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THE SYNAGOGUE: ITS HISTORY AND FUNCTION
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CHAPTER TWO

THE SYNAGOGUE BUILDING

As one passes from a survey of the conditions which led to the establishment of the synagogue and gave impetus to its development to a study of the edifice itself, one becomes acutely conscious of an apparent conflict between the ideals which the synagogue was to represent and the manner in which they were implemented in the structure of the building. Ostensibly the synagogue was to be essentially utilitarian since it was intended to meet an ever-increasing number of demands, and as a house of prayer it was to be functional, giving practical expression to a traditional mode of worship. One would have expected, therefore, that the uses to which it was put and the form of worship which it was to perpetuate would have dictated the pattern of its construction and even the style of architecture to be adopted for the exterior as well as for the interior of the building.

Unique as was its character and having served as the model for all such forms of prayer worship, even for those later adopted by the Church and the Mosque, the synagogue should have been able to lay claim to some originality in its overall structural design. Yet throughout its long existence it proved, in just this regard, to be more imitative than original, particularly in the styles adopted for its exterior elevation. Even the interior of the building, which was designed in accordance with the special requirements of the Jewish form of ritual, could apparently not remain immune to the many influences brought to bear on it. Some of these influences were wielded directly by contemporary trends in constructional development or by stress of circumstance, others made indirect impact and emanated from evolutionary processes.

At times conditions permitted some measure of self-expression and the Jew could evolve such designs as his own genius could devise or adapt; conversely he could be severely restrained in his construction when circumstances were adverse. It is this

constantly changing pattern of life which is responsible for the absence of any homogeneous design. The diversity of shape, elevation, general construction and even location of the synagogue reflects a constant inner struggle to maintain some semblance of identity. Had the Jews been permitted to live their own life unhampered by external constraining forces or had they been able to disregard the many modes and styles adopted by other peoples in whose midst they lived, there might have developed a unique and distinctive tradition of synagogue architecture, but, as is evident from the diverse styles which have obtained throughout the centuries, such a tradition failed to materialise.

In spite of this diversity the record of Jewry's attempt to adjust the synagogue building to the requirements of each successive generation is both poignant and informative because of the measure of historicity which it reflects. The various styles and designs must, in the final analysis, be regarded as merely overt expressions of affection for an historic religious institution manifested in the current idiom, whereas the deeper significance lies in the inner content of the structure and the services which it was required to render.

These were truly comprehensive in character and aided the community to foster the religious, social and cultural pursuits essential to its self-preservation. The continuous development of such activities often generated the impetus to develop patterns of construction which would satisfy the community's needs. Such progressive effort did not imply departure from time-honoured practices, even though they might have demanded adaptations in modes of structure. The old concepts associated with the past of the synagogue blended with the new modes of construction; on the foundations of past experience new and sometimes imposing edifices were erected which, though modelled on the contemporary idiom, were inspired by the historic traditions which they fostered.

I. THE SITE

As the natural heir to the Temple and having succeeded it as the central place of communal worship, the synagogue was in many respects modelled on the pattern of the last of the Temples, incorporating some of its characteristic features in its

external structure. Just as the Temple graced the Jerusalem landscape and stood high on the Temple mount, so it was regarded as fitting that the synagogue should enjoy a similar eminence, for to build it on a level with adjacent buildings would have reflected adversely on its dignity and importance. Hence all synagogues of antiquity were, where possible, erected in the highest parts of the city.*

Testimony to this general practice is available from the remains discovered in Galilee and elsewhere. Almost without exception these ruins were found on mounds which then formed the highest parts of the cities which these synagogues adorned. In adopting this form of construction physical expression was apparently given to the sentiments contained in a scriptural text—'She (wisdom) crieth from the *topmost places* of the tumultuous city' (Prov. i. 21)—and thus, in the typical style and language of Rabbinic homily, Biblical support was obtained for a practice which was to be generally observed.

To add to the dignity of its elevation it was ordained at a very early age that the synagogue should be the highest building in the vicinity. In this connection too, a proof text was cited from Scripture—'To exalt the house of our God' (Ezra ix. 9)—the implications of which were interpreted literally. It would appear that this practice was observed meticulously for a considerable period and only fell into disuse when it was interdicted by later Christian and Moslem authorities who resented the dominant position which the synagogue occupied. There is little doubt that the Church and the Mosque cherished a similar tradition which required that these buildings be the highest in the vicinity, hence the height of the synagogue was not permitted to compete with the church steeple or the minaret and consequently was forced to reduce its elevation.

