

Early Judaism and the Rise of the Synagogue

For a very long time the dominant view on the rise of the ancient synagogue has been that it originated during the time of the Babylonian exile, after 586 B.C.E., when the Judeans who were deported to Mesopotamia and were thus bereft of the Jerusalem Temple learned new ways to approach God without sacrifice. In other words they learned to pray in the small groups that gathered together in exile, as in Ezekiel's *miqdash meat* (11:16), or "little temple," or the "dwelling place" (*meon*) of Psalm 90:1.¹ Later rabbinic tradition understood Ezekiel's "little temple" as referring to the beginnings of the synagogue (*b. Meg.* 29a). In antiquity, however, the common view was that Moses invented the synagogue, a view supported by Philo (*On the Creation of the World* 128; *The Life of Moses* 2.215–16) and Josephus (*Against Apion* 2.175; *Ant.* 16.43–44). Such a view came to dominate presumably because Moses is credited in the Hebrew Bible with giving the Torah to the people and reading it to them (for example, Exod 24:7; Deut 5:1, 31:11). The association of the reading and interpretation of Scripture with Moses is one of the main factors that led to the centrality of the place of the Bible in the early development of the synagogue in the Second Temple period and even the post-70 synagogue in Galilee, a view already reflected in the Jerusalem Talmud (*y. Meg.* 75a).²

An important variant on the idea that the synagogue emerged after the destruction of the Temple in 587 B.C.E. is the one that associates the early synagogue with the city gate, some even pushing the idea back to the pre-exilic era.³ As the place for conducting important decision making, rendering judgments, reading Scripture, and proclaiming laws (Neh 8), the city gate's importance cannot be overstated. But it seems to us that positing the city gate as the main reason for the creation of the "early" synagogue rather explains how the Torah came to be associated with certain communal activities but not



necessarily with what we might call worship. The septennial reading of Scripture on Sukkoth when certain rituals were performed (Deut 31:9–13), the reading of and interpretation of the Law when Ezra read it also on Sukkoth (Neh 8), and the reading of the Law by the priests, Levites, and other officials (2 Chr 11:7–9) quite naturally leads to the conclusion that increasing weight was given to the centrality of Torah in the Second Temple period. As one might expect, such an activity ultimately was reflected in the late Second Temple period in the earliest known synagogues in Palestine where reading of the Torah was essential. Anders Runesson calls the earlier Second Temple examples “village assemblies” and the later Second Temple examples “voluntary associations.”⁴ In respect to the synagogue as a voluntary association he suggests that Jewish society became more decentralized as reading and interpreting the Torah became more essential to non-Temple worship.⁵ The synagogue in ancient Palestine thus emerges quite apart from the central authority of the government, and after the corpus of authoritative scriptures had taken its more or less fixed form except for the Kethubim, or Writings. In other words, by late Hellenistic times there would have been a synagogue of the Essenes (Philo, *That Every Good Person Is Free*, 81–82) “where the young sit ranked in rows below the elders,” a synagogue of Freedmen (Acts 6:9), and many others. And we may assume also with Philo (*On the Special Laws* 2.62) that a knowledgeable person would read from Scripture on the Sabbath and with Josephus that in addition to reading from Scripture, study of it was also a central part of Sabbath service (*Against Apion* 1.42; *Ant.* 16.43–45).⁶ As we shall see below, the oldest synagogues from the land of Israel may now be dated to the first century B.C.E.

The Pre-70 C.E. Synagogue in the Diaspora

The situation in the Diaspora is quite different, and the oldest attested buildings outside the land of Israel are in Delos, from the first century B.C.E., and Ostia, Italy, from the first century C.E. In Ptolemaic Egypt and later in Egypt, there are twelve inscriptions and papyri that identify the existence of structures known as *proseuchai*, or synagogues or prayer structures. Runesson suggests that some of them could originally have been temples and only later were identified as

places of worship or *proseuchai*.⁷ Though all are attested in the corpus of Greek inscriptions and papyri from Egypt, their physical remains have mostly never been located, nor have the inscriptions published over half a century ago been rediscovered. Peter Richardson has recently republished much of this inscriptional evidence supplemented by a number of papyri and presented them in a convenient form.⁸ He agrees that the epigraphic data confirm that this corpus refers to synagogues as actual buildings in Egypt even though the archaeological evidence for them is lacking.⁹ Whether the synagogues were once temples or were simple places of worship where a non-Temple liturgy began to emerge earlier than in Palestine, we do not know for certain. The terminology suggests as much, but given the limited nature of the data we cannot speak with authority on the matter in regard to Egypt.

The literary evidence for Diaspora synagogues is very ample and together constitutes yet another database for assessing the Jewish communities there. There is even mention in rabbinic literature of the great synagogue in Alexandria that was of such great size that the leader of worship standing on a raised dais had to lift a kerchief in order to signal the congregants when to respond with the appropriate “amens” and the like.¹⁰ Philo mentions this synagogue as well and calls it the largest and most magnificent one in all Alexandria (*On the Embassy to Gaius* 143). The fact is, however, there is no archaeological attestation for any such kind of building till the much later Byzantine period at Sardis and possibly elsewhere.¹¹

Although it is beyond the scope of this volume to deal with the many mentions in literary sources of synagogues in the Diaspora, we will briefly discuss the two pre-70 C.E. synagogues for which the archaeological evidence is strongest, one in Ostia, near Rome, and the other in Delos, in the Cyclades (fig. 8.1). The Delos synagogue was excavated in the early twentieth century, and only recently has a consensus about it being a synagogue emerged.¹² Probably built in the mid-second century B.C.E., or at the latest a century later, and surviving in the second century C.E., the Delos synagogue is located on an island in the Aegean lying southeast of the Greek mainland. The synagogue is situated on the eastern shore near a residential area and gymnasium, inland from the harbor. L. Michael White has questioned whether the

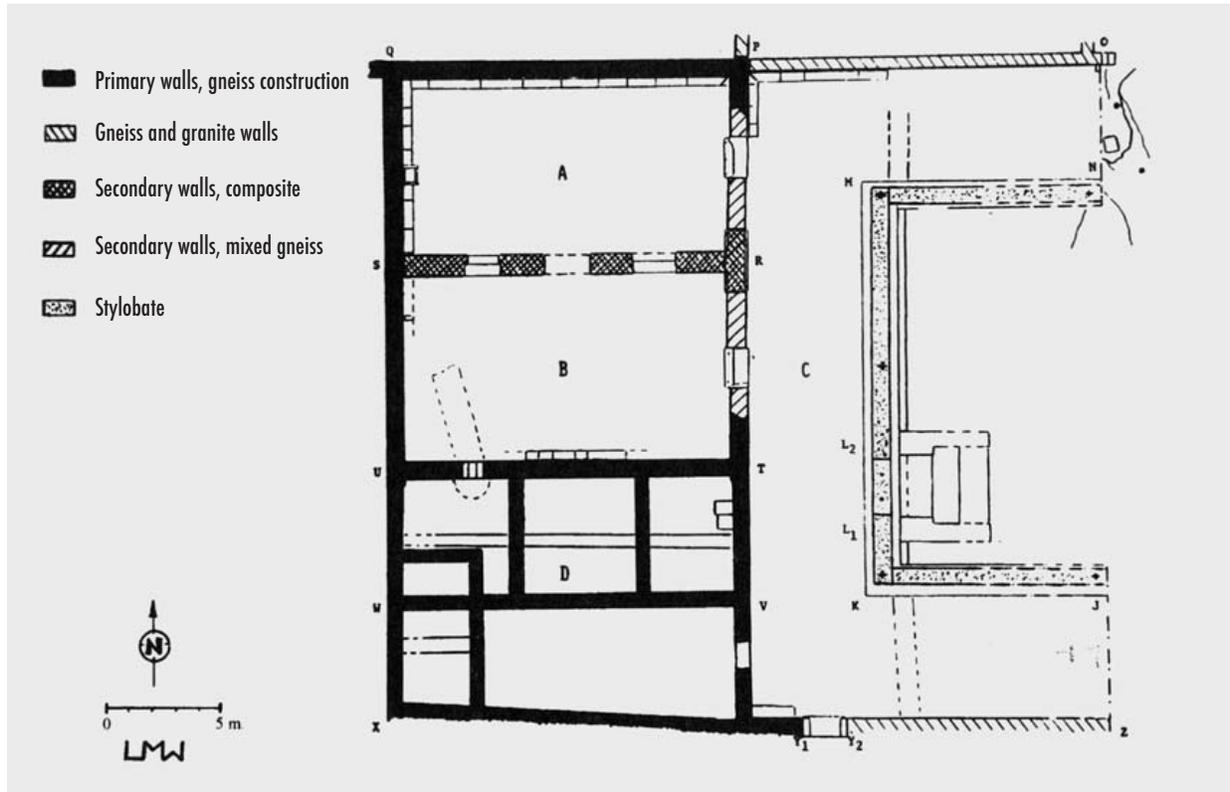


Fig. 8.1. Plan of the synagogue at Delos. Room A functioned as the main assembly hall; benches are marked along two of the room's walls at upper left, with a chair in the middle of the western wall. (From Lee I. Levine, *The Ancient Synagogue*, Yale University Press, 2000)

synagogue was originally built as a synagogue or was rather a house that was later converted to a synagogue, and his view has met with reserved approval by Lee I. Levine.¹³ A strong case for either has been made on the basis of archaeological and epigraphical evidence. There is a marble chair that could possibly be identified with the Seat of Moses for the elder of the congregation; it is oriented east toward Jerusalem; and there is a cistern that may have served as a ritual bath. The inscriptional evidence, however, is even more compelling. There are four inscriptions that mention the most-high God: "Theos Hypsistos." And there is the inscription with the use of the term *proseuche*.¹⁴ The absence of a Torah Shrine should not be a problem since most early synagogues do not have them. Close to the synagogue, some ninety meters north, two additional inscriptions from the third or second century B.C.E. have been recovered that point to the presence of a Samaritan community.¹⁵ Inscribed on marble stelae, the texts contain several inscriptions honoring two benefactors of the community of

Delos, calling themselves Israelites “who make offerings to the sacred Argarizein,” which is taken by most to refer to Mount Gerizim, the sacred mountain of the Samaritans.¹⁶ It is not clear whether the Jews mentioned in Josephus (*Ant.* 14.213–17) are Samaritans or not; and it is not clear that the benefactors refer to fellow Samaritans or to local Gentiles who had contributed to the local Samaritan community.

The building purported to be a synagogue was identified as such by the original excavator, and most descriptions follow that.¹⁷ It has a courtyard to the east, facing the sea (C), and there are three parts to the structure. The southern part (D) contains a series of four or five small rooms that provide access to the cistern or ritual bath; the large middle room (B) has three entrances to it and functioned as the main hall in front of the assembly hall (A), which contained benches on two walls and the carved marble seat already mentioned that faced east. The benches and marble seat—possibly a seat of Moses—facing east are reminiscent of Galilean synagogues and support the identification of the assembly hall as a prayer hall. Although we have rejected the idea that the building was originally a house that was converted to a synagogue in the first century B.C.E., it is still possible that it could have had a secular function in its earliest phases. That it became a synagogue can hardly be doubted any longer, and so it is the earliest by far in the Diaspora.

The synagogue at Ostia, the ancient port of Rome, is one of the most beautiful and most important ones in the Diaspora. Unfortunately, the synagogue that is preserved today dates to the fourth century C.E. and later, and we will have to conjecture whether or not reports of an earlier one beneath it are to be taken as accurate accounts of an earlier structure.¹⁸ Runesson has been very forceful in his argument for a mid-first century C.E. date, and Levine also has endorsed such a view.¹⁹ Dieter Mitternacht has the most complete discussion of the issues that extend to the epigraphical remains as well as a full consideration of the archaeology.²⁰ Since there is no final report on the excavations, and there is ongoing work at the site by White and others, it is not impossible that we will have a more definitive idea in years to come. In any event the floor plan of the synagogue is this: it is 24.9 by 12.5 meters and may have included a *bema*, or raised platform, on the curved western wall and could have also had benches.

