6) Synagogues served as hostels for the stranger, and provided food, shelter and clothing to the needy. In them, the Law and Prophets were taught, as they are to this day. The repeated calls of the Prophets for worship from a pure heart were seen to be answered in these "houses of prayer."

⁶ Joseph Good, Chavurah (tape), First Century Congregations, January , 1993, Hatikvah Ministries, Port Arthur , Texas.

⁷ Merrill F. Unger, *Unger's Bible Dictionary* Unger's Bible Dictionary, Moody Press, Chicago, IL, 1980, pp. 1052-53.

INFLUENCES WITHIN AND FROM WITHOUT

The Temple was always central to Israel's worship until the time of its destruction in 70 C.E. The priests' activities were focused there, but the role of Levites would increase in the synagogue after the Temple's destruction. During the Hellenistic, Hasmonean and Roman periods, the synagogues were influenced by diverse Jewish sects. These groups eventually usurped authority over both scripture and the people (one abuse results in the other). Many of the hardened hearts that rejected both the Messiah and the Apostles were nurtured under these religious authorities.

The Church was threatened by the pagan cultures that surrounded it as well as certain Jewish elements that minimized Christ's central role in the Church. Just as Israel was emphatically prohibited from assimilating heathen practices into Yahweh worship, the Church of God was never given license to adopt pagan elements of worship. Those that recreate the apostolic church in the image of its typical modern day descendant ignore the cultural and religious foundation on which that church developed. *It was in Jerusalem that the Church began, not Rome!*

Visualizing the Church out of its cultural context minimizes a wealth of biblical evidence that documents a large influence from the synagogue. *The religious background that defined the Church's worship was Jewish, not gentile.* The contention that "Paul did not begin with the synagogue and 'Christianize it'"⁸ is no more valid than the erroneous assumption held by millions that the Church christianized paganism. Paul was taught as a child in the synagogue at Tarsus, and due to his scholarship under Gamaliel he was a respected rabbi and *his example was that of a Torah-observant Jew throughout his life.*⁹ The contention that Paul made significant steps to distance the Church from the synagogue ignores numerous Pauline passages that can only be understood considering their "Jewish" background and context. Paul taught that Christianity and paganism are mutually and totally exclusive (2Co. 6:14-18). The first century Church of God drew upon the foundational teachings of the Tanakh (2Ti. 3:14-17) with the added understanding of the Messiah's life, teachings, death and resurrection.

"THE FIRST CHURCHES WERE SYNAGOGUES"¹⁰

"The earliest Christians were all Jews. Moreover, they did not regard themselves as having abandoned Judaism. Indeed, one of the earliest questions that the new religion addressed was whether gentiles--non-Jews--*could* become Christians or whether it was necessary to be a Jew in order to become a Christian (see Acts 15)."

"Not only were the original Christians all Jewish, but for several centuries Judeo-Christians and even some gentile Christians referred to their houses of worship

⁸ Robert Banks, *Paul's Idea of Community*, Anzea Books, Surry Hills, N.S.W. , Australia, 1979, p. 127

⁹ Ac. 18:21; Ac. 18:12-15 "your" law, not the Torah, Ac. 21:16-26; Ac. 24:14; Ac. 28:17 etc.

¹⁰ Bargil Pizner, "Church of the Apostles Found on Mt. Zion, *Biblical Archaeology Review*, Vol.XVI, No. 3, May/June 1990, pp. 23-24.

as synagogues.¹¹ To distinguish themselves from the Jews, the gentile Christians began to refer to their gatherings by the Greek word *ekklesia*, also meaning ‘assembly.’ This word was then applied to the gathering place and later to the church building itself. Another word for the building was the Greek *Kyriake*, meaning ‘belonging to the Lord (*kyrios*),’ from which the English word ‘church’ is derived.¹²

It is to be understood that “the early Church” and synagogue were not static entities. The time period in question covers nearly seventy years. Regionalism must also be considered, as the Church spread over the known western world with a variety of individual settings and circumstances. The debt the Church owes the synagogue is hard to fathom for through the Diaspora, the synagogue would spread to every community in the Mediterranean theater and on whose stage (*bema*) the Messiah and the earliest apostles would rise to spread Christianity. Edersheim concludes “*The synagogue became the cradle of the Church, without it...the conversion of the gentiles (would) have required a succession of millennial miracles.*(em. mine)”¹³

