

SACRED SPACE:  
ANCIENT SYNAGOGUE AND EARLY CHURCH

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A great deal of scholarly attention has been given over in recent decades to questions about the relationship between the Christian Church and its Jewish origins. This has provoked many new lines of research among the several disciplines of Christian theology and history, and has borne much fruit in some of them, particularly biblical studies.

Indeed, one would expect that such would be the case as well, if not more so, in the field of liturgical studies. Generally speaking, nowadays one could not even begin to consider Christian liturgy without explaining it in terms of the forms of Jewish worship out of which it has arisen, and to this extent, one may say that "intertestamental studies" have borne much fruit here, too. Nevertheless, there have been major problems in this kind of study itself which indicate that a great deal less is known than has been suspected.

Alexander Schmemmann indicates what a few of these problems are:

No matter what disagreement may exist between the historians of the Christian cult, they all agree on the acceptance of a genetical link between this cult and the liturgical tradition of Judaism as it existed in that period. The study and evaluation of this link has been hindered for a long time by a myth which has been central in liberal theology, the myth of the rebirth of the Church under the influence of the Hellenistic world. According to this myth, the organized catholic Church, as we see her from the middle of the second century on, with her doctrine, worship and discipline, was separated by a deep gulf from her Hebrew beginnings, and was the fruit of the Hellenistic metamorphosis which the original teaching of Christ underwent, it is said, some time prior to the Church's emergence as an organized structure. And it is precisely in the area of worship, above all in the area of "sacramentalism" (as if this were something completely alien to the Hebrew consciousness), where the major symptom of this Hellenistic metamorphosis is to be seen.<sup>1</sup>

In other words, one of the problems facing liturgical studies today is what scholars have made of the relationship between synagogue and church. In Schmemann's view, too much weight is given to Christianity's supposed Hellenism over and against its Jewish origin, too much emphasis has been given to the notion of a decisive kind of difference which may not, in fact, even have existed (as the archeology of ancient synagogues will show). A second problem is the historical issue -- what was synagogue worship like in the first centuries of the Christian era (let alone in apostolic times)? Without answers to this second question, we are left with the kind of thinking which has characterized the investigation of these links up until now, a kind of thinking which tends to read back in to the past on the basis of all-too-modern-texts and trends within Judaism, that is to say, it appears that, the discussion of Jewish synagogue liturgy, particularly as it relates to Christian liturgy, seems to have been begging the question.

It is precisely at this point that archaeological data are able to step in, in order, at the very least, to serve as a corrective to conclusions which might have been reached on the basis of texts alone. One need only think of the example of representational art and its rise in the synagogue to realize what the significance of archaeology's contribution must be, and the degree to which scholars would be let astray in its absence.

Our focus, then, will be upon this specific contribution of archaeology in the endeavor to understand forms of Christian worship in terms of cognate Jewish forms. We have chosen to formulate our topic in terms inspired by Fr. Bouyer's seminal work, Rite and Man; <sup>2</sup> namely, the notion of sacred space as it is conceived in Judaism and Christianity, and as this conception is given concrete expression in architectural forms which are accessible to archaeological investigation. The specific forms to be dealt with ultimately are general architectural plans, building (and hence, prayer) orientation

and axiality, and the bema as a structure within the building which mediates a specific kind of use and conception of sacred space. Our conclusion will be akin to that already reached by Fr. Bouyer:

Archaeology has shown what might be called an obvious kinship between the arrangement of the synagogues contemporary with the origin of Christianity and that of the primitive places of worship like those that still exist, particularly in Syria.<sup>3</sup>

Unfortunately, we are hard-pressed to be much more specific. For if the "research" undertaken for this paper has proven anything to this writer, it is that there is less of a consensus, with regard to both details and generalities, in this field than in just about anything else he has studied. This is perhaps the most difficult aspect of the subject matter to reckon with, and it is the excuse which must be offered for the loose and rather haphazard organization of this paper.

Be that as it may, a logical starting-point can still be found in a brief survey of archaeological evidence regarding the synagogue itself. Of necessity, this will entail some inquiry into the origins of the synagogue as institution and the dating and typology of extant remains.

Herbert Gordon May said it best when he remarked, in 1944, that: "The origins of the synagogue are shrouded in the mists of the past."<sup>4</sup> A great deal more evidence has come to light in subsequent years, but the story remains one of speculation and guesswork. Scholarly opinion covers a range of some 500 years in attempting to fix the time of the synagogue's emergence (from about 600-100 BCE), and the region of its origin has been variously declared to be Judaea, Babylonia, Hellenistic Egypt and Graeco-Roman Palestine.<sup>5</sup>

Until comparatively recent times, the most common view was that first put forth in the sixteenth century by Sigonius, who:

would surmise that synagogues were first erected in the Babylonian exile for the purpose that those who have been deprived of the Temple of Jerusalem, where they used to pray and teach, would have a certain place similar to the temple, in which they could assemble and perform the same kind of service.

This view was subsequently modified by Vitranga and others so that, by the nineteenth century, emphasis was placed upon the Persian period and the work of Ezra as the more significant consolidation of the movement which had begun in Babylonia.<sup>6</sup>

One modern author, at least, argues for a pre-exilic beginning of the synagogue as institution. Drawing from primarily biblical material, Louis Finkelstein claims that prophetic gatherings to celebrate new moons and sabbaths, the prayer of Solomon at the dedication of the Temple. (1 Kgs 8.12-53), the events of the reigns of Manasseh and Joseah, and the etymology of the word "midrash" establish the existence of

prayer gatherings under prophetic guidance even before the fall of Jerusalem in 586 B.C., and second, that out of these gatherings there grew imperceptibly the more definitely institutionalized synagogues that played so important a role in the Maccabean age.<sup>7</sup>

This argument is interesting in that it highlights the suspicion, which seems to be more or less universal, that some form of local gathering, as opposed to centralized Temple worship, must have characterized Hebrew religion from early times. Wellhausen hints, according to the Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible, that "the synagogues represent a survival of the bamoth (local shrines), "some of which "never ceased to be places of worship but . . . soon after the reformation of 621 B.C. they underwent a transformation from sacrificial to synagogal worship."<sup>8</sup> Solomon Zeitlin, taking the word "synagogue" quite literally, posits a kind of town meeting which was called periodically by local leaders in order to discuss political and economic questions. At these meetings, it seemed appropriate to read sections of the Torah (cf. Ezra, Nehemiah). This he takes to be the "germ" of the institution of the synagogue, which developed later, especially under the impetus of the practice of the ma'amadot begun by the Pharisees (about which more will be discussed later), which gave these assemblies their religious format and structure.<sup>9</sup>