Synagogues in the Land of Israel

In turning to the archaeological remains of ancient synagogues in the Land of Israel, we must identify this small corpus as among the most important databases for understanding the rise of early Judaism in relation to the rise of early Christianity. The excavation of synagogues all over the Land of Israel and in the Diaspora, especially those of the late Second Temple period, has produced important results. Pre-70 C.E. Palestinian synagogues have been excavated and/or identified at Masada, Gamla, Herodium, Qiryat Sefer, Modiin, Magdala (Tari-cheae), and possibly Jericho; others are identified in historical literature at Dor, Caesarea, Capernaum, Bethsaida, Nazareth, and elsewhere. Diaspora examples from the first century B.C.E. and C.E. or earlier have been previously noted. Both Palestinian and Diaspora synagogues are mentioned in first-century literary sources, such as Philo and Josephus, and in epigraphic remains such as the Theodotus inscription (fig. 8.2).

We begin this discussion by quoting the inscription in full: “Theodotus, son of Vettenos, priest and *archisynagogos*, son of an archisynagogos and grandson of an archisynagogos, built the synagogue for the reading of the Law and for the teaching of the command-

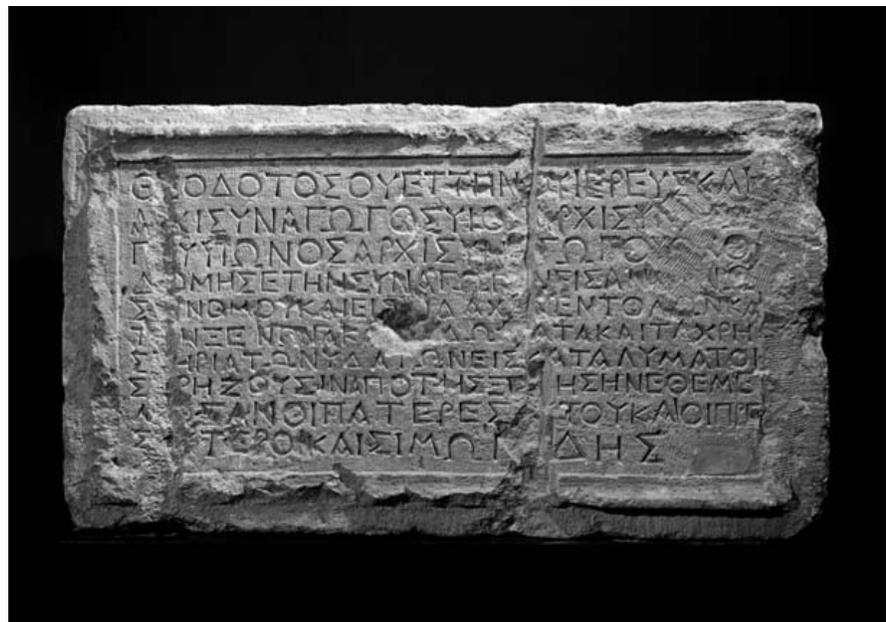
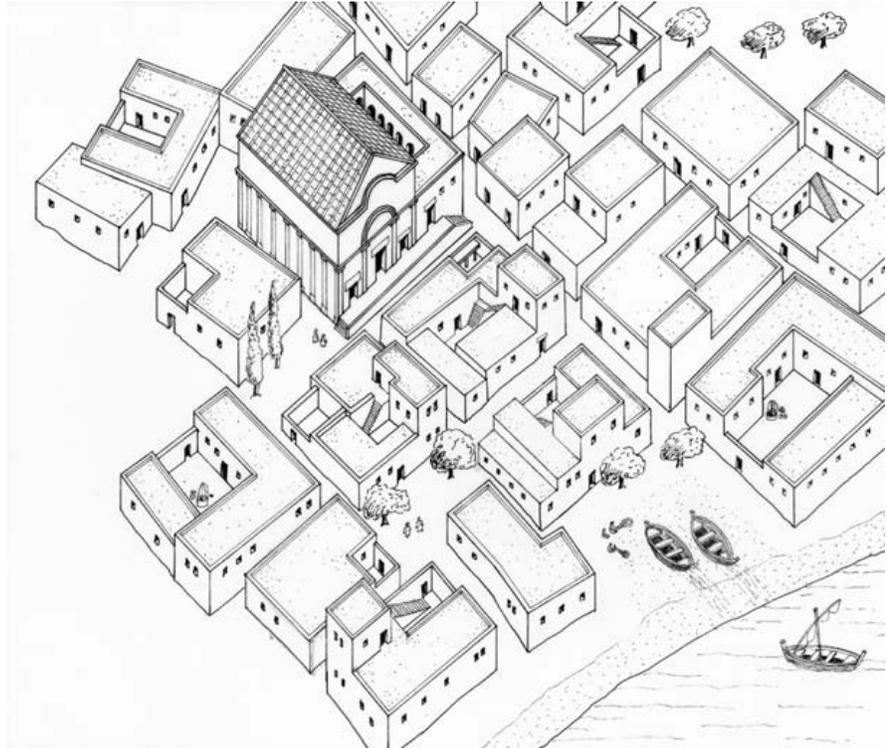


Fig. 8.2. The Theodotus synagogue inscription, Jerusalem (Photo courtesy of the Israel Museum)

ments and [built] the guest-house, and the [other] rooms, and the water fittings [installations?] for the lodging of those in need of it from abroad, [the foundations] of which were laid by his fathers and the elders and Simonides.”²¹ The inscription, which is dated to the first century C.E., points to a number of features that we may clearly associate with the pre-70 synagogue. First we may say that the term “synagogue” is used to indicate both a social grouping (congregation) and a building with special features. Second, the name “Vettenos” would most likely identify the synagogue as a place for Jews who came from Rome.²² Theodotus built it, and his ancestors together with the elders and one Simonides founded it some three generations earlier. In addition the text states that three of the main functions of the pre-70 synagogue were these: the reading of Scripture, studying the commandments of the Torah, and providing hospitality to visitors, many of whom were no doubt pilgrims, but not necessarily for the exclusive use of Theodotus’s own community. Note also the mention of “water installations” or “fittings,” which could possibly refer to a ritual bath, though this is by no means clear. The original excavator who found the inscription, Raymond Weil, noted that it had been recovered from a cistern, and a contemporary excavator, Ronny Reich, has pointed out that there were indeed miqvaot and water installations in the area just north of the cistern in which the inscription was found.²³ The presence of ritual baths and this mention in the Theodotus inscription are very suggestive of a relationship between the synagogue and ritual purity. The repeated use of the term “archisynagogos” for priests might be suggestive of a connection with the Temple, and in light of the frequent mentions of synagogues in the written sources there would not appear to be a problem of synagogues existing while the Temple still stood. However, in light of the frequent use of the term “archisynagogos” in later inscriptions both in Palestine and the Diaspora, it hardly suggests more than the priestly lineage of a well-to-do family of Roman background. The allusion in the last line to an earlier phase of the synagogue or congregation, which would have gone back to the first century B.C.E., is also instructive. Moreover, implicit in the text is also the idea that other sorts of activities would have taken place in the synagogue, such as the meetings of the town council or *boule* in Tiberias (*Life* 277–80), as well as the idea that the synagogue also offered simple hospitality not related to pilgrimage and the like.

Fig. 8.3. Reconstruction of Capernaum synagogue and village at Sea of Galilee. Ritual immersion would have taken place in the nearby lake. (Reconstruction drawing courtesy of Leen Ritmeyer)



Let us begin with examples from Galilee since we have such a solid literary base on which to build. All of the Gospels refer to Jesus' activities in synagogues, preaching, teaching, and healing, most of them in small towns and villages, which suggests that Jesus avoided the urban centers consciously.²⁴ The towns mentioned in the Gospels are Nazareth, Capernaum, Bethsaida, Chorazin, Gennesaret, and Magdala (figs. 8.3, 8.4).²⁵ Among these there are only two possible candidates for pre-70 synagogue buildings and only one for certain.

If the domicile in Capernaum that some identify as Saint Peter's House was indeed a house church in the first century, then it presumably served as a meeting place for Jewish Christians to worship.²⁶ About thirty meters to the north, under the great limestone synagogue that dates to the Byzantine period, are vestiges of earlier structures that are for the most part to be associated with private domiciles. Some of the features like thick basalt walls and a cobblestone pavement found under the nave of the synagogue suggest an earlier structure, which the excavators posit was the original synagogue of Jesus.²⁷ Very few scholars have accepted this view, but it should remain

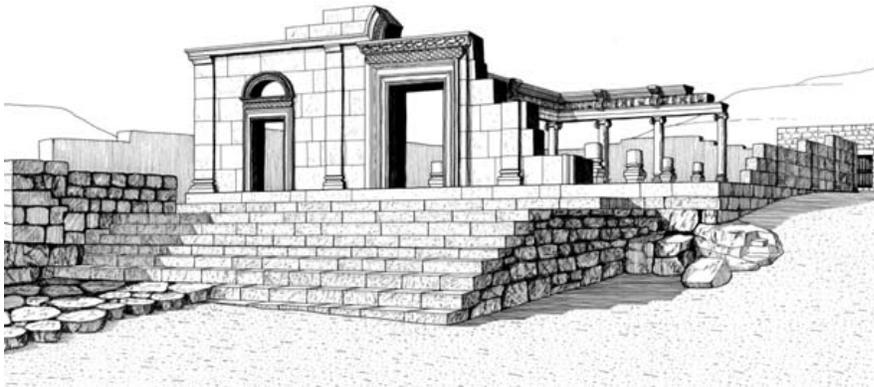


Fig. 8.4. Partial reconstruction of the fourth-century C.E. synagogue at Chorazin, a site mentioned in the New Testament (Mt 11:21; Lk 10:13) (Reconstruction drawing courtesy of Leen Ritmeyer)

a possibility. In any case the precise nature of the proposed synagogue remains unknown.

One of the most stunning surprises in recent years is the discovery of a first-century C.E. synagogue just a few miles south of Capernaum at Magdala, literally on the water's edge of the Sea of Galilee, also known as the Plain of Gennosar. As of this writing no scientific reports have been published, and we are entirely reliant on press releases from the excavators, Dina Avshalom-Gorni and Arfan Najar of the Israel Antiquities Authority and attendance at a public presentation of the discovery at the 2010 American Schools of Oriental Research Convention in Atlanta.²⁸ The site is associated with Mary Magdalene of the New Testament and is identified with the city of Taricheae. The site was apparently destroyed during the First Revolt and completely buried by debris. However, some archaeologists think it may have survived the Great Revolt and was possibly deserted because of flooding or other natural causes. The main hall of the building is 120 square meters and has stone benches built against its walls. The floor was paved with a simple black and white mosaic with meander design in the corners, and the walls were all frescoed with bright colors in the Pompeian style. Early Roman pottery and stone vessels abound, confirming its pre-70 dating, suggestive even of a date in the middle of the first century B.C.E. But the most exciting discovery is a large limestone piece that is engraved on one side with a seven-branched menorah flanked by two amphorae, with rosettes on top and several early Roman lamps depicted on its sides.²⁹ The stone is square and is engraved on the three other sides as well and appears to be a limestone pedestal with a triangular base. The four corners on top

Fig. 8.5. Remains of the synagogue at Gamla (Photo courtesy of Todd Bolen/BiblePlaces.com)



of the piece are worked smoothly, possibly to hold a wooden superstructure. It is our view that the stone served as the base for a readers' platform or table from which the Torah was read. It is situated in the middle or northern interior of the building, which is oriented south toward Jerusalem. The menorah depicted on the stone pedestal is one of a number of examples from the Land of Israel dated to the period of the Second Temple—the first was a graffito depiction of the Temple menorah from the Jewish Quarter excavation.³⁰ The high level of artisanship, the mosaic floor, the oldest in a synagogue, the excellent quality of the frescoes, all suggest a very affluent community though a small one, possibly associated with a priestly family. None of the other synagogues of such an early date can compare to this. Its closeness to the Sea of Galilee mitigates any need to build ritual baths since immersion in the sea, filled with pure water from the headwaters of the Jordan, would have been sufficient. The same holds for Capernaum.