PART II ORGANIZATION OF THE LOCAL SYNAGOGUE / CHURCH

PARALLEL STRUCTURES

“Their [the Jews] genius for the organization of public religion appears in the fact that the form of communal worship devised by them was adapted by Christianity and Islam, and its general outlines still exists in the Christian and Moslem world.”¹⁴ This organization truly was the providence of the Eternal. Scholars have pondered how this fledgling Church could have possessed such an advanced structure. The structure had in reality been refined over several centuries. “The epistles of Paul are in a sense evidence of the strength and cohesion of synagogue-community life and discipline. The nascent organization of the underground Christian Church was modeled to a considerable degree on this Jewish community life and organization.”¹⁵

¹¹ See for example, Ignatius of Antioch (Letter to Polycarp 4:2); Pastor of Hermas 43:9; Justin the Martyr (Dialog with the Jew Tryphon 63:5), as quoted by Pizner.

¹² Bargil Pizner, “Church of the Apostles Found on Mt. Zion,” *Biblical Archaeology Review*, Vol. XVI, No. 3, May/June 1990, pp. 23-24.

¹³ Alfred Edersheim, *The Life and Times of Jesus the Messiah*, Henderson Publishers, Peabody, Mass., June, 1993, p. 299.

¹⁴ *Encyclopaedia Judaica*, MacMillan Co., Jerusalem, 1971, Vol 15, Col. 579.. Toy, Introduction To The History Of Religions, 1913, P.546. as quoted in “Synagogue”, *Encyclopaedia Judaica*, MacMillan Co., Jerusalem, 1971, Vol 15, Col. 579.

¹⁵ H.H.B-S., “Community,” *Encyclopaedia Judaica*, MacMillan Co., Jerusalem, 1971, Vol. 5, Col. 810.

INDIVIDUAL RESPONSIBILITIES

-THE ZEQUENIUM (Knesset)

The leadership of the local Jewish community was provided by laymen known as Zeqenium (elders), who together formed the Knesset. The respect given to the elders is well documented throughout the scriptures. In Egypt (Ex. 3:16), Sinai (Ex. 19:7), the period of the Judges (Jg.11), the Monarchy (I Ki. 8:1), and the Return (Ezr. 10:8), the elders were ever present in the affairs of Israel. With the establishment of the synagogue, the elders continued their influence.

The synagogue was governed by 3,5,7 or 12 Zeqenium. Practice varied but voting was common, and each Zaqen was entitled to one vote¹⁶. Scripture is silent on the subject of voting by the Zeqenium. When choosing Judas' successor, lots were cast. In order to avoid nepotism and the consolidation of power within families, brothers were given one vote between them. They were not paid for their service during the first century because the Jews resented the political corruption that had become associated with the selling of the High Priesthood.

The parallels begin with the Messiah's appointment of 12 disciples (Lk. 6:13; 9-1). The number 12 was retained by the apostles in the last recorded event prior to Pentecost and the outpouring of the Holy Spirit (Ac. 1:16-26). Acts 13:1-3 mentions five Zeqenium in Antioch. In Acts 20:28 the Zeqenium of Ephesus gathered together for Paul's departure. These elders may well have represented various smaller groups that assembled in and around Ephesus. In Acts 15:2, 23, we see the Zeqenium mentioned in addition to the apostles. These elders probably served various congregations and around Jerusalem in addition to the congregation James oversaw.

The elders were responsible for the collection and distribution of relief (Ac. 11:30), they were ordained (Ac. 14:23), they heard matters of dispute (15:2; 15:6), commissioned apostles (Ac. 15:22), and wrote decrees (Acts 15:23). The elders were generally older men (1Ti. 5:1; I Pe. 5:1;5) though there were exceptions in the synagogue, as well as the Church. (e.g. Timothy- 1Ti 4:12). Elders were highly qualified through a proven history of exemplary moral qualities (Titus 1:5-9).