Reasonable as the above argument may seem, we would nevertheless do well to recall that, regardless of the kinds of assemblies which preceded it, the synagogue itself is a unique and central phenomenon in Jewish religion. In what is, to this writer, the most convincing hypothesis thus far, even if it remains as speculative as its predecessors, Joseph Gutmann takes as his starting point the literary and archaeological evidence at hand:

Some scholars, fully aware of the speculative nature of the claims for an exilic or pre-exilic origin of the synagogue -- for, after all, there is nothing but silence for about 600 years prior to the appearance of indisputable textual evidence, and 800 years in the case of archaeological evidence, for the existence of the synagogue -- do not hesitate to assert that the synagogue was definitely in existence by the third century B.C.<sup>10</sup>

It appears that what has militated for some date well before the time of Herod has been the nine proseuchai of Lower and Middle Egypt, the earliest of which dates to the reign of Ptolemy III (246-221 BCE).<sup>11</sup> However:

This theory has lately been challenged. Proseuchai, it is maintained, were nothing more than loyalty shrines where prayers were offered to the reigning emperor in lieu of the erection and worship of statues dedicated to him. Whether proseuchai were indeed loyalty shrines, or whether they served some other function in the Hellenistic world cannot be definitely determined. What does appear certain is that the word proseuchē is also used for pagan shrines.<sup>12</sup>

Gutmann goes on to formulate his hypothesis, according to which the origin of the synagogue as such is inextricably linked to the rise of Pharisaic Judaism. This form of Hebrew religion was new and vastly different from the form more commonly known through the Temple, inasmuch as it attempted to deal more with the individual's salvation and bodily resurrection than with Temple cult, priesthood and the fertility of the land. It arose and came into prominence after the Hasmonean revolt of second-century BCE Palestine, and constituted a way of response to "radical changes which Palestinian society had undergone since its earlier encounter with Hellenism".<sup>13</sup> After the destruction of the Temple, one may therefore speak of the triumph of Pharisaism. The



beth ha-knesseth becomes as well the beth ha-tefillah, going forth liturgically, it seems, from the point at which the institution of the ma'amadot had left off.

According to Temple practices up to the time of the destruction, the entire nation was divided into twenty-four groups, each of which had to send representatives of Jerusalem to participate in the offering of sacrifices there. The people of that community were then to meet in their communities at the same time as the sacrifices were being offered. This itself was begun under Pharisaic insistence, as a part of their more broadly-based and popular, and less priestly and cultic, conception of Judaism.<sup>14</sup> We have seen that Zeitlin finds in this the basis of the structure of the synagogue liturgy, and Eric Werner, in his significant work, The Sacred Bridge, concurs, seeing this as the means by which continuity was maintained between Temple and synagogue, and by which the Temple itself exerted some influence upon Christian liturgy (even if this influence was secondhand and, insofar as identifications which were made subsequently by Christian writers were concerned, largely fictions).<sup>15</sup>

This last hypothesis, or something akin to it, is attractive on two fronts. First of all, it seems to accord well with the archaeological evidence. The sites of the oldest dated synagogue buildings which have been excavated at Masada and Herodium are, of course, both Herodian (37 - 4 BCE).<sup>16</sup> There is however, some doubt as to whether or not these structures are really synagogues,<sup>17</sup> although E. M. Meyers accepts a first-century CE dating for them, making them the oldest known synagogues in Palestine.<sup>18</sup> Connecting the rise of the synagogue with the rise of Pharisaism allows for the possibility of a development analogous to the Christian situation, in which domestic architecture would have sufficed for a time<sup>19</sup> (until the destruction of the Temple ?), without having to assume that to have been the case for four or five hundred years.

Secondly, the hypothesis is attractive on the grounds that there is a revolutionary-type religious movement to go with the revolution in worship

which the synagogue represents. E. L. Sukenik remarks:

"Whatever the time and circumstances under which the synagogue originated, however, there can be no doubt concerning its significance as a new departure in the history of religion. Renan rightly names it 'la creation la plus originale et la plus feconde du peuple juif.' It is difficult for us to realize how revolutionary to the ancient world was a form of worship that excluded alike initiation by mysteries and propitiation by offerings. From the synagogue it was taken over by Christianity, and later by Islam."<sup>20</sup>

This feeling is supported by Meyers, who is very explicit in associating "nascent rabbinism or early Pharisaism," and "synagogue Judaism" calling this "one of the most significant of the achievements of ancient Judaic civilization."<sup>21</sup>

So it is that in the midst of conflicting speculation and interpretations of literary evidence and material remains, a discernible trend emerges which on the one hand dates the origin of the synagogue later and later, but which also, on the other hand, is developing clearer and clearer notions about the synagogue in its relation to the post-biblical history of Israel and to the religious milieu, against which it stands in sharp contrast. This will prove important in the later understanding of Christian liturgical forms as derivatives of it. In other words, the designs of neither early church nor of ancient synagogue are arbitrary; they are concrete expressions of theological notions of space which are themselves spartial expressions of theological themes peculiar to Christianity and Judaism.

Our next step is of course an examination of the synagogue sites themselves. Although there are some two hundred known synagogue sites which dot the Mediterranean littoral from Ancient Babylonia as far as, possibly, Spain (although certainly to Italy and Tunisia), fewer than one hundred buildings remain with significant parts still standing.<sup>22</sup> There seem to have been roughly two building periods, in which the sites under our survey were constructed. These are: 1) Prior to 70 CE: very few remains are left, and there is a gap in construction from the destruction of the Temple until the next period, which is: 2) End of second/beginning of third century to the eighth century. This