The other northern synagogue of early date and importance to be considered is Gamla (fig. 8.5). Before the discovery of Magdala the Gamla synagogue was considered the earliest in the land of Israel (Judea), dating to the turn of the first century C.E. or slightly earlier.³¹ The synagogue is the largest structure at Gamla and was certainly the main focus of all communal activities, since there is no other comparable building at the entire site. It is built of local black basalt stone.

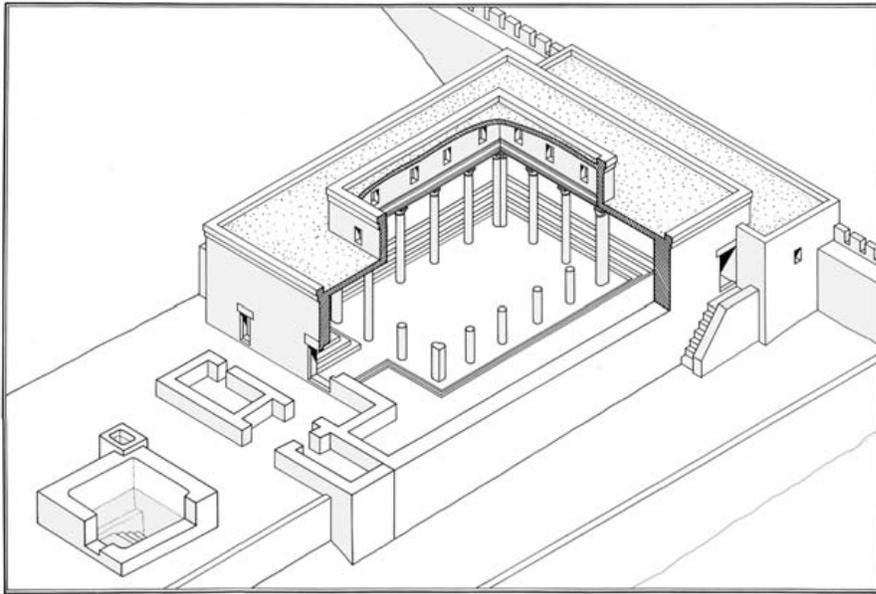


Fig. 8.6. Reconstruction of Gamla synagogue (Reconstruction drawing by Leen Ritmeyer)

Located just inside the eastern perimeter wall of the city, its interior measurements are 13.4 by 9.3 meters. It has three entrances, two on the southwest, one of them leading to the northern aisle, the second leading into the main hall, and one from the east that opens to the east. There is a niche in the northwestern end whose function is unclear. Benches surround the interior on all four sides and there are sixteen interior columns on all sides, though the plan in the Qatzrin Museum in the Golan has eighteen.³² The column drums supporting the roof were all well made and of high-quality workmanship. In each of the corners were columns with heart-shaped sections, composed of two half columns. The capitals all were of the late classical Doric order. Zvi Maoz conjectures that columns should be restored along the Jerusalem-facing entrance as a propyleum or in the center to hold a podium for the reading of Torah, where there is a row of stone pavers in the dirt (?) floor.³³ Having a podium for the reading of Scripture makes good sense in light of the discovery of the synagogue at Magdala, where the carved stone with a menorah could have served as a base for a reader's platform. A stepped cistern just west of the main entrance has been understood as a ritual bath, and a small channel and basin on the eastern aisle may be understood as a place for washing the hands or feet (discussed below in regard to the early synagogue at Nabratein). The synagogue could have held no more than 250 people:

150 on its benches and perhaps another 100 standing or seated on the floor in the center (fig. 8.6).

Turning south to the Judean desert we direct our attention to the well-known Herodian sites of Masada and Herodium (fig. 8.7). As we have seen in a previous chapter, there is some question about whether the synagogue of Masada was a synagogue in Herod's days. With the large retinue of aides, servants, and others that Herod would have had traveling with him, it is quite possible that the building served a sacred function before the turn of the era. But we cannot be certain. We are absolutely certain of its use as a synagogue during the final stage of the site's occupation by the Zealots and Sicarii, from 66–73/4 C.E. The small rectangular structure, 15 by 12 meters, not unlike the size of the Gamla synagogue, has a small room in the northern corner, 5.7 by 3.5 meters, where fragments of scrolls were found including a rolled scroll with portions of the Book of Deuteronomy and chapters from the Book of Ezekiel. There are five internal columns and benches all around that were added in the final phase and plastered over in the rough style of the rooms in the casemate wall. Its main entrance in the east faces toward Jerusalem.³⁴ A ritual bath is located close by.

The situation with the synagogue at Herodium is clearer: it was used as a synagogue only by the rebels and was converted from its

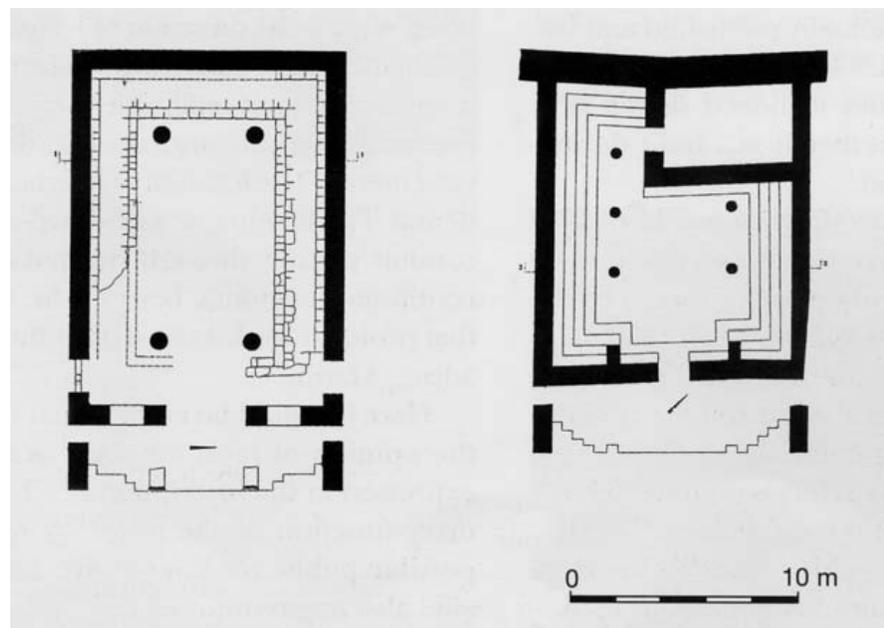


Fig. 8.7. Ground plans of synagogues at Herodium (left) and Masada (Drawings courtesy of the Franciscan Printing Press, Jerusalem)

prior use as a triclinium in Herod's fortress palace.³⁵ The Herodium synagogue is slightly smaller than Masada, at 10.5 by 15 meters. In the conversion from banquet hall to worship space four new columns were added as well as benches, some of which were made from the architectural fragments of Herod's palatial building on site. Like Masada, the Herodium building is oblong, with its interior plain and undecorated. The walls at Herodium retained their original plaster stucco and there was no trace of plaster on the benches. Although there is no small room such as the so-called scroll room at Masada, there is an adjoining room at Herodium that could have served as a repository for scrolls and other objects. A ritual bath is situated along the eastern wall near the door. The main entrance as at Masada is from the east, as in the Temple in Jerusalem, a point emphasized by Gideon Foerster, who says this is to be understood in keeping with later rabbinic literature.³⁶

There are other notable examples of early synagogues in the foothills of Judea and in the upper Shefelah region, including at Qiryat Sefer and Modiin, which have not been fully published but are worth mentioning. There is no consensus on these, but Levine has included Qiryat Sefer (fifteen kilometers east of Lod) in his list of synagogues dated to the first century C.E. or at the latest to the time of Bar Kokhba.³⁷ The square hall measures 9.6 meters on each side and is surrounded by four Doric columns and a wide aisle and is paved with well-fitted flagstones; a gabled lintel was found outside it. The facade is constructed of well-hewn ashlar with margins typical of the Herodian period. There are benches on three sides. Stone vessels and early Roman pottery were found on site. Thus, the synagogue would appear to be the first village synagogue found in Judea. Another candidate to be added to this list is Modiin, or Khirbet Umm el-Umdan, which is located near the Latrun junction in the Judean foothills on the road to Jerusalem and is not published.³⁸ The site, however, has revealed a public structure like the ones at Gamla, Masada, and Herodium, 7 by 12 meters, paved with stone slabs, and with eight columns. A ritual bath was discovered in a room just to the west of the building, which the excavators identify in its first phase as a synagogue and have tentatively dated to the late Hellenistic period, which would possibly make it the oldest synagogue in the Land of Israel.³⁹ The building was enlarged in the Herodian period to an irregular shape measur-

ing 9.5 by 10 by 11.5 by 13.5 meters, with one column removed; many plaster fragments were found on the floor of this phase in red, white, and yellow. An additional phase dating to between the two revolts has also been identified when the flagstone floor was plastered and a small room added at the northeast.⁴⁰ Like Qiryat Sefer this site is also a village synagogue, and most likely coterminous with it. The claim of the oldest synagogue to be found in the Land of Israel was also made by Ehud Netzer, who identified a structure at Jericho as a synagogue and dated it to the mid-first century B.C.E.⁴¹ That building was 16.2 by 11.1 meters, with twelve pillars and benches all around, and a ritual bath nearby.⁴² Netzer's views on this subject have not won any sort of acceptance, and Levine has most recently suggested it might have been part of a villa.⁴³

All of the examples of pre-70 synagogues we have brought forward have miqvaot nearby. Moreover, each reveals its public or communal character rather dramatically. Even as diversity in building plan is a defining characteristic of these synagogues, we can also observe a great commonality among them: square or rectangular buildings with internal columniation, benches for seating, and in several the entrance lies on the east side. Equally important is the fact that they are devoid of artistic decoration and inscriptions, except perhaps for Magdala where the pedestal is rather elaborately decorated. Moreover, unlike later synagogues, none had a Torah Shrine or a bema, though in several cases, as at Magdala and possibly Gamla, there are hints that the Torah was read in the middle of the hall. The question of sacred orientation toward Jerusalem for this small group of pre-70 synagogues is still too unclear to answer, although several do seem to be intentionally oriented to Jerusalem. All of the pre-70 synagogues are lacking specifically religious features, which suggests that they would have served some community functions in addition to gathering for prayer and Torah study.