But submissive as were the Jewish communities to such pressure, being powerless to resist, outraged conscience sought its satisfaction by resort to a measure of subterfuge. This resulted in a rather amusing battle of wits between the synagogue and the church, for whilst the latter rested content in the knowledge that the synagogue no longer appeared so dominant, the Jew erected a pole or rod on the roof of his synagogue which served as a symbolic addition to its height thus raising its elevation in accordance with his religious demands. This apparently satis-

fied the members of the Jewish community and did not offend the religious susceptibilities of their neighbouring church-goers! Another device adopted at this period was to lower the synagogue floor below ground level in order to increase the height of the interior. Whilst this did not offend against the restrictions on the external height it offered satisfaction to the Jewish community who could thus regard the internal height as the equivalent of the 'exaltation' which the synagogue should enjoy.²

Such concern for the elevation of the building and its inherent dignity only applied in those communities where the synagogue occupied a focal geographical point in the vicinity in which Jews resided. But not all communities were permitted to enjoy the privilege of erecting their synagogues in such a central location or even desired to do so. Some were constrained to construct them outside the confines of the Jewish residential area.³ Indeed this remarkable phenomenon existed in the early centuries of the Jewish Diaspora, and to this fact contemporary literary evidence as well as archaeological discovery bear ample testimony. In speaking of the Hellenistic communities Josephus reports that Jews 'make their places of worship by the seaside',⁴ and the apostle Paul similarly reports that in Macedonia he went out of the city on the Sabbath to participate in prayer meetings by a river side 'where prayer was wont to be made'.⁵

Whilst these reports emphasise that the synagogues concerned were located near the seashore or the river bank they do not indicate whether, in fact, they were at some distance from the Jewish residential area. This point, however, is confirmed by the discovery of remains of ancient Hellenistic synagogues found in various parts of the Mediterranean basin, all of which seem to indicate that the residential area was some distance from the water's edge whereas the synagogues themselves were sited near the seashore.⁶ The reason for this unusual location can only be surmised and the generally accepted view is that the practice was actuated by purely religious motives. The belief was then current that the soil of the Diaspora was defiled by levitical impurity due to the idolatry which then prevailed. Water was the sole means of removing this impurity, hence the synagogues were removed as far as possible from the dominantly pagan cities and located in close proximity to the seashore or river's edge to avoid possible contamination.⁷

This practice of erecting synagogues at some distance from the cities seems to have prevailed in Babylon during the Talmudic period, even as late as the fourth century C.E. This is evidenced by Rabbinic testimony and is reflected in certain usages which were later incorporated in synagogue procedure and liturgy. From these sources it would appear that it was once customary not to hold public evening services on weekdays. The reason for this somewhat unusual practice is attributed to the fact that the synagogues were located beyond the city limits; hence by refraining from holding such services members of the community were not exposed to the dangers which such journeys involved.⁸

The only exception to this rule was made on Sabbath and Festival evenings, but in order to ensure that the worshippers were not discouraged from attending the synagogue, the time of the commencement of the services was put forward so that the return journey should not be made after dark. Further precautions were taken by appending an additional composition to the service. This comprised an abridgement of the Friday evening Amidah which was recited by the congregation during the time that the latecomers to the synagogue were completing the rest of the service. By thus prolonging the service the whole congregation was enabled to return to town together and thereby feel a sense of security in their exposure to the hazards of the road. This additional prayer was later included in the statutory service and has found a permanent place in our Prayer Book.⁹

Additional evidence from our Prayer Book is to be found in the poignant references to protection contained in the fourth benediction of the evening service.¹⁰ This special plea that God should 'guard our going out and our coming in unto life and unto peace' enjoys heightened significance when it is appreciated that it refers to the journeys which had to be undertaken to and from the synagogue once the regular evening services were instituted. There can be no doubt that this benediction reflects the conditions prevailing in Babylon, for this is the Babylonian version of the prayer which differs considerably from its Palestinian counterpart. This is particularly visible in the conclusion of the benediction which, according to the Palestinian version, ended with the words 'who spreadest the

tabernacle of peace over us and over all thy people Israel and over Jerusalem' whereas the Babylonian version, which is retained in our Prayer Book, concluded with the words 'Who guardest thy people Israel for ever'. The fact that the former version, which does not stress the theme of protection, was later adopted for general use on Sabbaths and Festivals, whilst the latter was reserved for weekdays, would indicate the concern of Babylonian Jewry to pray for this protection, since it was the weekday attendance at synagogue which was so fraught with hazard.