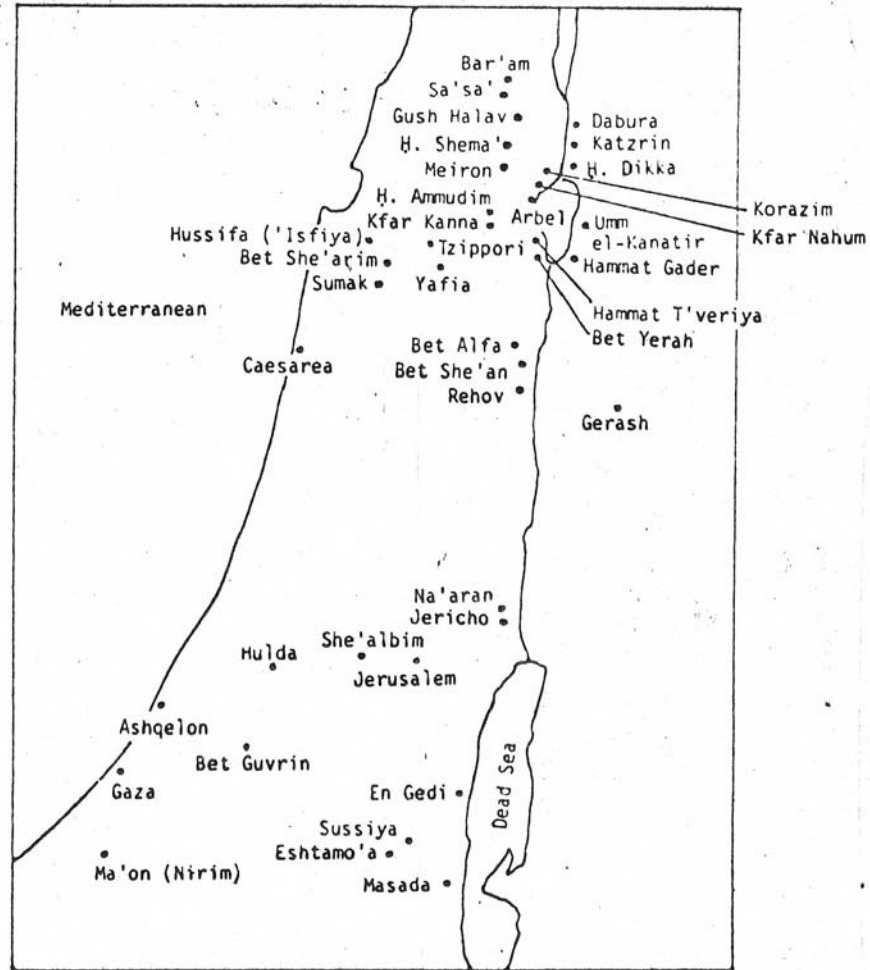


is really the sole period which pertains to our study. It marks a high point of construction activity and is the time during which church and synagogue, having definitely separated, nonetheless hold some very striking features in common. There is then a gap in the record from the eighth century, well into the early Islamic period, until the appearance of the medieval European synagogue of the eleventh century. Thus, according to Shanks, "With the rise of Islam, the period of the classical ancient synagogue in the Mediterranean world had come to an end."<sup>23</sup> In terms, then, of Palestinian archaeology, we are dealing with the late Roman/early Byzantine periods, and hence must be very careful in attempting to apply anything we know about the ancient synagogue to the time of Jesus or the Apostles, as E. M. Meyer quite explicitly notes.<sup>24</sup> Thus we leave open the question of whether or not the synagogue and the church are divergent developments from a common source, roughly contemporaneous in their development). We refer the reader to the most recent catalogue of sites of this period (1st century CE - 7th century CE), which was published in 1977 as a part of the Tuebinger Atlas project.<sup>25</sup>

The synagogues themselves fall into three typological categories:

1) the "basilical" (e.g., Capernaum, Chorazin, Bar'am); 2) the "broadhouse" (Dura Europos, Eshtamoa, Syssiya, Khirbet Shema'); and, 3) the "apsidal" (Beth Alpha, Jericho, Aegina, Gaza, and the last phase of Hammath Tiberias). The names of the categories are quite self-explanatory in the first and last cases, in that the synagogues of the basilical plan are characterized by rectangular shape, predominance of the longitudinal axis, and parallel rows of columns along this axis, with a third row parallel to the wall opposite the entrance commonplace; synagogues of the apsidal variety, of course, include an apse in one of the shorter walls. The broadhouse plan synagogue is an unusual sort of building, however, in that the synagogue is broader than it is long; in other words, while the entrance to the broadhouse synagogue is often retained

Below: Location map of major  
synagogue sites in Palestine.



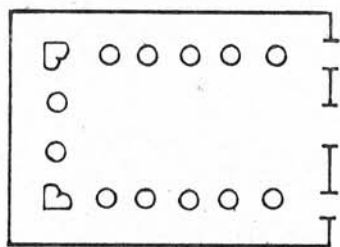


on one of the short walls, there is a Torah shrine on one of the long walls which orients the building along its shorter axis (see illustrations)..

For us, the significant issue is whether or not these types may be so construed as to constitute a developmental scheme which would contribute a great deal toward the understanding of the development of Jewish worship within this period, as well as provide a sequence for dating purposes. Indeed, until most recently this was thought to be the case. According to an argument put forth by Avi-Yonah in 1973, as it is explained by Eric Meyers:

1) The Galilean, or basilical, synagogue is the oldest of all Palestinian synagogues; 2) the broadhouse represents a transitional phase in the development of the synagogue and reflects a time when greater efforts were expended to fix a permanent place for the ark; 3) the apsidal building represents the final stage of development in which the worshipper enters opposite the orienting wall which points to Jerusalem and faces directly the sacred Torah Shrine.<sup>26</sup>

In the same article, however, Meyers develops a very strong case against such a chronology, arguing that material evidence from the sites themselves leads to conclusions with regard to dates which point to the simultaneous existence of several types, broadhouses which are much older than some basilicas, etc. For the purposes of this paper, let it simply be noted that, rather than giving evidence of a developmental sequence, this diversity of types points to a much broader and more inclusive pluralism of religious expression than had earlier been assumed. Basilical and apsidal structures are variations on a similar architectural theme, whereas the broadhouse stands outside this theme and is entirely concerned with another kind of use of sacred space.<sup>27</sup> Thus, we begin to see already how central a part the notion of orientation in prayer is given in the synagogue, inasmuch as all three of the above-mentioned types are taken to be various ways in which different legal requirements regarding orientation were to be met. Before embarking, however, on this much-discussed and confusing issue, there are still a few observations to be made on the architectural types themselves. Again, these observations are of the most general

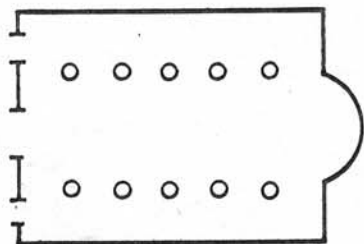


basilica



Jerusalem

broadhouse



apsidal

from Shanks

kind, dealing mainly with the most common features -- and each synagogue itself stands, in fact, as its own exception to these norms.