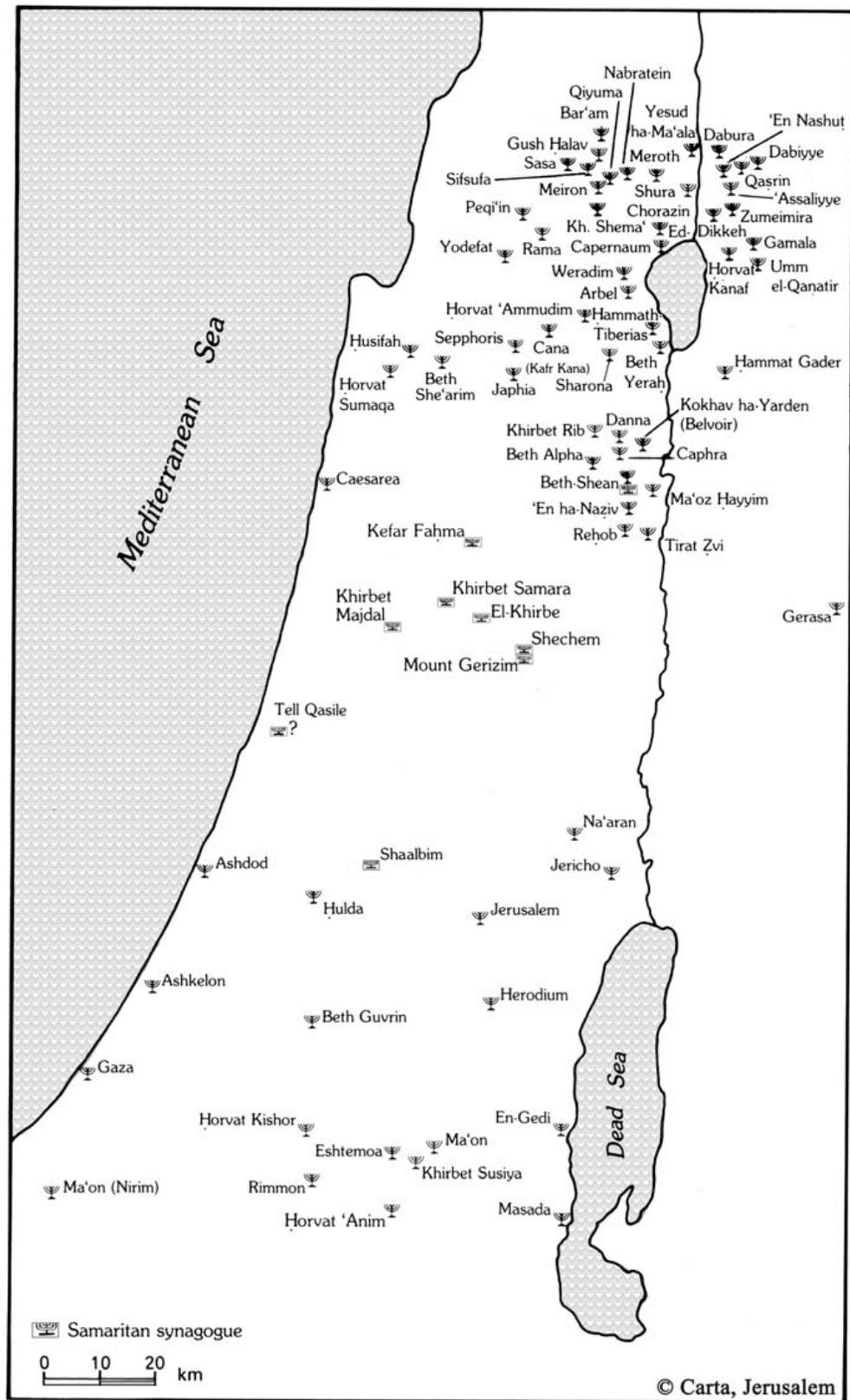
The probability that the earliest synagogues were used for communal purposes in addition to religious ones is supported by the fact that the architectural model for the early synagogue was probably the Hellenistic *bouleuterion* or *ecclesiasterion*, where people assembled to decide matters of civic interest or concern. The actions of Jews on the Sabbath in the Caesarea synagogue, which is not preserved, in 65–66 C.E. on the eve of the Great Revolt concerning their status in that

city, as reported in Josephus (*War* 2.266–70, 284–92; *Ant.* 20.173–78, 182–84), indicates that a political meeting took place there, in a building that also had a religious function. Note also that the New Testament focuses on Jesus’ teaching and preaching in synagogues, as in his Sabbath appearance at the synagogue in Nazareth (Luke 4:16–30), rather than on worship and study; and Torah reading is also the emphasis in regard to Paul’s experience in the Diaspora (Acts 13:14–15, 15:21).⁴⁴ In addition, the Theodotus inscription informs us not only about the religious-educational nature of the early synagogue but also about its social and communal functions, such as a hospice or inn, as well as about its priestly and administrative leadership. Clearly, the emergence of the synagogue in various locations and diverse forms signified the growing decentralization of Jewish life at this time, even though Herod’s rebuilding of the Temple and his expansion of its priestly precincts would underscore the centrality of the holy city and its Temple as well as its unique importance in Jewish liturgy. The irony of the synagogue’s development at a time when the Second Temple served as the most important symbol of Jewish religion cannot be overstated. On one hand the emergence of the pre-70 synagogue signifies diversity and decentralization, and on the other hand the Temple signifies uniformity and centralization. Nonetheless, the reality by the end of the Second Temple period was that the synagogue was already a pivotal institution among most Jewish communities and proved to be a key to the continuity of Jewish life after 70.⁴⁵

The Post-70 C.E. Synagogue

After the destruction of the Temple in 70 C.E., the synagogue became the central communal and religious institution of the Jewish community, reconstituted mainly in Galilee (fig. 8.8). Because of the relative paucity of archaeological evidence for synagogues in the pre-70 period, a brief glimpse of the synagogue in the later periods of the Roman era is in order, for not all aspects of the developing synagogue were present in its early precursors.⁴⁶ Indeed, it is only after 70 C.E. that its specifically religious character appears in the archaeological record. Levine has raised the issue of the scarcity of synagogue remains from 70 C.E. to 250 C.E., calling it a gap of some two hundred years.⁴⁷ While admitting that there are abundant literary sources for

Fig. 8.8. Locations of ancient synagogue remains uncovered in Israel. Many of the structures shown on this map are preserved only in their post-Roman states; as can be seen here, they tend to be concentrated in the north, in the Galilee and Golan, where the vast majority of Jews settled after the two wars with Rome. (Map prepared by Carta, Israel Map and Publishing Company, Ltd.)



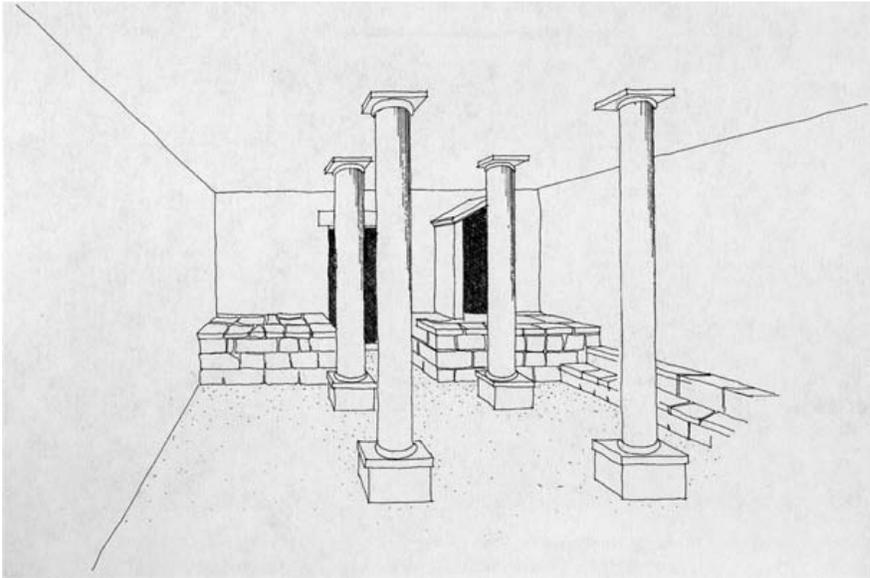


Fig. 8.9. Reconstruction drawing of the interior of a second-century synagogue at Nabratein (Nevoraiah), showing a bema with Torah Shrine at back right (Photo courtesy of Eric and Carol Meyers)

physical structures from this period in the tannaitic, or pre-200 C.E., rabbinic literature, he is hesitant to draw too many conclusions about the emergence of the post-70 synagogue in view of the limited archaeological evidence.⁴⁸ Although we freely admit that there is a scarcity of evidence for the early-Roman-period synagogue, we do not want to draw any major historical inferences from this as do others, as seen, for example, in the influential suggestion that Judaism was adrift after the two wars with Rome and only in response to the rise of imperial Christianity did the Jewish community get hold of itself and begin to build synagogues in any significant numbers.⁴⁹

At Nabratein in Upper Galilee, rabbinic Nevoraia, for example, we have one of the earliest post-70 Galilean synagogues, circa 135–250 C.E., Synagogue I, which dates to the second century C.E. and has the earliest bema and possible Torah Shrine; we would not be surprised for other examples from this period to turn up in future excavations and surveys (fig. 8.9). The bema on the southern wall of the Nabratein synagogue clearly indicates the orientation of the building to Jerusalem. Although Jerusalem was no longer a Jewish city at this time, its conceptual significance as the Holy City and thus the focus of worship continued and increased as manifested in the architectural principle of sacred orientation.⁵⁰ (See plate II.)