Further testimony to this Babylonian practice to erect synagogues beyond the city confines is adduced by some scholars¹¹ from the prayer commencing with the words 'Blessed be the Lord for evermore'¹² which immediately precedes the weekday Amidah. Its composition, it is claimed, was inspired by the same motive—concern for the safety of the worshippers. This prayer, in which the name of God is mentioned eighteen times, was deemed a substitute for the eighteen benedictions of the Amidah, and its recital served to prevent the worshippers from being unduly detained in the synagogue, thus saving them from exposure to unnecessary risks. The fact that this composition was not incorporated in the Palestinian order of service, but was unique to Babylonian Jewry, would point to the exceptional conditions which prevailed in the land of its origin.

This awareness of the dangers attendant on synagogue worship and concern for the worshippers' protection probably gave added impetus to the belief in the protective presence of ministering angels. According to the view expressed by Rabbi Jose ben Judah (third century C.E.), which was doubtless commonly held at the time, these angels accompany the worshipper to his home on Sabbath evenings and hence reduce the measure of danger to which he might otherwise be exposed. This comforting belief ultimately inspired the composition of the popular hymn which is still chanted on Friday evenings on return from the synagogue. This sings the praises of the ministering angels whose arrival is welcomed and whose blessing is sought. In some editions of the Prayer Book the hymn concludes with a citation from Psalm cxxi, 'The Lord guard thy going out and thy coming in from this time forth and for evermore', thereby serving as a reminder of the close affinity be-

tween the theme of this composition and the general concern for additional protection.

With the passing of time the synagogues were once again restored to their rightful place within the confines of the residential area, there to serve as the central institution of the community. But the memories of former exigencies were not permitted to be forgotten and the prayers which these conditions inspired were integrated into the general format of the accepted liturgy. Although the reasons for their original composition no longer operate, their retention serves as a reminder of the conditions prevailing in bygone ages and are of immeasurable value in our efforts to reconstruct the historical developments of the synagogue and the communal spirit which it engendered.

II. EXTERNAL ARCHITECTURE

Whilst religious motivation determined the location and siting of the synagogue, it had no influence on the outward form which the building ultimately assumed, nor were regulations imposed as to its design. The style of architecture varied according to the prevailing taste, displaying no traditional pattern which might be regarded as recognisably Jewish. We thus find that the synagogues of the Hellenistic period were invariably erected in the form of the square or rectangular basilica, the front elevation of which was dominated by a highly ornate, richly ornamented portico. The great synagogue of Alexandria, to which the Talmud refers in such glowing terms,¹³ and many of those built in Galilee in the second and third centuries whose remains have since been discovered, were all constructed in this form. The fact that the Chamber of Hewn Stone which served as the Temple's synagogue was also built in the form of a basilica¹⁴ was probably coincidental and did not affect the architectural expression of later generations. One can only assume that the adoption of this design was actuated by the desire to erect a house of worship in a style known for its dignity and generous proportions which would reflect in its outward form the piety of its worshippers and their desire to enhance the glory of God to which the structure was dedicated.

With the passing of the centuries new styles of architecture were adopted. The advent of the Renaissance saw the rejection

of the Graeco-Roman basilica and its replacement by the Gothic and the more florid Baroque. Synagogues built in this period in France and in other countries of Central Europe were invariably constructed in this form, adapting the style more particularly to the interior whilst leaving the exterior essentially simple and unobtrusive. In Spain, where the Moorish style predominated, synagogues accepted this elaborate pattern. This is evidenced in the two famous synagogues of Toledo, one built by Joseph ibn Shushan in the 12th century—later converted into the church of Santa Maria la Blanca—and the other, the El Transito, which was subsequently seized by the Jesuits; both of these exemplify this typical oriental design. Unique in character were the wooden synagogues built in Poland in the 16th and 17th centuries which, though designed in accordance with the local Slavic prototype, displayed the exceptional skill and ingenuity of Jewish craftsmen both in their design and ornamentation.