First, with regard to the basilica plan, we find that its emphasis is more on an elaborate facade and exterior decoration, often consisting of a good deal of exterior bas-relief, than upon interior decoration (although the synagogue at Capernaum was heavily decorated both inside and out). There may or may not have been a second story as at Bar'am. There was usually no fixed Torah shrine, and, with some notable exceptions, the wall which had the entrances (the three-ported facade) was the wall which was oriented toward Jerusalem. Finally, it ought to be kept in mind that the basilica-style synagogue is an adaptation of a public building which itself was not originally religious architecture. Whether the Graeco-Roman basilica came to Palestine via Herod or through Syro-Roman and Nabatean buildings,<sup>28</sup> it is highly significant that:

This public building, employed for all kinds of assemblies, had nothing religious about it. Both the synagogue and the church, however, took over this type of building since it was essential to both religions that worship should not be restricted to the clergy, even though this was done in the name of the people, but rather that it should be an act of the people themselves. The primitive opposition between the naos and the hieron was thus effaced, so that the naos now embraced in some way the whole priestly people. At the same time the sanctuary, without ceasing to be the house of God, became the house of the assembled people, or, as the Christians described it, the domus ecclesiae.<sup>29</sup>

This, of course, is completely consistent with what has been said earlier regarding transformations in Judaism contemporary with the rise of the institutional synagogue, concisely phrased as well by Hershel Shanks:

Its [the synagogue's] focal ritual was not sacrifice, but the public reading of the Law and prayer. In the synagogue the worshipper sought communication with God, unmediated by any priest. Even those who led the communal prayers were laymen. Instead of a single centralized institution, a synagogue could be established wherever a quorum of ten Jews felt the need to have one.<sup>30</sup>

The broadhouse synagogue seems to have descended, or was at least influenced by, the basic temple design of the Syro-Palestinian region. This design seems to have resulted in the least uniformity among excavated examples, to the point



that Shanks questions the validity of a separate category for them, noting that "the only uniting factor among their small number is that they are broader than they are long, with the Torah shrine located on the long side."<sup>31</sup> However, they characteristically also have a bema, or reader's platform, on the orienting wall, along with a fixed aediculum or niche (Meyer in fact associates the appearance of this synagogue type with the appearance of the fixed, vs. portable, shrine itself).<sup>32</sup> Most are devoid of any interior columnation, with the notable exception of Khirbet Shema' in Galilee, which has two parallel rows of columns running east and west, and a southern orienting wall. Khirbet Shema' is thus a kind of hybrid broadhouse/basilica, leading one to wonder whether its original design was not in fact basilical, although Meyer finds archaeological evidence for an aediculum on the south wall from its first construction.<sup>33</sup> Dura Europos, famous for many reasons, is also the earliest known example of the broadhouse synagogue (first half of the first century CE).

The apsidal synagogue can, in several ways, be considered a "final type." It consists of a "return" to the basilica style, but with an apse (either semicircular or rectangular) which is oriented toward Jerusalem. The apse held the Torah shrine and was frequently screened off from worshippers by elaborately carved marble screens supported on pillars,<sup>34</sup> often thought to be the progenitors of Christian chancel screens or iconostases. There is a striking example of this in the case of the apse screen in the synagogue at Myndos whose columns are very nearly copied in two early churches at Jerash.<sup>35</sup>

Apsidal synagogues possess the most elaborately decorated interiors of any of the types we have examined. Eric Meyers attributes this to limitations imposed upon synagogue building and repair by the Byzantines, and the consequent shift of focus to the inside of these buildings, which do not appear before the fifth century CE.<sup>36</sup> The most striking development in this regard is the appearance of geometric and pictorial mosaic floors. The synagogues at Beth Alpha and

Hammath Tiberias, surprisingly, even contain large representations of the sun god, Helios, surrounded by a depiction of the zodiac, as well as depictions of biblical characters.<sup>37</sup> The appearance of apsidal synagogues ends with the rise of Islam and the end of our period of study.

By way of summarizing our brief survey of sites and synagogue types, it may be noted that, while no dependable typological sequence can be discerned, it is nevertheless helpful to view stylistic differences over time as a non-linear developmental process, by which various solutions to liturgical problems (orientation toward Jerusalem, the synagogue's resemblance to the Temple or Meeting Tent, the place of the Torah shrine, etc.) worked themselves out, gradually achieving perhaps a greater uniformity as Judaism itself became more monochromatic and normative. Such a view would be, conceptually at least, parallel to the development of the Christian church and Christianity. As a means of approach to this view, then, let us address ourselves to two major features of ancient synagogue architecture which will give us an insight into the synagogue's liturgical situation, as well as provide us with concrete points of comparison to the early Christian church building. These two features are the orientation of the synagogue and of prayer, and the presence (or absence) and location of the bema.

In the basilica, as in the variant forms of the ancient synagogue, the major architectural concern, if not theological concern, is the wall of orientation which faces Jerusalem. It generally is assumed that this, the most salient and telling feature of the synagogue, is derived from the biblical practice of praying toward Jerusalem (1 Kgs 8:44 parallel 2 Chr 6:34; 1 Kgs 8:48 parallel 2 Chr 6:38; Dan 6:11).<sup>38</sup>

Thus Eric Meyers enunciates the general operant principle in the liturgical use of the synagogue, the principle of Jerusalem orientation, which became a matter of legal requirement in the rabbinic period.

Significant as this principle is, it is also the source of problems in

accounting for the design of basilical and broadhouse synagogues, in which the obvious situation of a Jerusalem-oriented apse is absent. In the main, basilica-style synagogues were oriented such that their facades faced Jerusalem. This would mean that worship-pews, upon entering the synagogue, would have to perform the much-commented-upon "awkward about-face" in order to face Jerusalem while at prayer. At the same time, no niche for the Torah could be placed on the opposite wall, since that would require the faithful to stand with their backs toward the Scrolls of the Torah while facing Jerusalem. Consequently, most scholars posit a portable Torah shrine which would be wheeled to the doorway before the scrolls were removed for reading. Such a portable shrine, being made of wood, would not have survived to this day, and, alas, none has yet been found.