A Zaqen was brought into the ruling board by ordination (Acts 14:23). In the synagogue, the ordination of a Zaqen was to be on behalf of the congregation and represented the congregation's wishes.¹⁷ This principle is reflected in the ordination of deacons in Acts 6:1-7, where the responsibility was that of the "whole multitude" that chose the deacons. In Paul's writings we have no recorded examples of the appointment of Zeqenium by the wishes of the congregation as a whole. This may be in part due to the realities of establishing congregations with large percentages of gentiles. In many newly established areas, the decision may have rested more heavily on emissaries such as Timothy and Titus. The requirements of moral qualifications and experience would have required consultation with the local congregation, just as in the

¹⁶ "Organization of Community-Ancient and Medieval", *The Jewish Encyclopedia*, 1914, p. 194

¹⁷ Good, see above

synagogue. They were “Duly examined for knowledge, absence of pride, gentleness and humility.”¹⁸.

Scriptural References: 1Tim. 3:1-7; 2Tim 2:2; 2:15; 2:22-26; 3:14-17; 4:1-5; Tit. 1:5-9; 2:1-9; 3:1-2

-THE ROSH HA-KNESSET (Gk. Archisynagogue; Archon, Nasi)

The Rosh ha-Knesset was an elected¹⁹ spokesmen for the Zeqenium. He was responsible for pronouncing the consensus of the elders. Acts 15:19 likely illustrates this function with James’ pronouncement. In the synagogue, the Roch ha-Knesset also appointed those who fulfilled certain duties concerning worship and physical administration. He was responsible for collecting charity funds and donations for Jews in Palestine. He saw to the enforcement of the rules of the congregation. Crispus, a Roch ha-Knesset (KJV, “ruler of the synagogue”) was converted during Paul’s first stay in Corinth (Ac. 18:8).

Did this position carry over into the Church? The account in Acts 15 *can* certainly be seen in this context, however it could be interpreted that James was Jerusalem’s pastor and this qualified him to render such a judgment. The text repeats the unity of mind among the congregation, elders and apostles which might indicate the typical synagogue structure, especially considering the conference was in Jerusalem. There is no scriptural indication that the position ‘ruler of the synagogue’ existed outside of Palestine or outside the context of a physical synagogue. The listing of spiritual gifts and offices omits a parallel to this position (Eph. 4:11; 1Co.12:28), which is to be expected, since the Rosh ha -knesset dealt primarily with the *physical* administration of the synagogue.

During the Apostolic age God’s Spirit moved powerfully within the Church. Visions, healings, prophesying, tongues, and miracles of every kind were abundant. How this affected the structuring of individual congregations is difficult to assess. In the churches Paul had planted, he continued to have a very interactive relationship and reserved many responsibilities for himself.

-THE RABBI (Chakkamen,sage,wisemen, Gk. Magi)

Rabbis were promoted according to their scholarship in the scriptures and their ability to teach them. The practice of ordination was followed in certain times and abandoned in others. There were various degrees of “rabbi” such as a rabbon (highest rank) and rav, such as Rav Shaul (Paul). Great emphasis was placed on the education of children, and the people as a whole.

Sages (apostoloi) were sent forth to supervise and instruct. Rav Shaul was an “apostle” for the high priest in Jerusalem when he was commissioned to go to Damascus (Ac. 9). His apostleship to destroy (the Church) was transformed into one to build. Paul’s

¹⁸ Sanh. 92a; Chag. 5b

¹⁹ Edersheim,.. *Jesus the Messiah*, P. 304

example of having an occupation for his livelihood was consistent with practice of the first century.²⁰

-THE HAZZAN HA-KNESSET (Cantor)

The cantor was appointed by the Rosh ha-Knesset. Any member could serve in this post during talmudic times. He was considered in every respect a servant of the congregation and was responsible for blowing a trumpet to announce the weekly and annual sabbaths.²¹ He also took out and returned the Torah scrolls as mentioned in Luke 4:20. Colossians 3:16 describes the musical responsibilities the Hazzan attended to and led. Most prayers during worship are led and sung by the cantor.

-SHAMMASH (Deacon, Deaconess)

These were general servants of the congregation, who, during most periods were salaried (in the synagogue). Their functions included secretary, messenger and handyman. In the Church, they were to be of, "good reputation, good report, full of the Holy Spirit and wisdom (Ac. 6:3)," and they were ordained by elders (Ac. 6:6).