But with the exception of this brief interlude in Eastern Europe there was frequently little reason to differentiate the outward appearance of the synagogue from the contemporary church or secular public building, except for the steeples or bell towers which dominated the non-Jewish structures. This tendency to merge with the contemporary background was particularly visible in the post-Emancipation period.

The 18th and 19th centuries, regarded as the great era of enlightenment, witnessed the adoption of a profusion of styles of construction in the wider community, and the synagogues once again were no exception. The basilica pattern and the Classic style were revived, and it was not uncommon to see the exterior dominated by massive Corinthian columns surmounted by a heavily ornamented portico. The only feature which helped to distinguish such synagogues from the churches built in the same style was the Hebrew inscription which so frequently appeared on the façade. The Moorish style complete with bulbous domes and cupolas made its appearance again to revive nostalgic memories of the Golden Age of Spain or to impress by its attempt at grandeur. In cities of the Austro-Hungarian Empire experiments were made with circular buildings which were then enjoying popularity in the non-Jewish community. These ornate structures, which give an impression

of expansiveness, reflect the happier circumstances in which Jews lived and speak favourably of their desire to display in their religious buildings the sense of security and well-being which they enjoyed.

With the advent of the 20th century even newer experiments were undertaken. The current idiom in general construction, the use of new materials and the adoption of ultra-modern designs were and are revolutionary in concept. The simple line, the absence of all extravagance, are contemporary in outlook, but whether the patterns which have been devised will be deemed worthy of veneration will depend on the reaction of those who accept them as their places of worship.

In surveying, albeit superficially, the various styles and forms which were adopted for synagogue construction one is impressed by the apparent inability of the Jew to display any originality of design in the structure, particularly in its outward appearance. Regrettable as this is, one realises the profound reason and the exceptional circumstances responsible for this artistic disability. Distinctive artistic expression can only be achieved when economic and political conditions are sufficiently stable to permit roots to be struck in a settled society. This was not granted to the Jew. He was rarely allowed to remain at ease for that period of time which would have been conducive to independent artistic development. All too often he was forced to take up the staff of the wanderer.

Thus, actuated by the desire to erect a structure which was expressive of his deeper religious emotions, he was impelled to adopt the colouration of his surroundings and to express in the design of his synagogue the influences which dominated the taste of the period. Where permission was granted to erect synagogues and no restrictions were imposed on their size or form, the local communities could be as pretentious as their non-Jewish neighbours. Where, however, such freedom of expression was withheld the Jew was forced to adopt some more modest outward expression in order not to appear too conspicuous, though he might compensate the humble exterior by a more elaborate interior. This, at least, can be said of those who were responsible for synagogue construction throughout the centuries—if they lacked originality in architectural concept, they were intensely actuated by the desire to accept that

which was deemed the best of each period and to apply it to the construction of their house of worship.

III. TOWARDS JERUSALEM

The impulse to imitate generally accepted architectural designs did not extend to those aspects of the structure which had a direct bearing on religious practices. In this there was always visible a marked adherence to traditional convention. This is exemplified in the regulation concerning the synagogue's orientation which required that the worshippers should face Jerusalem during the recital of their prayers. This tradition, which has been meticulously observed, doubtless developed during the Babylonian exile. The report that Daniel prayed near 'the windows which were opened towards Jerusalem' (Dan. vi. 11) would indicate that this was not a mere isolated incident in the life of one individual, but was the accepted practice of all those who, during this period of exile, felt moved to participate in such form of prayer worship. The need for such orientation was given precise expression in the Talmud—'He who prays in the Diaspora shall direct his heart to the land of Israel; in Israel he shall direct his heart towards Jerusalem and in Jerusalem towards the Temple . . . thus shall all the house of Israel direct their hearts to one place'.¹⁵ This desire to focus the attention of worshippers to one sacred place not only created a living link with past history, perpetuating the memory of the Temple as the former centre of Jewish religious life, but also set the seal on the manner in which synagogues should be constructed.

In this connection it is of interest to note the changes which have taken place in the method of interpreting this regulation concerning synagogue orientation. One passage in Rabbinic literature states authoritatively that 'the entrance to the synagogue shall be at the eastern end of the building'¹⁶ which, in that context, implies that the doors and their place of construction determine the orientation of the building. This, in fact, seems to have been the practice in the early centuries of the Common Era, as is evidenced by the remains of synagogues found in Upper Galilee. All of these were so constructed that their main portals faced southwards, i.e. towards Jerusalem.