The first question, of course is why would the wall bearing the entrances to the synagogue be chosen as the orienting wall? This is explained by reference to Dan 6:10 (RSV): "When Daniel knew that the document had been signed, he went to his house where he had windows in his upper chamber open toward Jerusalem," etc. Citing also a passage from the Talmud (Berakoth, V, i, 31a: "A man should pray in a room which has windows.")<sup>39</sup> Herbert Gordon May indicates that the idea was to allow the faithful to look out of the portals (and other windows, which tended to be rather ample on this wall) toward Jerusalem. Returning to our notion of sacred space, borrowed from Bouyer's Rite and Man, this is perfectly logical if some how Jerusalem and the Temple were regarded as the dwelling-place of the presence (Shekinah) of God.

However, it is obvious that no account is thus made for broadhouse and apsidal designs, and in particular the two earliest synagogues, Masada and Herodium, both basilicas. In both of these synagogues, the entrance facade faces east and the opposite wall faces Jerusalem. In commenting upon this, Shanks notes:

A curious passage in the Tosephta /earlier rules which did not become part of the Talmud/ tells us that the entrance facade of synagogues must face east, just as the Temple did. Scholars have long puzzled over this passage which appears to contradict the halachic requirement that the synagogue must be oriented toward Jerusalem. The Tosephta may preserve an earlier tradition in which synagogues faced east, rather than Jerusalem.<sup>40</sup>

It appears, then, that there is a conflicting tradition to Jerusalem-orientation, one which stresses eastern portals over Jerusalem-facing portals. It is, perhaps, this conflict which accounts for the situation to be found at Hamath-by-Gadara, Yafa, and Eshtamoa, all broadhouses which have eastern-facing portals and a Jerusalem-facing Torah niche. Franz Landsberger posits a later requirement, that the synagogue have east portals in order to follow the model of the tent of meeting (cf. Ex 38:13), although he probably views this requirement as late because broadhouse synagogues were all thought to be later than the basilica at the time of publication of his article.<sup>41</sup> He also calls our attention to a most interesting feature of the Torah shrine at the "transitional" Dura-Europos:

A striking feature of the niche is the way in which it indicates the direction of Jerusalem, thus making the wall "holy." This elucidates a representation... which the niche carries on its brow. There is pictured the Temple in the Hellenistic architecture of the Temple rebuilt by Herod. Inevitably the gaze of the worshiper is guided toward the holy city.<sup>42</sup>

So far, it seems that the only valid generalization to be made, is that wherever the portals face Jerusalem there is also no fixed Torah shrine, at least in the earliest phases of certain basilicas; or that there seems to be, in terms of sacred space, only a weaker association between the Torah scrolls and the location of the Shekinah. This association seems to be strengthened by the fixed Torah shrine placed on the wall which is oriented toward Jerusalem. The divine presence is not so much felt, perhaps, in the Torah scrolls themselves as much as at the Temple, or rather the location of the destroyed Temple in Jerusalem, where God had promised to dwell with his people.

At this point, an additional factor may be taken into consideration which may take us one step further in understanding those synagogues with eastern-oriented portals. That factor is the association of the east with the expectation of the Messiah and an eschatological kind of awareness within Judaism. It is in this factor that both the point of contact and the point of departure with Christian practice may be found. We find this matter documented and clarified in the following observations by Paul F. Bradshaw in an article which appeared in 1979:

Firstly there is the fact-which would appear quite remarkable were it not so familiar that we take it for granted - that the Christians made their prayers facing towards the East. One can easily understand their desire not to conform to the Rabbinic practice of praying toward the Temple at Jerusalem, but that does not explain why they chose this particular direction and maintained it without exception not only in corporate gatherings but in individual prayer also. It cannot be coincidental that the Essenes, according to Josephus (Jewish War 2.128), did the same. Secondly the times of prayer in early Christianity had a strong eschatological dimension: they were the liturgical expression of the constant readiness for, and expectation of, the parousia which characterized the primitive Christian community. Once again this is true also of the Essenes, and the eschatological imagery employed at Qumran and in the early Church is very similar, especially the use of the idea of the "true Sun" and "true light" which they prayed would dawn upon them.<sup>43</sup>

The point is that if there was as much diversity of expression in Jewish religion as archaeology seems to indicate, then the possibility exists that the eastern portals represent a situation in which an eschatological/messianic current of thought achieved prominence along with the regard for Jerusalem as the particular locus of the Shekinah. One would naturally expect this to become the primary consideration of the proto-Christian community, whereas the intense feeling of expectation would, in competition with a rising sense of the presence of God amidst God's people embodied in the Torah, become less and less influential within the mainstream of Jewish liturgical expression. Thus it is that the apsidal synagogue can be considered "final" and the broadhouse "transitional," so long as these terms are taken to refer not to a temporal/linear scheme of



development, but rather to a development from the more diverse and multiform to the more normative and uniform.

The significance of the sun imagery mentioned by Bradshaw above might also be taken a step further. The association of sunrise and the dawn of the parousia or Messianic age in Christianity and Judaism is well known. Landsberger credits a kind of "heliophilia" on the part of the Emperor Constantine, with the use of portals in Christian churches to indicate the sacred direction, east.<sup>44</sup> This would conceivably explain east-portals on synagogues as well (Masada and Herodium, as well as domestic synagogues and churches, of course, excepted), but does not explain those basilicas whose doors open to Jerusalem. An analogy could be drawn, however, between portals which let in the sun on the one hand and portals which are open to and admit the radiant presence of God (Shekinah) localized in Jerusalem. The radiant glory of Yahweh (even if in fact, invisible) should be present to the worshippers by "being allowed in", and they, in turn, ought to be able to look out toward the direction of its origin. This would stand in contrast to regard for the sun, either as a deity for the gentiles or even as a symbol of God. A community worshipping in such a synagogue might not, then, possess a messianic flavor like that of the Essenes. It may well be significant, in this light, that the apsidal synagogue is the type in which depictions of Helios figure so prominently - in the center of the mosaic floor of the nave.

We thus can hypothesize that the various arrangements of portals, orienting walls, Torah shrines, and apses render explicit various theological emphases by lending a sense of axially--movement, so to speak, along a given direction. From the basilica, with its portable Torah shrine and portals open to Jerusalem, we are given a sense in which God's presence is mediated to the community by Jerusalem, where the only true worship of God had taken place.