Another early synagogue has been identified at the site of Hor-

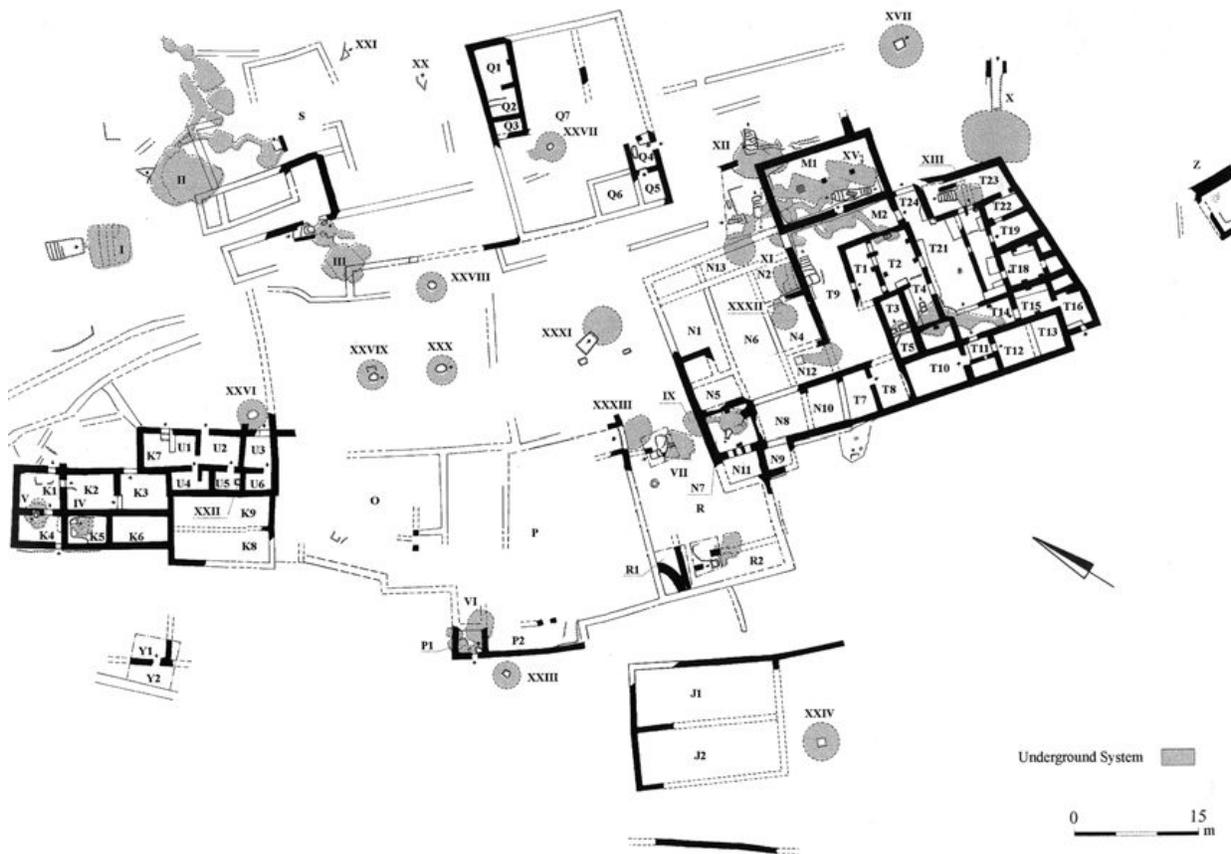
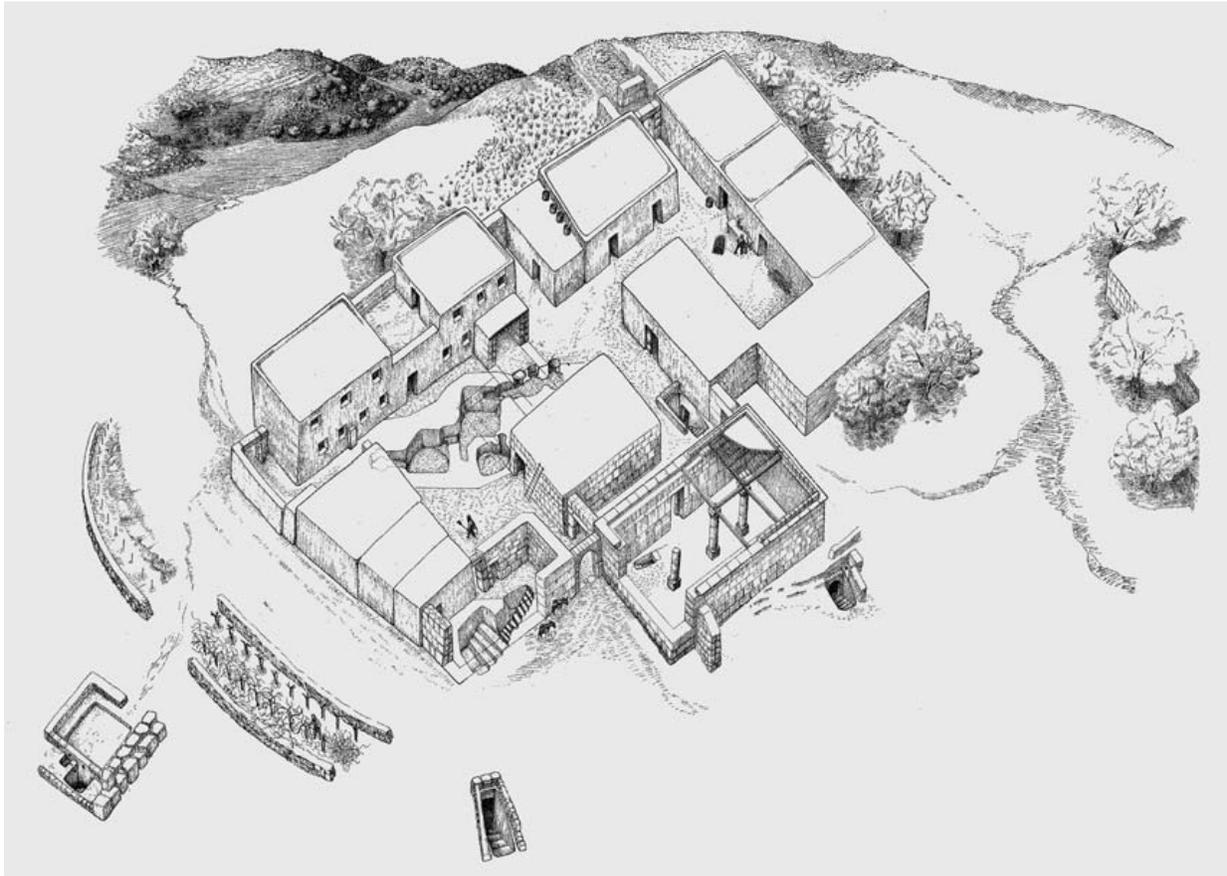


Fig. 8.10. Plan of the village of Horvat Ethri. The synagogue was located at M1, in upper right, with ritual baths near it at XV and T23. (Plan courtesy of Boaz Zissu with V. Essman, S. Pirsky, N. Zak)

vat Ethri, located in the upper Shefelah, roughly thirty-five kilometers southwest of Jerusalem, which may be identified with a village mentioned in Josephus, *Caphetra* (*War* 4.552–54) that was destroyed in 69 C.E. by the Fifth Legion (fig. 8.10).⁵¹ The structure that has been identified as a synagogue is thirteen by seven meters and is a broad-house in plan entered from one of the long walls. Three columns are located across the width of the hall to hold the ceiling. In front of the entrance is a courtyard with a ritual bath off to the side. The structure is very similar to the village synagogues described above in the section on pre-70 evidence. Though lacking in any definitive feature that we might identify with synagogues, which is the case with most of our examples, the site is still an excellent candidate for a synagogue that dates to the interwar period (fig. 8.11).⁵²

Levine suggests that it was the chaos created by the two wars with Rome that possibly contributed to the destruction or demise of



Second Temple synagogues. That the earlier synagogues were of a different sort from the later, post-70 synagogues is a point we have already made and will emphasize in our presentation of the later data. The internal furnishings and plans of those later synagogues from the third and fourth centuries, and even later, suggest that at that time there was a greater emphasis on the idea of holiness taken from the Temple and less of an emphasis on the communal character of the synagogue. In support of his notion that the two wars wreaked havoc on the land and the people, Levine cites the *Chronicle* of Malalas, which records that Vespasian destroyed a synagogue at Daphne and replaced it with a theater, inscribing on it “from the spoils of Judaea” and doing the same with a synagogue at Caesarea.⁵³ We may also add to this the possible destruction of a synagogue in Tiberias and Alexandria, and the aftermath of the Hadrianic persecutions a bit later; and we are not hard-pressed to find many other examples of the difficulties Jews

Fig. 8.11. Reconstruction drawing of Horvat Ethri, featuring the synagogue at right foreground with columns inside (Reconstruction drawing courtesy of Boaz Zissu with V. Essman, S. Pirsky, N. Zak)

faced after 70 C.E.⁵⁴ The problem is that we do not have much material evidence for many of these claims, and the literary traditions that report some of these events are not always reliable, something Levine readily admits. At the same time we must emphasize the existence of many early rabbinic (tannaitic) sources, which presuppose the reality of the synagogue as architectural entity in the second and third centuries C.E.⁵⁵

The second explanation Levine advances for the so-called archaeological gap is the possibility that the synagogue at this early stage of development was a *domus ecclesiae*, or a space in a private home akin to a house-church, which would make it very difficult to identify in a material context, a point we have briefly explained above. Levine dismisses this explanation in the following way: the Palestinian synagogue in the pre-70 era was a communal structure and separate edifice with columns and benches on four sides as at Masada and Gamla, and judging from the Theodotus inscription was a building that could be so identified because of its individual construction. But even though the pre-70 evidence illustrates a number of common features among the examples we have provided, the diversity of buildings and ground plans among the Judean synagogues may also be noted. Some of that diversity can be attributed to the fact that many Jerusalem synagogues were built by Jews who originated in the Diaspora. Levine freely admits, however, that the pre-70 synagogue building could well have survived into the next centuries, since the tannaitic sources for it are so rich and incontrovertible. Both types of synagogues—the *domus ecclesiae*, or “house-synagogue,” and the smaller, village types with columns similar to Synagogue 1 at Nabratein or one like Modiin or its neighbors—could easily have existed side by side in the early post-70 era. Indeed, as advisers to Nazareth Village, Levine and Meyers agreed to such a structure being built at Nazareth among the Roman-period ruins, representing as it were the kind of synagogue that Jesus and his early followers would have known there.⁵⁶

Levine also offers an archaeological explanation for justifying the possibility of a two-century gap in the Palestinian synagogue. Because so many new synagogues were constructed in the late Roman and Byzantine periods, it is not surprising that earlier materials could easily have been discarded during a renovation or building stage. This was certainly the case in Jerusalem, not necessarily in respect to syna-

gogues alone. Herodian construction obliterated much of the earlier phases of occupation in many places. This was especially true where bedrock rises high and is utilized in the later building phase(s). At Khirbet Shema in Upper Galilee, for example, the oldest preserved synagogue is built over a series of bedrock structures and underground cavities that had to be filled in and leveled off in order to build anything over them (fig. 8.12). In the process of constructing the first synagogue building on the site, those structures and their surrounding contexts were virtually erased, leaving it most difficult to reconstruct with any degree of certainty the nature of the earlier materials except for sealed pockets here and there.⁵⁷ Looking at the two east-west walls of the later synagogue and the fact that there are abutments in key places, it is possible to conjecture that a house was there before the building of the first synagogue; but it is also possible that there was only a ritual bath, which survives in the southeastern quadrant. In any case, the extensive building operations in the third century made it most difficult to reconstruct fully what the area looked like before. A similar situation existed at Nabratein where cavities in bedrock, underground chambers, and tunnels had to be sealed up when Synagogue 1 was constructed. No doubt these chambers and tunnels had a function, but whatever it was is difficult to recover since the first synagogue and other structures come from a variety of periods and make it nearly impossible to reconstruct the picture of how things looked

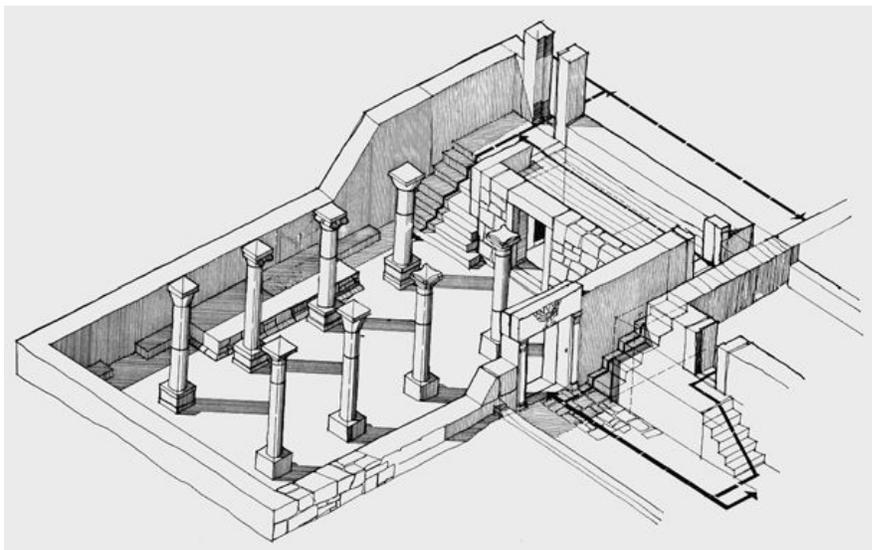
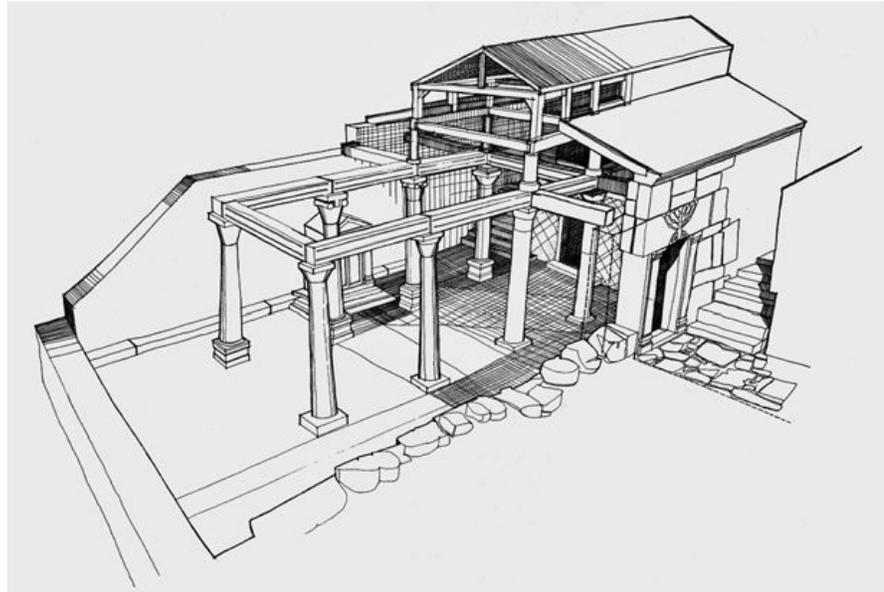