This can only be appreciated when one realises that in antiquity the dominant feature of the building was its entrance and the façade in which the portals were erected. The worshippers, on entering the synagogue, would take their places facing the main entrance and in this direction would recite their prayers. On leaving the synagogue at the termination of the service the worshippers would walk straight out of the building without having to turn their backs on the Ark which, as we shall later show, was situated in the vicinity of the main entrance.

In the course of time, however, the Ark as a permanent fixture became the dominant factor in the synagogue's orientation, whilst the portals enjoyed only secondary importance. This radical change impelled the synagogue architects to transpose the position of the main entrance. The doors were henceforth placed at the opposite end to the Ark or at times on the side of the building, so that on entering the synagogue the worshipper would face the Ark and, if he so desired, make prostration towards it. Much depended on the geographical location of the synagogue in its relation to Jerusalem. Frequently the portals could be retained in the eastern end of the building,¹⁷ especially if the Ark was placed in the north, south or west of the building.

Another unique feature of those ancient synagogues, to which archaeological discovery bears testimony, was the invariable practice to construct three doors in the main façade of the building. It would appear, however, that the centre door was not used for admittance to the auditorium, but that the worshippers entered by the two side doors. This unusual practice leads one to presume that the Ark was placed near the centre portal, which lent additional emphasis to the synagogue's orientation based on the position of the main entrance. The subsequent alteration in the siting of the main entrance did not seem to affect the attachment to the style of the three-door entrance, and in spite of the many variations which were later adopted in synagogue architecture it seems to have been retained, although the reason eludes explanation.

IV. THE FORECOURT

In addition to the outer doors which form the main entrance from the street most contemporary synagogues are so con-

structed that the auditorium is separated from the main entrance by a vestibule or forecourt. The latter contains two sets of doors, one leading off the street and the other giving admission to the synagogue itself. This form of construction would appear to be attributable to a long-standing tradition rather than to mere architectural style. From the literary evidence available the practice may be traced to Talmudic times. A third-century scholar, R. Hisda, is reported to have said 'One should always enter the synagogue through two doors'.¹⁸ Although this statement has not always been accepted literally and even the Talmud attempted to interpret it metaphorically—that one should take one's seat at a distance from the main entrance measurable by the gap created by two doors—there is every reason to believe that the author was aware of the form of structure which provided for two entrances separated by some form of vestibule. This was a well-known feature of Roman and Greek architecture current at the time,¹⁹ and even the Talmud's reference to the measure of distance between the two doors would imply that some space separated them.²⁰

Later generations however, seem to have fused the literal with the symbolic interpretations of R. Hisda's statement, and we thus find that whilst the vestibule formed an integral part of the structure a clear and incisive moral purpose was attributed to it. This is best seen in a comment made by the famous Rabbi Judah Loeb of Prague who observed that by entering through the outer doors into the vestibule one sheds oneself of the influences of the outer world, and on passing through the inner doors into the synagogue itself one is admitted into the inner sanctuary, there to enjoy close communion with God.²¹

Another characteristic of the synagogue of antiquity closely allied to the function of the modern vestibule was the forecourt which adjoined the main entrance. From a passing reference in the Talmud²² it would appear that such a forecourt did exist and was a recognised feature of the building, since the question was asked whether one was permitted to use it as a casual passageway from one part of the building to another. Further testimony may be obtained from the Mishna, though much depends on the correct interpretation of an expression found in different contexts. One such passage speaks of the 'Open space

of the city' being sold by the leaders of the community, and the proceeds being used to purchase a synagogue.²³

Another context describes the procedure on special fast days when a scroll was removed from the synagogue to this open space where penitential prayers were recited.²⁴ All the authorities seem to agree that this open space was endowed with a measure of sanctity, but its actual identity remains a matter of conjecture. Was it the forum of the city, which the literal meaning of the expression would appear to convey, or might it be interpreted as the forecourt of the synagogue? The latter seems more likely since one cannot visualise the forum being the object of a commercial transaction or regarded as possessing a measure of sanctity. It would appear therefore that this forecourt was regarded as a distinct adjunct of the synagogue primarily because it was the place in which special services could be held, as on the fast days to which the Mishna refers.