The broadhouse, on the other hand "moves" in two directions -- first, from the presence of God coming from Jerusalem but more explicitly in the Torah scrolls themselves, which are housed in a niche on the Jerusalem wall; and second, from the eastern portals into the assembly, as if another presence (eschatological/messianic) were expected at the same time.

These two axes separated, as it were, into the apsidal synagogue and the Christian church. In the former case, the saying of the Pirke Aboth, to which Bouyer refers (" . . . that where there are ten Jews gathered together to listen to the reading of the Torah, the Shekinah is in the midst of them,")<sup>45</sup> is concretized in liturgical architecture most radically. In the latter case, the saying of Jesus of Mt 18:20 is coupled with the expectation of the parousia, not as an expected presence, but as the direction in which the Church itself is moving, from nave, to altar, toward the east and the second coming. (This might be considered analogous to the Christian Church's seizing upon apocalyptic literature and an awareness of salvation history, while Torah-centered Judaism moved out of this form of literature and awareness toward emphasis upon the timelessness of the Law.)<sup>46</sup> The hypothesis that some kind of transformation in Jewish worship occurred along these lines is encouraged by the example of the Galilean basilica synagogue of Bar'am. A nineteenth-century engraving indicates that the main door, which is now open, was at one time blocked up -- an indication to some scholars that a permanent Torah shrine was later introduced just inside the Jerusalem wall, such as happened at Capernaum.<sup>47</sup> Ein-Gedi, which through several rebuildings incurred a similar transformation, is further evidence to the same effect.<sup>48</sup>

Finally, we turn our attention to an item of furniture whose presence in some synagogues and early churches has aroused a most lively debate. The bema, a characteristic structure of medieval and later synagogues (including Orthodox synagogues to this day) has often been considered a particularly significant item

in the exploration of ties between synagogue and church. On the face of it, this would indeed seem to be a perfectly natural place to look for such ties, inasmuch as the public reading of scripture as a climactic event in the worship service is certainly Christianity's inheritance from Judaism, and it is the bema which is associated with the function of public reading (as well as other similar functions, such as leading the congregation in singing).

Unfortunately, the relative abandon with which the term "bema" is employed, referring to anything from Ezra's "wooden pulpit" (Neh 8:4) to the ecclesiola in ecclesia of the Syrian church of Qirk Bizzeh, a massive, semicircular stone structure which takes up a huge portion of the interior space of the nave,<sup>49</sup> diminishes the precision of any argument about it. Consequently, we will confine our consideration to those bemas only which, by virtue of their size and/or structure or location, exert a considerable influence upon the disposition of space within the building. In other words, the issue which has been at the heart of scholarly debate, which is the issue we will address as well is: can a case be made for the widespread use of a large bema in primitive Christian churches as a feature of typically Jewish provenance? Formulated in terms of our "sacred space" discussion, the issue revolves around whether or not another dimension should be added to the notions of orientation we have developed above, namely: organization of the worshippers around the Divine Presence manifested in their midst or center, as opposed to, or in addition to, their orientation along a Jerusalem or eastern-facing axis.

The problem is effectively posed by Fr. Bouyer in the citation given as expressing, for the most part, our own conclusions at the beginning of this paper. Bouyer, along with Dennis Hickley, seems to regard the large bema of Syrian churches as an obvious descendant of the large, free-standing bema of the synagogue. The point made by both of the above scholars is that worshippers in contemporary church and synagogue were organized around the bema, and that

the leaders of these congregations were habitually seated there, in the midst of the people. To illustrate this, Bouyer cites the following as describing the transformation from Jewish to Christian usage:

The assembly itself is centered around the "chair of Mosès" where the presiding rabbi sits, in the midst of the benches of the "elders." The congregation is grouped around the bema, a platform supplied with a lectern, which the lector ascends to read, as we see in the Gospel, the texts that the hazan, the "minister" (ancestor of our deacon) has taken from the ark. Then all turn to Jerusalem for prayer.

In the ancient Syrian churches the chair of Moses has become the episcopal seat, and the semi-circular bench that surrounds it the seat of the Christian "presbyters." But as in the synagogue they remain in the midst of the congregation. The bema is also there, not far from the ark of the Scriptures which is still in its ancient place, not at the far end, but some distance from the apse.<sup>50</sup>

According to Bouyer, this organization about a central point, supposedly coming from Judaism, was then mediated via Syria to Constantinople, where this concept played a part in the design of Hagia Sophia. It then gradually faded from importance.<sup>51</sup> In general, Bouyer's scheme is to start with the people clustered about their leaders for a "Liturgy of the Word," which then moves on to prayer in the direction of Jerusalem, in the case of the synagogue, or to the Eucharist in the apse and the parousia in the east, in the case of the church. These are somewhat similar to the axes of worship we proposed above, and Bouyer calls them the synagogal "Word-Jerusalem" axis and the ecclesiastical "Word-Eucharist-East" axis. The difference between our proposal and his lies in the emphasis Bouyer places upon the grouping-about-the-center as the starting point of the liturgical dynamic. As can easily be seen, this involves quite another sacralization of space (through the manifestation of God-in-one's-midst) than the arrangement previously discussed.

Hickley's approach is basically the same, and he makes the same assumption regarding the presence and use of a bema (as we are understanding it here) in the ancient synagogue. His article interprets data obtained from early churches

in north Syria on the basis of east Syrian (Nestorian) liturgical texts and comparisons to later synagogues, the great Diplostoon of Alexandria (reconstructed for his article on the basis of references to the Jerusalem Talmud), and some assumptions about Dura Europos.<sup>51</sup> The tone of his conclusion is thus:

. . . it might be asked if it is not time to study the spatial principles of worship in the early Church at a time when it was still linked, to some extent, with the Judaic context from which it emerged and which was our Lord's in his time. . . The study of the relation between altar and ambo and of the spatial disposition of the congregation is a problematic one, which can only gain by a deeper reflection on the earliest arrangements which were made in the regions culturally closest to the world of our Lord and the Apostles.<sup>52</sup>

Undoubtedly, the kind of arrangement described by Bouyer and Hickley is an attractive one, particularly in light of the modern tendency to see in Christian worship a "Liturgy of the Word" and a "Liturgy of the Eucharist" as two more or less independent services-within-a-service. Thus interpreted, however, the Eucharist itself comes to be looked upon as something decisively Christian tacked onto what is left of an originally Jewish "Word-service." It is beyond the scope of this paper to deal with that question in any detail; however, since we are about trying to see what archaeology can tell us regarding the relationship between Jewish and Christian liturgy, it remains for us here to deal with the question on those terms. And it is precisely on those terms, the "deeper reflection on the earliest arrangements" of which Hickley writes, that the ideas propounded by him and Bouyer seem to illustrate where speculation has gone too far.