Concerning women, scholarship as a whole has rejected the inclusion of women in most positions within the synagogue. One scholar, however, has produced nineteen Greek and Latin inscriptions bridging seven hundred years from the first century B.C.E. in which women possess titles of honor within the synagogue community.²² Paul's teaching that women should not teach in the Church does not preclude their service in many other responsibilities within the congregation. Paul's first assembly in Greece consisted entirely of women (Ac. 16:13). When Apollos needed, "the word of God expounded more perfectly" to him it was Aquila and Priscilla God used. Women were a vital part of the synagogue just as they were in the Church of God

-METHURGEMAN (the Interpreter)

The interpreter translated scripture readings into Aramaic (the common tongue). A parallel is seen in 1Cor. 14:13,28. (see 'teaching' in the synagogue service)

-IN THE CONGREGATION

The Church closely followed the example of inclusion established by the synagogue. Robert Banks makes the following observations in his book "Paul's Idea of Community."

"To a large extent Pharisaism and the synagogue anticipated this (Paul's) approach. The former was essentially a lay movement, and the synagogues were popular assemblies belonging to the local community and organized by it

²⁰ L.I.R. "Rabbi", *Encyclopaedia Judaica*, MacMillan Co., Jerusalem, 1971, Vol. _ Col.1445.

²¹ "Hazzan", *Encyclopaedia Judaica*, Vol. 8 Col. 1542.

²² Bernadette Brooten, *Women Leaders in the Ancient Synagogue*, Scholars press: Chico CA ,1982

rather than the priesthood.”²³ In several places in his letters, and notably 1 Corinthians, Paul talks about specific aspects of the church’s meetings, clarifies the principles upon which decisions in this area should be based and gives concrete advice on specifics dealing with their manner of worship. But nowhere does he address his remarks to a group of persons (or to any one person) who alone have responsibility for dealing with these affairs. This consistent and quite remarkable feature of his letters, so self-evident when one reads them that it is apt to be overlooked. He consistently reminds the whole community of its obligations in these matters and calls upon every member to deal with them in a proper fashion. His letters are uniformly addressed to the local groups as a whole rather than to any authorities within them, and the expression ‘brethren’ is constantly on his lips - not least in places where organizational matters are being discussed, Clearly all who belong to the community share in the responsibility for the general conduct of its proceedings.”²⁴ It is relevant to note that Paul’s first letter to the Corinthians came approximately five years after his first visit. The problem of division is addressed but local leaders are not. Paul’s emphasis was certainly representative of his Pharisaic Jewish background

“With respect to each of the area’s of community life we have been examining, responsibility lies with every member to play his particular part in the leadership of the community. Rather leadership is a corporate affair devolving in some measure upon all who participate in the communities gatherings.”²⁵

The “all” included the *entire* congregation. The emphasis on the children’s participation in Jewish life is exemplary. Children were not segregated from the adult Spiritual community but were an interactive part of it. They participated alongside adults in activities such as the reading of the law in the synagogue. This custom was in complete accord with the Torah’s repeated instruction to nurture the child’s spiritual education and interaction with his elders. Elders were to have “faithful children”(Tit. 1:6) and their inclusion in the church environment promoted their identity within that community.

CHURCH STRUCTURE

- IN JERUSALEM

Scriptural evidence indicates the Jerusalem Church followed the structure most familiar to them- the local synagogues. The apostles were all laymen and thus their lifelong beliefs tended to parallel the teachings of the Pharisees (Hillel to be exact), as opposed to other Jewish schools of thought. In applying the synagogue model to the apostles, one must ask, “Were the Apostles in Jerusalem devoting full time to the work of the Church?” Considering the magnitude of the Church’s initial growth and the need for deacons as mentioned in Acts 6, they probably were. Did they then continue a format (the Zeqenium) that was traditionally associated with laymen?

²³ Banks, p. 151.

²⁴ *ibid.*, p.157.