This forecourt appears to have been put to other uses and was helpful to worshippers in their daily devotions. Reference is found in the Talmud²⁵ to the washing of the hands and feet in a water butt or container for the collection of rainwater which, from the context, would appear to have situated in the synagogue forecourt. Although the context does not specifically state that such ablutions were performed prior to the act of worship, it is known that such was the accepted practice. It was regarded as particularly essential for the hands to be washed before prayer, as is evidenced by the Psalmist, 'I will wash my hands in innocency, then will encompass thine altar' (xxvi. 6). The fact that a laver stood in the courtyard of the Temple, in which the priests performed their ablutions prior to their sacred ministrations, lent precedent to the later synagogal practice. From this literary evidence, therefore, it seems apparent that such facilities for washing were to be found in the forecourt of the synagogue. Further testimony is obtainable from the remains of the Dura Europos synagogue where distinct traces of a pool which once stood in the forecourt have been discovered.²⁶

In this connection it is worthy of note that the Moslems adopted the same practice, extending it to the washing of the hands and the feet, and for this purpose instituted that a water fountain become an integral part of the forecourt of the Mosque. It would appear, too, that they in their turn wielded a measure

of influence on Jews living under Islamic domination. We thus find that scholars of the eminence of Saadiah Gaon, Natronai Gaon and later Abraham, son of Maimonides, urged that both hands and feet be washed before prayer.²⁷ Although this was the original practice observed by the priests in the Temple,²⁸ it was not generally observed in the synagogue and there is no Rabbinic justification for its adoption. But the washing of the hands before entering the synagogue did become an established custom and every effort was made to preserve the practice. Hence with the inevitable changes to which the synagogue structure succumbed, the facilities for this observance were transferred from the forecourt to the vestibule. To this day a water tap, wash basin or similar facilities are to be found in the vestibules of synagogues built in the traditional pattern.

V. INTERNAL STRUCTURE

Just as the variety of styles of architecture adopted throughout the centuries influenced the exterior of the synagogue, so the interior structure was subjected to similar variations in mode and design and was dominated by the prevailing moods of different ages. The straight lines of the basilica gave way to the elegant Gothic arches which lent an impression of height and dignity to the building, or to the Moorish style with its elaborate and highly ornate character, or to the more austere mode of the Classic style. Except for those features of the interior which were essentially religious in character, such as the Ark and the *Bimah*, there was no special style or pattern which survived the changes adopted in successive generations, and even these religious appurtenances were not entirely immune to the variations in location and design.

The one characteristic which seemed to dominate the concept of interior construction was the manifest desire to lend beauty and dignity to the synagogue auditorium, either through the architectural medium employed or by the addition of some form of ornamentation used as an extra embellishment. The former is best exemplified in the synagogues of the Middle Ages which were built in the Romanesque or Gothic styles. These were constructed in the form of a double nave, with the central pillars supporting a vaulted roof, which in turn formed several

bays each with its groined or ribbed crossvaults. The simple dignity of this typical medieval design must have stirred the worshippers by the impression of loftiness which it conveyed.

An even simpler alternative style, though equally impressive, was the single nave chamber whose vaulted ceiling and buttressed walls resembled the monastic refectory. This gave an air of spaciousness and offered a clear view of the Ark and the Bimah unobstructed by supporting columns. More elaborate and highly stylised were the Spanish synagogues built in the Moorish pattern, whose parallel arcades of pillars supported a series of circular or Byzantine arches. To add to the overall impression of grandeur the surmounting frieze which extended along the whole length of the interior was intricately ornamented with gilded scribal lettering or geometric designs. Such elaborate interiors, enriched as they were with their embellishments, reflected the generosity and love which communities lavished on their synagogues. With the return to the less ornate designs the focus of attention was directed away from general interior structure to the purely religious appurtenances—the Ark and the Bimah; the one often veiling with the other as to its relative importance within the design of the building. As the alternating focal points of the interior construction both were invested with due impressiveness.

In spite of the tendency to adopt current forms of architecture one feature in the construction seemed to enjoy a measure of permanence throughout the period extending from the earliest known form of synagogue building until the present generation when completely novel styles have been introduced. This is the apparent desire to retain a columned structure. Although the incorporation of pillars in the interior design may have been dictated by the nature of the styles adopted in successive generations there is reason to believe that it was not entirely attributable to architectural requirements, but to a long historical association and to a conscious religious demand. The fact that pillars formed the basic structure of the sanctuary in the wilderness and the Temple in Jerusalem may have prompted later generations to retain them in the synagogue's construction thereby preserving a sense of historical continuity and sentimental association with the past.