Bouyer draws most of his archaeological data regarding the ancient synagogue from E. L. Sukenik's Ancient Synagogues in Palestine and Greece. However, to note what Sukenik actually says regarding the bema:

The spot where the lesson of the week was recited was raised above the rest of the floor. This platform, bēma, . . . which is present in every larger synagogue to-day, is frequently mentioned in the Talmudic literature. Apparently it was usually constructed of wood and therefore perished under the unfavorable climatic conditions of Palestine. An actual bema -- this time in

stone--has been found only in one place in Palestine, Beth Alpha, near the second pillar from the south of the eastern row, not far from the apse. That it is of later date than the mosaic floor is evident from the fact that it stands on it. It was probably built near the end of the sixth century. There is a more elaborate structure, hewn out of basalt in the al-Hayyat Mosque of Aleppo; this mosque was formerly a synagogue, and still contains a Hebrew inscription, and has been shown by Herzfeld and Sobernheim to date from the sixth century.<sup>53</sup>

Note that the argument-from-wood has been used before, with reference to portable Torah shrines, (although in the cases of the wooden and, at least two relief carvings were found at Capernaum which appear to illustrate such an object.)<sup>54</sup> Talmudic references notwithstanding, it seems difficult to deduce a free-standing bema, in the center of the synagogue with elders seated upon it, from the available data. The stone bema at Beth Alpha is near the apse; the bema in the ad-Hayyat mosque was not found in situ. Where other bemas of any sort have been found, they do not seem to have been centrally located. In Capernaum, it is in the southeast corner, next to a pillar. In the basilica at Beth Shearim, which is oriented to the southeast, it is found, enclosed by walls, near the northwest wall.<sup>55</sup> The basilica at Gush Halav has a bema along the southern (orienting) wall, and may have had an ark built atop it, and many apsidal synagogues having a bema in the apse itself, where the cantor and elders stood. In the broadhouse synagogues, "the bema is the most widely *attested* feature and always is situated on the Jerusalem-orienting wall," (emphasis added.)<sup>56</sup> In short,

The central free-standing almemor is known only from talmudic references to the famous synagogue-basilica of Alexandria destroyed by Trajan in 116 CE. The central bima was generally not found in antiquity in medium-sized synagogues (and there is no archaeological evidence for such a bima).<sup>57</sup>

With regard to the "chair of Moses" to which Bouyer refers, most scholars seem to understand it to be the place on the benches or the seat closest to the orienting wall, or, in the case of apsidal synagogues, those on either



side of the niche in the apse, where the elders sat. This accords well with a memorial inscription on such a seat at Chorazim, as well as with the tradition from which describes the elders as sitting in front of the congregation with their backs toward Jerusalem (Tosephta, Megillah, IV 21).<sup>58</sup>

Hence, on the basis of archeological evidence, there seems to be no reason to believe that the centrally-located bema, as understood by Bouyer and Hickley, was so widespread as to have had a natural counterpart in early Christian churches. When one takes into account the likelihood of significant diversity among Jewish congregations, it seems even less likely that a feature as consistently absent from their synagogues would have been any more standard in Christian communities.

In fact, a fairly recent article by Robert F. Taft<sup>59</sup> puts forth a most convincing argument that such bemas were by no means widespread, even in Syria, and that bema-churches could not be considered "original" types of Christian churches. Most documentary evidence concerning bema churches concerns the "East-Syrian" or Nestorian tradition, where only two churches, both at the al-Hira site in Mesopotamia, have been uncovered which have bemas. In these cases, the design of the bema corresponds to the ninth century Anonymi Auctoris Expositio attributed to George of Arbela, which is Hickley's main source in interpreting the use of the bema.<sup>60</sup> It is not possible to argue from this source to the function of bemas in the "West-Syrian" (Jacobite) tradition or group of traditions. Most other excavated bemas were found in regions where wood was most plentiful, and the bemas were constructed of stone. In regions where wood was scarce, no bemas were found.<sup>61</sup> Further, only one bema was found in a church where it is known that there was a bishop (and in that case, there was also a throne in the apse.) In any event, there does not seem to be a place for the seating of a bishop, so that the West-Syrian bema seems to fulfill the function of any raised platform (reading, singing, etc.) rather than anything like Bouyer had in mind. Lastly, rather than being a primitive characteristic of churches,



there may instead be a link between the evolution of the bema and the evolution of the enclosed sanctuary.<sup>62</sup> Although Taft does not take up the question of the origin of the bema, our own brief survey might be sufficient to show that at least there is no necessary connection between its appearances in Jewish and Christian liturgy.

The point of the above discussion is simply to illustrate one area in which archaeological investigation has applied a necessary corrective to one particular speculation regarding the Jewish antecedents to Christian worship. It does not seem to be the case that Christian worship inherited from synagogue worship that sense of "sacred space" which we have discussed as mediated by the presence of a bema, upon which is focused the Word of God and the hierarchical leader of the community, and about which the community is gathered in the explicitation of the mystery of God among God's people. This is not to debate the merits of such an arrangement, even less to argue (contrary to fact) that such an arrangement was never the case in both Jewish and Christian worship.

But it does provide us with another illustration of the several things we have learned over the course of this inquiry. First, that the notion of sacred space and the use made of this space is a subject amenable to study on archaeological grounds; secondly that orientation in prayer and lines of liturgical "movement" in the worshipping assembly are significant considerations in the study of liturgy, and material remains brought to light by the work of archaeologists contribute infinitely to our understanding of these considerations and their theological interpretation. Thirdly, we are continuing to explore in a new way the implications of the facts of Christianity's birth, i.e., into a Jewish milieu. No less, certainly, than scripture studies does the study of liturgy profit by this new/old investigation, even when it turns out that what was thought to be a point of contact between the two faiths is contravened as such by the material remains of our ancestors in these faiths. Fourthly, we

are being made increasingly aware of inconsistencies and diversities of expression of both faiths. Our awareness that our traditions were neither as universal nor as monochromatic as we had thought ought to be of great help to Christians and Jews alike who are attempting to live within their traditions in our own age of cosmopolitanism and pluralism.