²⁵ *ibid.*, p.159

Acts 15 can be understood in such a context. Acts 15:19 record the council's judgment rendered by James. (NKJ "I judge, " AV "my sentence," NIV, NEB, RSV, "my judgment,"). Did James speak only on his behalf or for the apostles and Zeqenium as well? *The text can be seen as the apostles acting as a board of Zeqenium.* Peter equates his calling as both an elder and Apostle (1Pe.5:1). The Scriptural account in Acts 15 does not mention a vote among the Zeqenium which could indicate:

1) that James (or some would present Peter) had the authority to make a decision of this magnitude without a vote (contrary to practice often found in the synagogue)

2) a vote did take place and only the conclusion is noted in the account 3) James knew he had a majority and it was obvious to all he had sufficient support. If any of the leadership would have had a problem with Paul's presentation it would have most likely been James. His own decision was quite sufficient and may have constituted a unanimous one among the Zeqenium as well. James, possibly the Nasi (president of the council), spoke on behalf of the Zeqenium and the Zeqenium spoke on behalf of the people. This unity is illustrated in Acts 15:22, "it pleased the apostles, and elders, with the whole church."

James' importance and possible responsibility as the Rosh ha-Knesset is indicated in his preeminent mention in scripture (Ac. 12:17; 21:18; 1Co. 9:5;15:7; Ga. 1:18-19; 2:9). It is also of import to note that Paul in Galatians 2:9 views the three leading apostles in much the same fashion any rabbi would view the ruling Zeqenium. His respect was tempered in that he viewed their leadership and example in this instance as falling short of God's will, and creating division in the Body of Christ. This was contrary to the responsibility they had to their fellow elders and to the Church as a whole. Paul's humanity is perhaps a reflection of the tension that occasionally existed between synagogues .

-BETWEEN JERUSALEM AND LOCAL CHURCHES

It is important to note that the only issue of such magnitude to warrant a Jerusalem council was that of the responsibilities of gentile converts. The only other references to Jerusalem's influence are negative. (Judaizers and/or prejudiced Jews) There is much debate concerning the relationship of Paul to the leadership in Jerusalem, but it can not be understood properly outside the Judeo-Christian synagogue context.

The responsibility for gentile churches fell primarily to the man God had called as an apostle to raise up those congregations. In several cases he spent prolonged periods of time with these congregations and refused payment for his services in order to bolster his integrity among them. Jerusalem would always have been viewed as their mother but its impact on the function of the local church was minimal.

As was customary in the synagogues, individual assemblies brought periodic donations to Jerusalem.²⁶ Paul followed this example in his recruitment of aid from the largely gentile churches (Ac. 11:27-30; 12:25). He also sought feedback from the leadership in

²⁶ A collection for one is described in 1Co. 16. Paul requests this to take place on *Motza'ei Shabbat* (Saturday night).

Jerusalem, and visited on at least five occasions. A fundamental condition for the coexistence of hundreds of synagogues was local autonomy. This varied in degree, but it has always been a part of the Jewish mindset. Autonomy and division are *not* synonymous in a Judaic-Christian context. The local autonomy of synagogues and their relationship with Jerusalem was replicated by the Church. *Neither the culture nor the technology of the period encouraged significant influence from the Church in Jerusalem.* Unity was through God's Spirit.

PART III FUNCTIONS OF THE SYNAGOGUE / CHURCH

TRADITIONS REGARDING WORSHIP

Friday evening Sabbath (Shabbat) meals often took place within a communal setting. Many synagogues held three to four Sabbath services with festive meals in between called the breaking of bread (see Ac. 2:42). These occasions were vital to the community, joyous, even consecrated to God. In addition, there could be a Haudalah service that would mark the close of Shabbat (sundown) and could at times go all night. Such a service conducted by Rav Shaul in Acts 20:6-12. The love for scripture, the strong sense of community and participation renown within Jewish culture continued in the new congregations of the Church of God. The Messiah's life, death and resurrection as well as the gift of the Holy Spirit gave their beloved Tanakh even more meaning and application in their lives.

INTERACTIVE WORSHIP

The degree of adherence to the traditional service as found in the synagogue²⁷ probably varied within the Church of God, depending upon the region and the specific date. It would be expected in areas where Christians continued to worship in the synagogue. The question, then, centers primarily on Paul and the churches that had a large percentage of gentiles.

Prayer, reading and teaching are the three key elements of worship in the synagogue. Public prayer is mentioned throughout Luke's narrative and is found in Paul's epistles as well.