Fig. 8.12. Isometric drawing of Khirbet Shema with traffic patterns (Plan courtesy of Eric Meyers)

Fig. 8.13. Perspective drawing of Khirbet Shema synagogue. The Torah Shrine appears at left in pre-bema stage, and there is a menorah carved on a lintel at right. (Drawing courtesy of Eric Meyers)



right after 70 C.E. So, Levine has a very strong point in this line of reasoning, and we believe the accidental nature of the survival of Synagogue 1 (second to third century) at Nabratein makes such an explanation more plausible.

Levine goes on to advance the well-known theory of how the Palestinian synagogue took on more and more of the holiness and sanctity of the Jerusalem Temple in the course of time. One of the features of the later third-century Galilean synagogues that he points to is the sacred orientation, directing prayer to the wall facing Jerusalem.⁵⁸ With their interiors oriented toward the holy city and three rows of columns, it was the southern wall facing Jerusalem that had no columns that was dubbed the “Jerusalem wall” of orientation. Often such synagogues would have a bema and Torah Shrine to accentuate the importance of the southern wall of orientation, which was the case at Khirbet Shema (fig. 8.13) and Gush Halav (fig. 8.14), and each of the synagogues at Nabratein.⁵⁹ In the case of Nabratein, however, we may associate this pattern with the earliest phase of all its synagogues, which is why the presentation of Synagogue 1 is offered in such detail in the final publication. If we succeed in making our case for the earliest phase of Nabratein, then we may say with a good degree of conviction that the post-70 synagogue assumed these distinguishing features, namely sacred orientation and a Torah Shrine with or with-

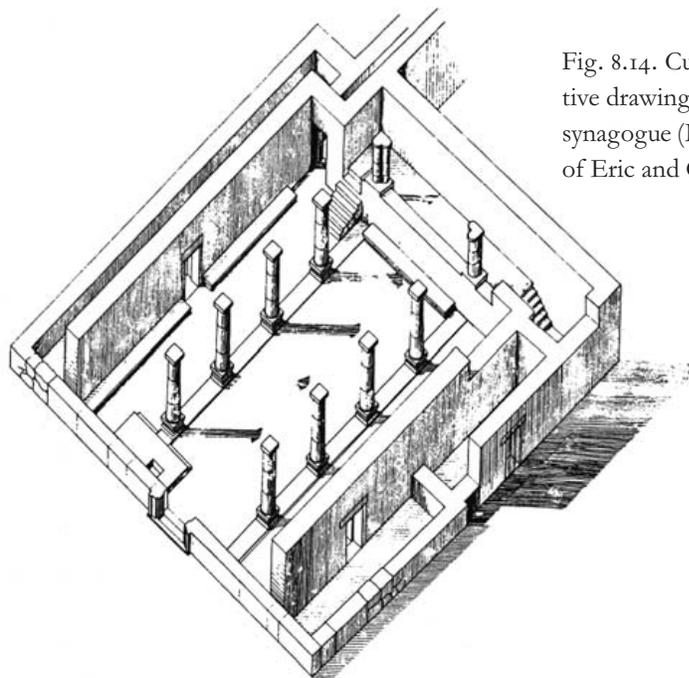
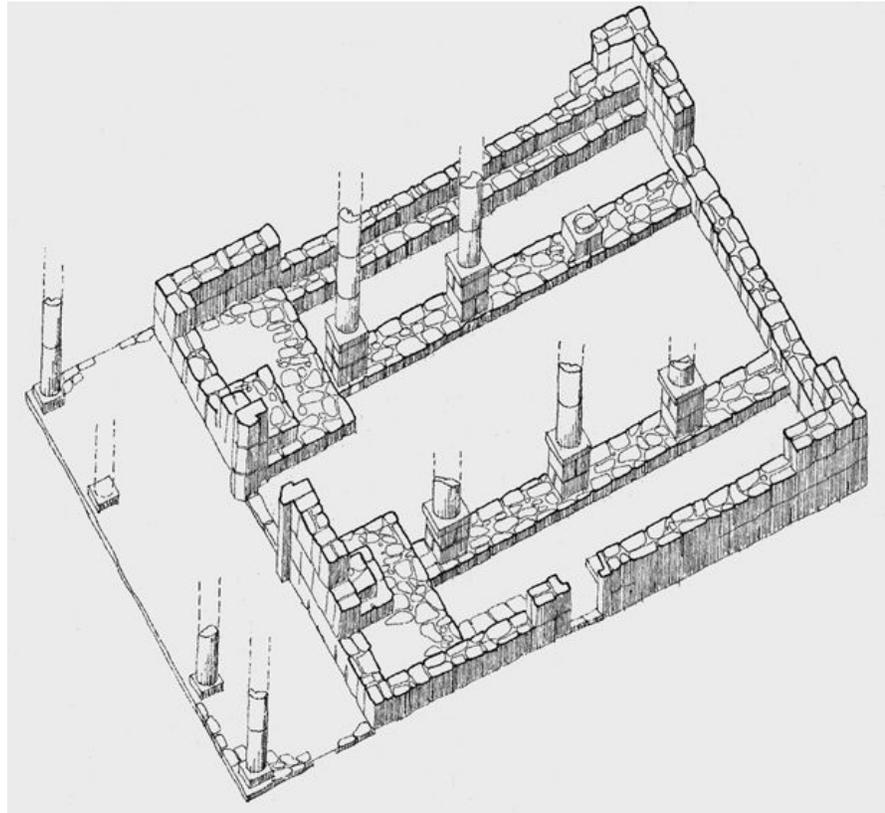


Fig. 8.14. Cutaway perspective drawing of Gush Halav synagogue (Drawing courtesy of Eric and Carol Meyers)

out bema, soon after the two wars with Rome and not later, as Levine was inclined to believe when he wrote his influential book on the history of the synagogue in 2000. This would also support the view that the post-70 synagogue assumed more and more of the sanctity of the Temple at a very early stage when the liturgy of the synagogue was taking final shape. Such a view challenges the consensus that only in the third century or later did the synagogue assume that sanctity.

In regard to Synagogue 1 at Nabratein let us point out also that its measurements as a broadhouse, 11.2 by 9.35 meters, reflect the design pattern and unit of measurement of the standard Roman *pes*, or foot.⁶⁰ In addition Doron Chen has noted that the proportion of 4:3 indicates a use of the Pythagorean triangle (3:4:5), which was regularly utilized in antiquity for laying out angles on the ground. If he is correct this would imply that the builders of the first public building at Nabratein employed well-known classical standards and measurements in their work, indicating that the process of Romanization was already at work deep in the heart of rural Upper Galilee in the second century C.E. When the designers made the next phases of the building basilical in layout, Synagogue 2, third to fourth century C.E., with six columns, and Synagogue 3, sixth to seventh century C.E., with eight columns, we may observe the continuing influence of classical architectural style on the local architecture in the Roman East (fig. 8.15).

Fig. 8.15. Late-Roman synagogue at Nabratein (Nevo-raiah), with two bemas on south wall (Photo courtesy of Eric and Carol Meyers)



In contrast to the earlier Second Temple synagogues, an important feature of the post-70 synagogue is that its dominant plan is the Roman basilica, though as noted Synagogue 1 at Nabratein was a broadhouse. The choice of the basilical form in the first centuries C.E. is another indication, in addition to what we have already mentioned, that many Jews found features of Greco-Roman culture congenial. Yet they did not always relinquish their indigenous architectural traditions and forms. The fascinating case of the third- to fifth-century synagogue at Khirbet Shema illuminates this point as well. Khirbet Shema, like Eshtemoa and Susiya in the south, is a broadhouse structure like Nabratein Synagogue 1, as were many temples in the Semitic world; its bema, or focus of worship, is on the long, Jerusalem-oriented wall (fig. 8.16). Yet, with its characteristic columniation, and when viewed looking east–west rather than to the south, it appears basilical. It thus exhibits a mixed or hybrid architectural type—its classical basilical features are derived from Roman building types and its broadroom plan represents an indigenous form that echoes Canaanite prototypes.

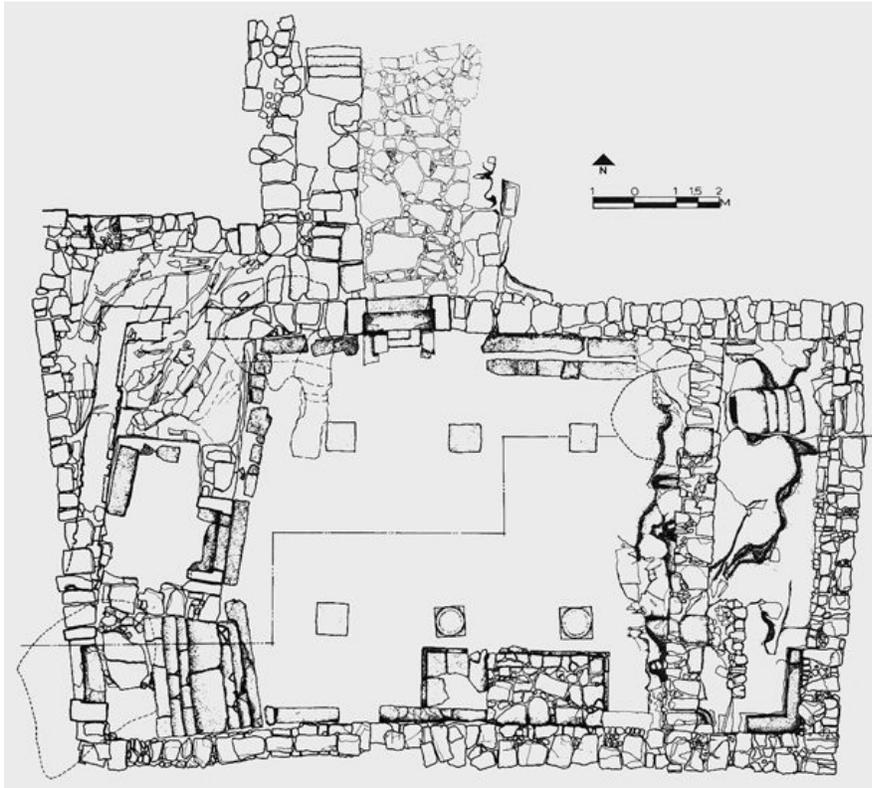


Fig. 8.16. Ground plan of the synagogue at Khirbet Shema with ritual bath detailed at right (Drawing courtesy of Eric Meyers)

This combination of plans meant that the Holy Ark, or Torah Shrine, if placed on the bema of the long southern wall, could not be seen from all directions because the many columns along the main sight lines blocked it. The Khirbet Shema synagogue, although later than the first or second century, is an indication of the creative response of Palestinian Jews to Greco-Roman culture and Hellenistic influence in the rabbinic period. (See plate 12.)