Finally (and this may not have been so apparent in this study) it is clear that, whatever differences may exist between church and synagogue, however much they may both have changed through the ages and however much they may be called to change in our day, the God who is worshipped in these places is the same and will remain the same. And the motive for building and decorating these houses of worship will ever remain the same as well:

How lovely is thy dwelling place,

O Lord of hosts!

Blessed are those who dwell in thy house,

Ever singing thy praise! (Ps 84)

## NOTES

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2. Louis Bouyer, Rite and Man: Natural Sacredness and Christian Liturgy, trans. M. Joseph Costelloe, S.J., University of Notre Dame Liturgical Studies, vol. 7 (Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 1963).
3. Louis Bouyer, Eucharist: Theology and Spirituality of the Eucharistic Prayer, trans. Charles Underhill Quinn (Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 1968), p. 25.
4. Herbert Gordon May, "Synagogues in Palestine," The Biblical Archaeologist, 7-1 (Feb. 1944), 2.
5. Joseph Gutmann, "Prolegomenon," in The Synagogue: Studies in Origins, Archaeology and Architecture, compiled by Joseph Gutmann, The Library of Biblical Studies, ed. Harry M. Orlinsky (New York: Ktav Publishing House, Inc., 1975), p. x.
6. Quoted by I. Sonne, "Synagogue," in The Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible, vol. 4, ed. George Arthur Buttrick, et. al., (New York: Abingdon Press, 1962), p. 478.
7. Louis Finkelstein, "The Origin of the Synagogue," in Gutmann, pp. 12-13. The article originally appeared in Proceedings of the American Academy for Jewish Research (1928-1930), 49-59.
8. Sonne, p. 479.
9. Solomon Zeitlin, "The Origin of the Synagogue: A Study in the Development of Jewish Institutions," in Gutmann, pp. 20-23. The article originally appeared in Proceedings of the American Academy for Jewish Research, 2 (1930-1931), 69-81, and later in Solomon Zeitlin, Studies in the Early History of Judaism, I (New York: Ktav Publishing House, 1973), pp. 1-13.
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11. Sonne, p. 484.
12. Gutmann, "The Origin," p. 74.
13. Ibid., p. 75

14. Ibid., pp. 75-76.

15. Eric Werner, The Sacred Bridge: Liturgical Parallels in Synagogue and Early Church (New York: Schocken Books, 1970), pp. 3, 17, 21-22.

16. Hershel Shanks, Judaism in Stone: The Archaeology of Ancient Synagogues (New York: Harper & Row, Publishers, and Washington, D.C.: Biblical Archaeology Society, co-publishers, 1979), p. 22.

17. see Gutmann, "Prolegomenon," pp. xi-xii.

18. Eric M. Meyers, "Ancient Synagogues in Galilee: Their Religious and Cultural Setting," Biblical Archaeologist, 43 (Sp. 1980), 99.

19. Gutmann, "The Origin," p. 76, n. 20.

20. E. L. Sukenik, Ancient Synagogues in Palestine and Greece, The Schweid Lectures of the British Academy, 1930 (London: Oxford University Press, 1934), p. 2.

21. Meyers, p. 97.

22. Shanks, pp. 11, 35.

23. Ibid., pp. 48-49.

24. E. M. Meyers, "Synagogue Architecture," in The Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible, Supplementary Volume, ed. Keith Crim, et. al. (Nashville: Abingdon 1976), p. 843.

25. F. Huettenmeister and G. Reeg, Die antiken Synagogen in Israel, Beihefte zum Tuebinger Atlas des Vorderen Orients, No. 21/1 (Weisbaden: Reichert, 1977), cited by Meyers, "Ancient Synagogues," pp. 98, 108.

26. M. Avi-Yonah, "Ancient Synagogues," Ariel, 32, 29-43, cited by Meyers, "Ancient Synagogues," pp. 97, 108.

27. see Shanks, pp. 103-104.

28. Meyers, "Ancient Synagogues," p. 100.

29. Bouyer, Rite and Man, p. 167.

30. Shanks, p. 12.

31. Ibid., pp. 102-103.

32. Meyers, "Ancient Synagogues," p. 103.

33. Ibid., p. 104.

34. Sukenik, p. 57.

35. Shanks, p. 120.

36. Meyers, "Ancient Synagogues," p. 105.
37. Shanks, pp. 108-130.
38. Meyers, "Ancient Synagogues," p. 100.
39. May, p. 13.
40. Shanks, pp. 28-29.
41. Franz Landsberger, "The Sacred Direction in Synagogue and Church," in Gutmann, pp. 249-250. The article originally appeared in Hebrew Union College Annual, 28 (1957), 181-203.
42. Ibid., p. 245.
43. Paul F. Bradshaw, "Prayer Morning, Noon, Evening and Midnight -- an Apostolic Custom?" Studia Liturgica, 13 (1979), 61.
44. Landsberger, p. 255.
45. Pirke Aboth 3.8, cited by Bouyer, Rite and Man, p. 165.
46. Unfortunately, I am unable properly to credit or to express this notion, once expressed by Prof. Krister Stendhal during a class on NT exegesis, given at Harvard Divinity School, Cambridge, Ma., spring, 1981.
47. Shanks, pp. 63-65.
48. Ibid., pp. 133-140.
49. Dennis Hickley, "The Ambo in Early Liturgical Planning -- A Study with Special Reference to the Syrian Bema," Heythrop Journal, 7 (1966), 410-411.
50. Bouyer, Eucharist, p. 26.
51. Bouyer, Rite and Man, pp. 180-181.
- 51b. Hickley, pp. 416-417.
52. Ibid., p. 427.
53. Sukenik, p. 57.
54. Shanks, p. 67.
55. May, pp. 5-6.
56. Meyers, "Ancient Synagogues," pp. 102-103, 105.
57. Rachel Wischnitzer, "Mutual Influences between Eastern and Western Europe in Synagogue Architecture from the 12th to the 18th Century," in Gutmann, p. 265. The article originally appeared in YIVO Annual of YIVO Institute for Jewish Research, 2-3 (1947-1948), 25-68.

58. May, p. 17; cf. also Sonne, pp. 488-489, and Meyers, "Ancient Synagogues," p. 105.

59. Robert F. Taft, SJ, "Some Notes on the Bema in the East and West Syrian Traditions," Orientalia Christiana Periodica, 34 (1978), 326-359.

60. Hickley, p. 414.

62. Taft, p. 339, n.2.

63. Ibid., p. 350.



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