The eleventh chapter of 1 Corinthians discusses the traditions Paul gave to the Corinthian church. The first topic concerns head coverings during public prayer. This is followed by a discussion of the partaking of the Passover symbols. Both of these practices were common in Judaic practice. The fourteenth chapter literally opens a door to observing the congregation during worship. The participation of so many people was commonplace in the Jewish assemblies. Ma'oz in discussing the Gamla synagogue illuminates this practice. The [seating] arrangement would "allow free discussion among

²⁷ The Jewish origins and influences on Christian ritual and liturgy is discussed in Encyclopaedia Judaica "Christianity", vol. 5, col. 505-515.

the seated public. The most important element was the *congregation*, which assembled to worship, listen to the scriptural readings, and participate in instruction and prayer”.²⁸ Sanders further explains, “Just as the synagogues at Gamla, Matsada and the Herodium were arranged to allow and even encourage participation by the congregation, the New Testament assumes that anyone with something important to say would be allowed to speak: thus Jesus and Paul could use the synagogue service for their message (Mr. 1:14-15; 6:1-5; Ac. 13:15: ‘Brethren, if you have any word of exhortation for the people, say it.’).²⁹

1 Corinthians 14 documents the interpreters, prophets and those that judged, all familiar participants in the synagogue. The open dialogue described, however, was not being handled properly. Paul does not instruct the Corinthians to abandon their open interaction, but rather instructs them on how to participate in an orderly manner.

Paul’s first epistle to Timothy reiterates certain themes found in Judaic worship. The key elements of public prayer (2:1-8), reading and teaching (4:13; 5:17) are encouraged. The second epistle continues with study (2;15) and Paul’s declaration that the Tanakh was, “able to make (one) wise unto salvation through faith which is in Christ Jesus (3:15)”.

THE SYNAGOGUE SHABBAT SERVICE (in order of occurrence)³⁰

1. *Prayers* (Ac. 2:42;6:4;12:12;16:13,6; 22:17) The service opening includes various prayers- some given while standing, others while sitting (some speculate from evidence at Capernaum that worshippers sat on mats on the floor, eastern fashion.)³¹ In the synagogue, a prayer book is used with a variety of prayers for different occasions. Some are said aloud others silently. It is doubtful the first century practice included prayers in unison or from a fixed text. “In fact, first century Jews probably did not do anything in unison”.³²

“The prayer for government” is said on Sabbath mornings and festivals. It follows the Mishnah’s instruction, “Pray for the welfare of the government; since but for the fear thereof, men would swallow each other alive.” (Avot 3:2)³³ This same prayer is encouraged by Paul in 1 Timothy 2;1-4.

²⁸ Ma’oz, “The Synagogue of Gamla and the Typology of Second-Temple Synagogues”, *Ancient Synagogues Revealed*, ed. Levine, pp. 35-41 as quoted by E.P. Sanders, *Judaism: Practice and Belief 63 BCE-66 CE*, Trinity Press International, 1992, p.p. 200.

²⁹ E.P. Sanders, pp.201-202.

³⁰ This is a broad overview. E.P.Sanders doubts all these components had come together to form a standard worship service in the first century C.E..

³¹ James F. Strange and Hershah Shanks, “Synagogue Where Jesus Preached Found at Capernaum” *Biblical Archaeology Review* Vol IX No. 6Nov./Dec. 1983 p.26.

³² E.P. Sanders, p. 207

³³ “Prayer for the government”, *Encyclopaedia Judaica*, vol. 7, col.834

- *Shema* (De. 6:4-9; 11:13-21; Nu. 15:37-41)- a proclamation of God's unity recited by the congregation in chorus. The Shema and the Ten Commandments served as kind of a core that was often written and repeated".³⁴

- *18 Benedictions*- "God is blessed for encouraging *people to repent* and *forgiving those who do*."³⁵

- *B'rakhah (blessing)*- by priest if present during which the congregation would raise hands horizontally ("lifting up holy hands", 1Ti. 2:8)

2.) *Reading of the Law* (Neh.8 Lu. 7:14, Ac.13:15; 15:21; 17:2; 1Ti 4:13) *and the Prophets* (Lu. 4:16-20, Ac 13:27) The attendant solemnly took out the scroll of the Pentateuch from the ark. From the ark the torah scroll was brought through the congregation to the bema (elevated platform) located in the synagogue's center. On Shabbat seven different people read portions of the Law, none of which is less than three verses. The readers, standing at a reading desk, read word for word, no memorizing was allowed. Lay members, including minors, were welcome to read.³⁶ Lectionaries were developed over time to divide the scriptures so that complete readings could take place from one to three and one half years (depending on the lectionary used). During festival seasons, the lectionary was interrupted for relevant festival readings (2Ti. 4:2). A Methurgeman (interpreter) could be used to translate the Hebrew reading into common Aramaean. In such cases, he stood beside the reader and could, if his renderings were given correctly, paraphrase for better, popular understanding (1 Co. 14:27-28).