We would add that the Torah Shrine as the focus of worship in late Roman and Byzantine synagogues is likely modeled after the pagan aedicule. An excellent example is the oldest extant Torah Shrine, perhaps the best one in all the Land of Israel, from the late Roman synagogue at Nabratein, Synagogue 2a (fig. 8.17). Its elaborate construction on a raised bema, with columns and rampant lions as well as a place for a chain to hold the Eternal Light, indicates how even more important Scripture had become in the life of the Jewish people at the time when the Mishnah was edited and the canon of the Hebrew Bible was coming to a close.⁶¹ The Torah Shrine after all is a kind of perma-

Fig. 8.17. Interior view, looking south, of a late-Roman synagogue at Nabratein built as a six-column basilica. The Torah shrine is at right. (Drawing courtesy of Eric and Carol Meyers)

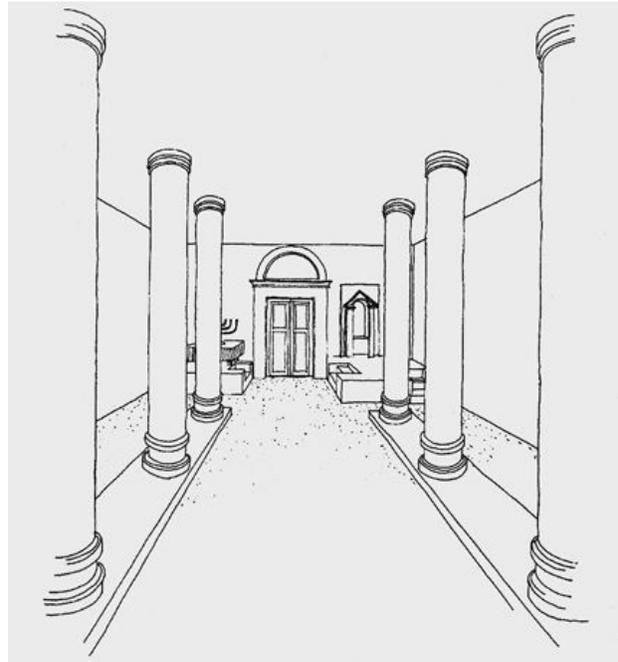
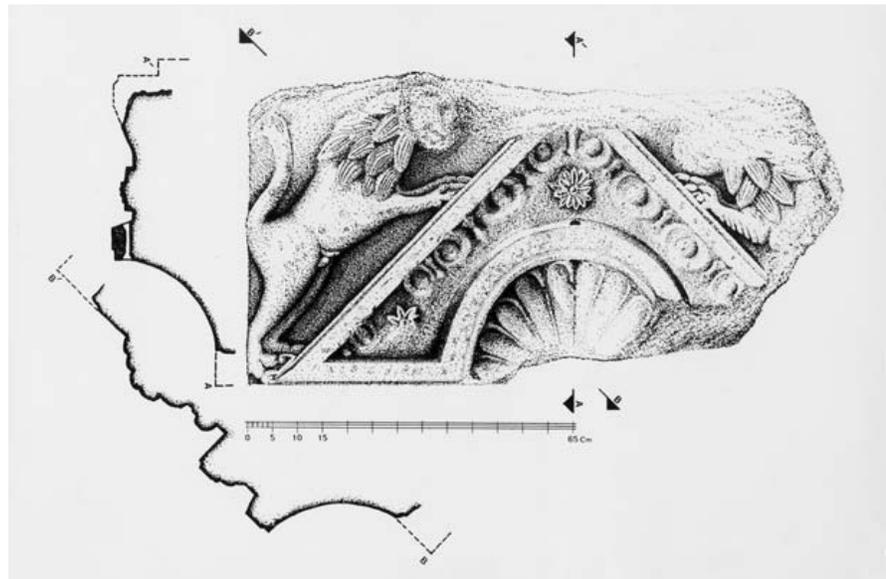


Fig. 8.18. Pediment of Torah Shrine from Nabratein, third century C.E. (Drawing courtesy of Eric and Carol Meyers)



ment house for the Hebrew Bible, and its elevated place on a bema and decoration give visual testimony to its sacrality and centrality in Jewish worship (fig. 8.18).

Another feature of the developing synagogue, known from ancient art, is the fact that the Torah was read in the rolled “scroll” form. This may mean that by the third century the synagogue as a Jewish place of worship differed from the places where the first Christians

prayed—for the Christians read from their new sacred books in the form of a codex, according to the evidence from ancient mosaics and frescoes. However, Christianity in the east was still in the formative stages in the first centuries C.E., as indicated by the absence of a distinct symbolic vocabulary and of any structures that can be identified as having been purposely built as churches. Roman-period synagogues and churches probably looked much the same except for the Torah Shrine and bema in synagogues and the use of the codex rather than scrolls in Christian worship.⁶²

With the establishment of the synagogue as the true successor to the Jerusalem Temple, Judaism's ability to move away from the sacred center was made the more possible and easier. Whereas before 70 C.E. there was only scattered evidence for Jewish worship, after 70 we may conjecture that as the liturgy developed and the tractates of the Mishnah and texts of other contemporary writings (for example, the tannaitic midrashim) were written down, there was hardly a place where Jews settled in which we could not imagine a communal gathering place where Torah was read and interpreted and the emerging liturgy recited or chanted. Even though the material evidence for synagogues is somewhat limited, we need not conclude that the two centuries after 70 C.E. were devoid of an appropriate physical setting in which the liturgy could be chanted, the Torah read and interpreted, and communal meetings held. The rise of imperial Christianity after Constantine the Great gave a second impetus to local communities to strengthen their ties to the traditions of the past and to develop new ones in the face of a daughter religion that now became the official religion in the East. All this is to say that the synagogue early on became the major vehicle for allowing Jewish tradition to move and reinvent itself with relative ease. The synagogue, thus, became the place where Jews could worship God wherever they may find God, in the Land of Israel or in the Diaspora, in private houses, elaborate basilicas, or hybrid buildings in which a quorum would gather for prayer and reading the Torah.

It is not surprising then that we believe there was an important stage in the evolution of the synagogue as a purpose-built structure in the two centuries after 70 C.E. Nor do we find compelling recent arguments for the late dating of Galilean synagogues to the Byzantine period, in the light of both material and literary evidence.⁶³ There is literally no other institution in the history of the Jewish people that



Fig. 8.19. Remains of Khirbet Hamam synagogue, just north of Tiberias and west of the Sea of Galilee, dated to the late Roman period (Photo courtesy of Uzi Leibner)

has exerted such an important influence on Jewish civilization as the synagogue, and much of its liturgy has been dated to precisely this period; moreover, it has influenced the development of the church and mosque in their own distinct ways. In general it may be said that the synagogue was less decorated with art and sculpture in the earlier periods and devoid of colorful mosaics and figural art, but this may be pure happenstance. The rabbis were very much at home with art throughout the Roman period, and Nabratein in particular in the Roman period has a full range of relief sculptures both inside and outside the synagogues there.⁶⁴ The most famous ones are the pair of rampant lions that stood astride the pediment of the Torah Shrine in the second half of the third century C.E., giving a sense of power and authority to the Hebrew scrolls of the Bible housed in the Torah Shrine below. By the Byzantine period, when a ban was imposed against building new synagogues, greater emphasis was placed on the interior of buildings and on repairing old buildings. We find many decorated with colorful

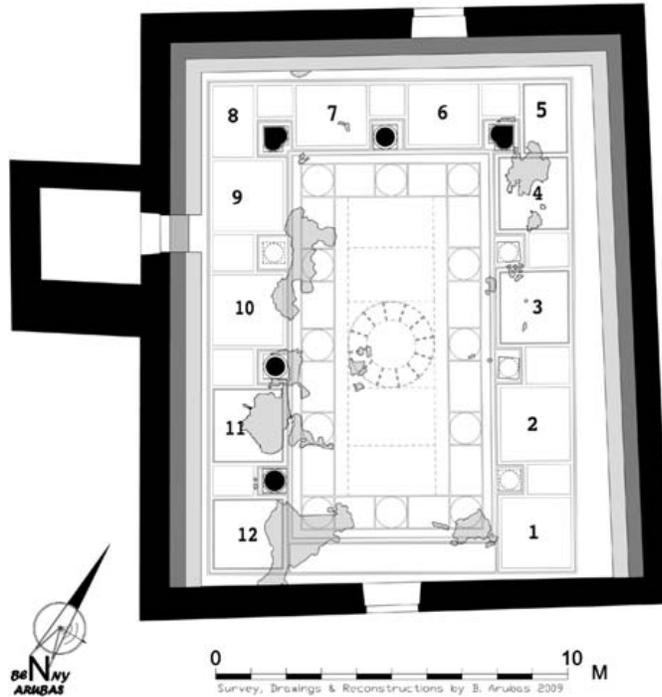


Fig. 8.20. Plan of Khirbet Hamam synagogue with diagram of mosaic (Drawing courtesy of Uzi Leibner)

mosaics, including a number with the zodiac as the central theme, as at Tiberias, Sepphoris, Beth Alpha, and other places (fig. 8.19).

The recent excavations of Uzi Leibner at the Wadi Hamam synagogue in eastern Galilee, however, suggest that decorated mosaics on synagogue floors were introduced in the Roman period, either at the end of the third century or a bit later (fig. 8.20).⁶⁵ This goes along well with the excavation and publication of the Dionysos Mansion and mosaic at Sepphoris, which dates to the third century and is contemporary with the residency there of Rabbi Judah the Patriarch, who was responsible for the redaction and publication of the Mishnah and related writings at the beginning of the third century C.E.⁶⁶ The overwhelming majority of decorated synagogue mosaics, however, may be dated to the Byzantine period, or late fourth, fifth, and sixth centuries, the reasons for which lie beyond the scope of this volume.⁶⁷ It should be noted in brief that Zeev Weiss and Rina Talgam, who wrote the report on the Dionysos mosaic at Sepphoris, do not agree on who was the owner of the mansion let alone who was responsible for the commissioning of the mosaic. Since the mansion is on the edge of the Jewish sector of the western summit, it is unlikely that it could have been owned or inhabited solely by Gentiles during the



Fig. 8.21. Portions of mosaic from the Khirbet Hamam synagogue, late Roman period, including a battle scene (at left), and a construction scene (Photo courtesy of Uzi Leibner)

third century C.E. (a fuller discussion of this issue appears in Chapter 10). Indeed, there is no reason to dismiss the idea that the mansion could have been a place where the municipal council, or *boule*, met, a body integrating Jews and Gentiles in decision making as it may have affected the life of the city.⁶⁸ Indeed, the Jewish council members in the time of Rabbi Judah the Patriarch are called *boulevtim*, derived from the Greek word for council.⁶⁹ The mosaic at the Khirbet Hamam synagogue, depicting workers and artisans and possibly biblical themes, has also challenged many older views about the date when elaborate mosaics were included in the decorative design of synagogues. Heretofore the consensus was that synagogue mosaic art originated only in the late fourth century and later.⁷⁰ If Uzi Leibner is correct in his dating of the mosaic and synagogue, and we must await final publication of the finds, not only will the dating of the so-called synagogue be less of an issue, but the date for the beginning of mosaic art with narrative themes from the Bible will be lowered by a significant degree, a century or more (fig. 8.21).⁷¹

This is only to say that the study of the ancient synagogue today finds itself in a dynamic phase that will surely go on for some time. With renewed excavations being conducted at Taricheae (Magdala), which produced the remarkable first-century synagogue, and at Horvat Kur and Huqoq in the same vicinity, much new information is coming to light about the material culture of eastern Galilee, which will help us better understand what was happening between Jews and Christians at a critical time in the history of both traditions.