3.) *Teaching* [*'Drashot'; Discourse, Sermon*] (Mt. 4:23; Mr. 1:21; Lu. 4:15; 6:6; 13:10; Joh. 6:59; 18:20, Ac.13:14-44; 1Ti 4:13) Its purpose-"It glorified God, and brought men back, or at least nearer him. The little city, weak and besieged , but delivered by the wise man in it (Ec. 9:15), served as symbol of the benefit which the preacher conferred on his hearers."³⁷ The preacher would sit in a special preaching seat (commonly called Moses' Seat, Mt. 23:2)³⁸ located on the bema (this one is located in front of the synagogue). The preacher did not require ordination although there were "necessary qualifications both mental and moral."³⁹ His appointment was dependent upon the wishes of the congregation.

Among those chosen to preach would be rabbis, distinguished visitors, famed preachers, ministers (Hazzan, Lu. 4:20) and lay members. "The peculiarity here is that just for the acts proper to public worship - the reading of the Scriptures, preaching and prayer - no special officials were appointed. These acts were, on the contrary, in the time of Christ still freely performed by members of the congregation."⁴⁰

³⁴ E.P. Sanders, p.196.

³⁵ E.P.Sanders, p.205 includes a thorough discussion on prayer.

³⁶ *Unger's*, (see above), p. 1054.

³⁷ Edersheim, *Jesus the Messiah*, p. 308-9.

³⁸ Bo Reicke, *The New Testament Era*, Fortress Press, Philadelphia, PA, copyright 1968, pp. 122-3. See also Ze'ev Yeivin, "Ancient Chorazin Comes Back to Life, A Galilee Town is Reconstructed From Fragments, *Biblical Archaeology Review*, Vol. XIII, No. 5, September/October 1987, pp. 32, 35.

³⁹ Edersheim, ..*Jesus the Messiah*, p.308.

⁴⁰ *Unger's*, (see above), p. 1053

Rabbi's often employed the use of a Methurgeman (Amora). The rabbi or preacher might whisper to the Amora, who would then amplify the rabbi's teaching. He would also, at the close of the sermon, answer questions or meet objections.⁴¹ The Amora, it is noted, was all too often guilty of attracting attention and applause to himself through caustic and deprecatory remarks, manners, tone, vanity, self-conceit and silliness. For this reason, some rabbis used only trusted interpreters of their own over fifty years of age.⁴² Peter, it was said, was accompanied by Mark as an interpreter, probably to translate his sermons into Greek, and later published the expositions as instructions.⁴³ The most important qualification in speaking was that the orator knew the scriptures well. In addition, he was to present himself well and speak well. Apollos was a perfect example in that he was "an eloquent man, *mighty in the scriptures* (Ac. 18:24)."

Two types of preaching styles were in common use. The first, Haggadic (eg. the Messiah) dealt with parables, stories, allegories, witticisms, strange and foreign words, absurd legends, anything to startle an audience.⁴⁴ The second, found most commonly after 70 AD, was the Halakhah, that filled the need to define how one should walk. This became increasingly important in light of the dispersion and the increasing influx of gentiles.⁴⁵

Most addresses closed with a reference to the basar (the gospel), a proclamation of the coming Messianic Kingdom. "It (the gospel) was well defined in the Jewish mind long before Yeshua walked upon the earth.⁴⁶ Festival discourses were expected in preparation for and during the Holy Day seasons (2Ti 4:2). In Hebrew thought, a balance exists between being taught of God and man, as demonstrated by the saying "God opens the book to those that open the book."

-*Closing B'rakhah (Blessing)*, given if Levite or priest is present. If not, a prayer in its stead. The congregation responds with an "amen" to conclude the service.