The absence of an artistic vocabulary for material culture in the Christian tradition until after Constantine, however, makes this quest very difficult.⁷² We saw the earliest evidence for Christian worship places in the preceding chapter, but neither at Capernaum nor near Megiddo in the Kefar Othnay room do any of the spaces have the cross in them.

Purity Concerns: Before and After 70 C.E.

The association of ritual baths and handwashing with purity concerns is an issue of long standing that has surfaced regularly in relation to the analysis of the ancient synagogue and the dispersion of the Jewish people into new lands after the destruction of the Temple in 70 C.E. Recent discussions of purity in relation to the existence of miqvaot in different contexts besides proximity to synagogues, such as in agricultural, industrial, and domestic settings, with a chronological range of about 200 B.C.E. to 600 C.E., have led to a new appreciation for the phenomenon of “non-priestly purity.” This practice has to do with eating ordinary food in a state of purity and has been extended to the realm of prayer and reading the Torah, first by Gedaliah Alon and most recently by Eyal Regev.⁷³ Eating food in a state of purity is also known by the expression “table fellowship” and has been associated with the Pharisees and their Bible study groups known as “havurot.” Such a concern also touches upon the most intimate matters between a man and a woman but also extends to areas of daily interaction of a nonsexual kind. Interest in this subject has also been renewed because the number of known ritual baths from the land of Israel has doubled in the past decade, from 300 to more than 850 today, and that number will surely keep rising as new excavations are conducted and new construction leads to the discovery of new sites.⁷⁴ In addition, as more and more stone vessels have turned up in excavations of sites from all over the country greater attention has been given to the reason for their occurrence and their association with ritual baths as well.

The oldest literary mentions of non-priestly defilement go back to the late Hellenistic period (first half of the second century B.C.E.) and are found in the Apocrypha. Tobit (2:9) purifies himself after burying his fellow countryman’s corpse, and after leaving Holofernes’s camp Judith purifies herself of Gentile uncleanness before praying for divine guidance (12:6–10). Similarly, the practice of prayer demand-

ing some form of ritual purity occurs in Pseudo-Aristeas (305–6) and the Third Sibylline Oracle (591–93), which mentions handwashing in the sea as a means of purification, and we have seen several examples of possible features in the early synagogues (Gamla and Delos). As Susan Haber puts it: “In the Diaspora ritual ablutions took the form of sprinkling, splashing, or hand washing.”⁷⁵ The cisterns and baths found at numerous sites, however, cannot be definitively understood in this way. Haber believes that in the Land of Israel even though the use of stone vessels was widespread, defilement according to biblical standards required total immersion, a suggestion that is rejected by Regev and many others if we are thinking about non-priestly purity practices. The fact that there are so many ritual baths near synagogues does not necessarily mean that ordinary worshipers would bathe adjacent to the synagogue before prayer, following the practice associated with going up to the Temple as pilgrims, in which no one could enter the Temple precincts in a state of impurity (Lev 15:31). Even in one of the smallest synagogues, say for 100–150 souls, it would take hours for the congregation to assemble and enter the synagogue if they were all required to immerse just before entering. The fact that many of these small communities had several other ritual baths in the village could simply imply that there was a general concern for purity in the community. So, for example, while there is a ritual bath ten meters away from the synagogue at Gamla to the southwest, there are also three other ritual baths in the settlement. The same pattern exists in regard to Masada, where the assembly hall/synagogue used by the rebels in 66–73 C.E. had a ritual bath only fifteen meters to the north and there were three other ritual baths from the same period scattered about the site.

The association of Khirbet Qumran with issues of purity comes from the fact that ten ritual baths were found among the ruins. Furthermore, texts associated with the sect call for regular immersion in pure water, especially the Community Rule. Even the well-known Theodotus inscription mentions that there are “water fittings” associated with the synagogue, though it is not clear whether they are for ritual or hygienic purposes since the synagogue also functioned as an inn of sorts.⁷⁶ Haber calls attention to the water basins found at Gamla and Masada and raises the possibility that they were used for ritual handwashing, which actually supports Regev’s idea of the practice of

non-priestly purity, though in the case of Theodotus it was a priestly synagogue.⁷⁷ In connection to ritual handwashing we might also add the basin found at the Byzantine-period synagogue of Nabratein (Synagogue 3) with a depiction of the Torah Shrine on it, which could have been used for handwashing or footwashing, the latter still being the orthodox practice today when Levites are called to wash the feet of the Cohanim before they deliver the priestly benediction.⁷⁸ In regard to the Diaspora synagogues in the pre-70 era there is simply too little information to draw any concrete conclusions. Nonetheless, washing the hands and sprinkling could well be associated with the known synagogues of Ostia and Delos.

It is logical, therefore, as Regev has assumed in his study, that such an awareness and attention to purity laws cannot be solely related to priests either before or after 70 C.E. In Regev's own words: "those who voluntarily observed purity in order to eat, pray, and read Scripture were seeking holiness in their everyday life."⁷⁹ Achieving a sense of personal sanctity, Regev goes on to say, was an effort of the individual to identify the human body as part of the self, an idea that is a direct outgrowth of the biblical concept of the close relationship between body and soul, or *nephesh*, in contradistinction to the Greek dualistic notion of body and soul that presupposes an immaterial soul in a physical body.⁸⁰ The Greeks, it should be emphasized, celebrated the human body and hence too much should not be drawn from their dualistic views. That the concern for ritual purity began in the Second Temple period proves that the Temple could not fully meet the religious and spiritual needs of all Jews, especially those who lived far away from Jerusalem. Such a view also permits us to understand the practice of non-priestly purity as a feature that delineates Jewish ethnic boundaries, as in the observance of the dietary laws. But it is precisely the comprehensive nature of the observance of non-priestly purity that enables us to speak of it as a major feature of early Judaism before and after 70 C.E. A large number of ritual baths thus far discovered or excavated in ancient Israel belong to the period after 70 C.E., especially up to 135 C.E. At Sepphoris on the western summit, for example, of more than thirty excavated ritual baths the vast majority are from the middle to late Roman period.⁸¹ While stone vessels are traditionally dated to the Herodian period, from the first century B.C.E. to about 135 C.E., there is increasing evidence that this cutoff

date is much too early, a logical assumption in view of the tremendous literary activity associated with the Roman period—the redaction of the Mishnah, the writing of the tannaitic midrashim, the canonization of the Hebrew Bible, and the emergence of the Talmud of the Land of Israel—most of which presupposes the existence of purity concerns and practices. Jonathan Adler, however, whose research is focused on this matter, sees the Sepphoris evidence as anomalous and reflective of the priestly presence at the site. Rather, he argues that both miqvaot and stone vessels pretty much went out of use around 135 C.E., and that is why no synagogues after that time have ritual baths associated with them.⁸² But this is precisely the period, as we have argued above, that the ancient synagogue emerged as the main institution of Jewish life in the homeland and doubtless in the Diaspora as well. If in the Second Temple period, therefore, we may postulate a high degree of awareness for and practice of purity issues, albeit for both priestly and non-priestly reasons, all the more may we attribute to the post-destruction era a high degree of purity practice and awareness for many of the reasons given above. The nature of the archaeological evidence for continued use of stone vessels and miqvaot into late antiquity or after 135 C.E., however, in only a number of sites and their absence in synagogues from that period, makes this point an important one for further study. The sanctity of Scripture only increased as the process of canonization came to fruition; and the sanctity of the synagogue only became greater as the liturgy of worship came into being beyond the Torah service.

Toward a Complex Common Judaism After 70 C.E.

The major literary production of the Second Temple period may be said to be the Hebrew Bible in its proto-Masoretic version and the various rewritten forms it took in the corpus of the Dead Sea Scrolls. Not that there were no other types of literature produced (legal, liturgical, secular, midrashic). But it is fair to say that it was the Hebrew Bible or Old Testament as we know it that emerged post-70 C.E. as the predominant document that was to shape the future of the Jewish people. It also shaped the early Christian community along with Christian scripture that was emerging. At this point two significant streams in early Christianity, the Jerusalem church and associated Christian com-

munities elsewhere in Palestine, whose origins predated Paul, and the Diaspora churches founded or influenced by Paul, were coming together. And it is precisely in this time period, from 70 to 200 C.E., that the tannaitic literature of the early rabbis was produced in response to what had been evolving over so many years before, which many scholars associate with the Oral Law. Indeed, many of the Qumran documents are pre- or proto-rabbinic in character, and the whole late corpus of biblical books is full of intertextual components that presage later developments.

We have noted before the usefulness of E. P. Sanders's rubric of "common Judaism."⁸³ Primary components of that common Judaism were monotheism, reliance of Scripture, especially Torah, and the symbolic centrality of the Temple. While we endorse in the main Sanders's views on this subject we also maintain that other factors also come into play when we define the people who lived in this era. What a person actually did to actualize his or her Jewish practice, for example, and how we identify that, also must be taken into account. Where one lived and what languages one spoke also played significant roles, as did what one consumed at meals. Common Judaism, thus, has common aspects of practice to it, and we have accordingly presented the realia and variety of Jewish life after the destruction of the Temple that pertain to it. Many of these factors also inform the everyday life that underlies the period of reconstitution of the Jewish people and their traditions in Galilee in the ensuing centuries. It may well justify the use of a new term to describe this phenomenon: "complex common Judaism."

In the process of reconstituting themselves in the north and even in places in the south, the newcomers brought with them the traditions of Judea and the memory of the Temple and its elaborate sacrificial system. The so-called Herodian terra-cotta lamp, it has recently been suggested, was taken to the north as well and became emblematic of the ties to the old heartland of the Jewish people, which after the two wars with Rome became more or less off limits.⁸⁴ And the Herodian lamps found at the Jewish sites in the north such as Sepphoris, Yodefath, and Gamla were in fact made of Jerusalem clays.⁸⁵ In recreating a religious tradition without the Temple and all the ceremonies that went with it, it is not surprising that the Judean experience became a template for the Galileans. The world of learning that had

surrounded the Temple and its priesthood was transferred to the academies and to where the Sanhedrin was located, Jamniah, Sepphoris, Tiberias, and other places. The changing demographics of the early to middle Roman and tannaitic period also brought Jews to other municipal locations away from the new centers of gravity in Galilee: to Caesarea Maritima, Beth Shean (Scythopolis), Tyre, Bethsaida, Caesarea Philippi (Banias), and so on. Although so many Jews had left the Holy Land after the two wars and gone to points west in North Africa and Spain, to the north to Greece and Europe, to the east and the academies of Babylonia, and to southern Arabia as well, a strong community remained in Palestine, flourishing until the Islamic conquest and even after. This community produced the Mishnah in those first several centuries after 70 C.E. and its own version of the Talmud, the Talmud of the Land of Israel, the Yerushalmi, that we recognize as playing the pivotal role in transforming Judaism as a Temple-based religion into one that was portable and fully equipped to face the multicultural world of late antiquity along with the religions of Christianity, Mithraism, and continuing robust versions of paganism that lay at the heart of the Roman Empire. One of the major institutional vehicles for allowing the tradition to develop was the synagogue, which was the true successor in every way to the Temple in Jerusalem.