BETH MIDRASH (the House of Study)

Often adjoining the Synagogue was a complex for congregational study. Excavations at Meroth in Galilee have uncovered a Synagogue complete with a Beth Midrash. Studies took place in a room that had, under one archway, a mosaic depicting Isaiah 65:25 "The wolf and the lamb shall graze together."⁴⁷ This passage is of great significance, considering that most discourses were concluded with a reference to the basar (gospel) message of the coming Messianic Kingdom. All worship and study looked forward to the Messianic Kingdom and the ingathering of the exiles.

⁴¹ Edersheim, *Jesus the Messiah*, p. 308.

⁴² Ibid, p. 311.

⁴³ Eusebius *Hist.* iii. 39.15

⁴⁴ Edersheim, *Jesus the Messiah*, p. 311.

⁴⁵ Good, (see above)

⁴⁶ Joseph Good, *Rosh HaShanah and the Messianic Kingdom to Come*, Hatikva Ministries, Port Arthur TX, 1989, p.33.

⁴⁷ Emmanuel Damati, "The Synagogue at Meroth, Does it Fix Israel's Northern Border in Second Temple Times?" *Biblical Archaeology Review*, Vol. XV, No. 2, March/April 1989, pp. 20-36.

BET DIN (House of Judgment)

Text to be submitted later.

Scriptural references: Mt. 16:19; 18:17-18; 1Co. 5:12; 6:1-8; (vs. 4 unqualified men sitting in judgment); 2Co. 13:1; Col. 2:16-17; Jas. 2:6

CHURCH FINANCIAL ADMINISTRATION

Text to be submitted later.

Scriptural references:

Ac. 8:20; 2Co. 11:7-9; 2Co. 12-13-19; Phil. 3:19; 1Th. 1:9; 2Th. 3:8-10; 1Ti.5:17; 6:3-5; 2Tim 2:6; Tit 1:11; 3:14 “ours” work; Heb. 13:5; 1Pe. 5:1-3; 2Pe. 2:1-3; 2:14-15; 3Jo.7

⁴⁸ *Unger's*, (see above), p. 979

HOME CHURCHES

The concept of home assemblies came directly from the Jewish community. Judaic (oral) tradition required a minimum of 10 males for the establishment of a synagogue. One alternative for small assemblies was to meet by a body of water. Josephus mentions assembling by the seaside.⁴⁹ This is illustrated during Paul's first journey into Europe, when Luke describes a Sabbath on which Paul spoke to a group of women, "by a river side" (Ac.16:13) in Phillipi. The Jewish population evidently did not warrant a synagogue.

The more common option was a home setting. "When the number of Jews was small, a large room in a private home was set apart for the purpose (of assembling)"⁵⁰ "Many synagogues...operated out of a private house. There were no rabbis for these synagogues, and they were not joined in any kind of umbrella organization."⁵¹ Excavations in Corinth illuminate one of the situations we find in the early church. "The residential sections of Corinth remain unexcavated, but archaeologists have made careful studies of a first-century villa in nearby suburban Anaploga. Since even this fine house could have accommodated an assembly of only 30 or 40 people, Paul's congregation was probably organized into subgroups that met together only on occasion. As Jerome Murphy-O'Connor has suggested, this situation may have contributed to the divisions in the Corinthian church (1Co. 1:10-12), which evidently became acute whenever the whole congregation had to crowd into just one house for the Lord's supper (see 1Co. 11:17-34)."⁵² The home assembly remains a popular alternative for small Jewish, Messianic Jewish and sabbatarian Church of God fellowships to this day.

Scriptural references: Ac 20:20; 28:23; Law and Prophets taught in the home. Ro. 16:3-5; 1Co. 16:19; Col. 4:15.

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⁴⁹ Flavius Josephus, *Antiquities of the Jews*, Bk. XIV, Ch.10,23

⁵⁰ Edersheim, *Sketches*, pp. 259-260.

⁵¹ Louis H. Feldman, Hershel Shanks ed., *Christianity and Rabbinic Judaism*, Biblical Archaeology Society, Washington D.C., 1992, p.11.

⁵² Victor Paul Furnish, "Corinth In Paul's Time, What Can Archaeology Tell Us?" *Biblical Archaeology Review*, , No. 3, M Vol. XV ay/June 1988, p. 27.