But whilst this may only be based on surmise there is literary

evidence to indicate that the retention of this style of construction had religious motivations. The Talmud reports that pious scholars preferred to recite their prayers whilst standing or sitting near one of the synagogue's columns.²⁹ Another report speaks of scholars who recited their prayers 'between the columns where they studied'.³⁰ This would indicate that the columns, which separated the aisles from the nave, also acted as a natural subdivision of the synagogue virtually separating that section of the building which formed the *Beth HaMidrash* from the rest of the auditorium.

This attachment to a columned structure which has impelled its retention combined with the traditional association of recital of prayers in close proximity to the columns has given rise to an expression which has become current in synagogue parlance. Even to this day we speak of 'reading the service at the *amud* (column)'. The expression reflects a natural transference of ideas, for the *amud* in its present context means a lecturer, but in reality this usage is directly derived from those columns near which the sages recited their prayers.³¹

VI. THE LADIES' GALLERY

The incorporation of a colonnade of pillars in the interior design of the synagogue had its practical aspect as well as its religious and historical associations, for it provided facilities for the construction of a ladies' gallery on three sides of the building. This gallery, which has become a distinct characteristic of all synagogues built on traditional lines, has a long and unbroken history, and, like so many other aspects of synagogal life, finds its origin in the Temple. Its purpose is to separate the sexes during the act of worship, a feature of Jewish religious life which even antedates the established Temple procedure. A reminder of the antiquity of the practice is to be found in the biblical description of the act of devotion performed by the Israelites at the Red Sea, where it is stated that after Moses had led the people in the song of thanksgiving Miriam led the women in a similar recital. The fact that the two songs were identical in content and differed only in the manner of their rendering led Rabbinic commentators to the natural conclusion that the sexes were segregated in this act of worship.³²

In the construction of the Temple the segregation of the sexes was effected by the erection of separate courtyards for men and women. The women's sector, called the *Azarath Nashim*—a name still applied to the ladies' gallery—formed the outer courtyard and was situated at the end of the building furthest from the Holy of Holies. Its level was slightly lower than the courtyard of the men, which was adjacent to it, and the two were connected by a flight of fifteen steps.³³ To complete the separation the women's sector had its own entrances leading off the outer perimeter of the Temple, and these 'Women's gates,' as they were called, gave direct access to the women's courtyard. The siting of this sector on the lower level did not obstruct the view of those who worshipped in it or debar them from witnessing the priestly offices, for the Temple was built on an incline on the slopes of the Temple mount and this facilitated the construction of each courtyard on successive levels.

In spite of this ingenious method of segregating the sexes it appears to have failed in its ultimate objective. On festive occasions, especially during the celebrations of the Drawing of the Water on Succot, the display of levity apparently exceeded the bounds of propriety and the authorities were later forced to reconstruct the women's sector. In place of the courtyard a gallery was erected on three sides of the area formerly occupied by this courtyard so that, in the words of the official record,³⁴ 'the women should sit above and the men remain below'.

The pattern of construction ultimately adopted in the Temple became the prototype for all subsequent styles of synagogue interiors. Thus, where facilities for such segregation existed a special gallery was constructed, but where circumstances did not permit of such a structure, or where it was found architecturally impractical, the segregation was rendered more complete by relegating the women worshippers to an adjoining room which was connected to the main synagogue by a window or lattice. Frequently this prevented the women from hearing the full service conducted in the main synagogue and as a result female precentors were engaged to conduct separate services for the women. The very name given to this women's annexe, *Frauen Shule* (women's synagogue), indicates the measure of separation thus enforced.

Another device employed to effect this separation was the

erection of a curtain or screen around the ladies' gallery, or where no gallery existed, between the section of the synagogue respectively occupied by the men and women. This permitted the women to hear the service but precluded them from seeing the procedure in the main synagogue. It certainly prevented the men from gazing at the occupants of the ladies' section. This partition, called a *Mehitzah*, has been the subject of much controversy and has not met with universal approval even in those congregations where the segregation of the sexes is accepted as an established principle.

In this connection it should be noted that the principle of segregation of the sexes did not exempt the women from their religious obligation to participate fully in the statutory services. It was expected of them to hear the Reading of the Torah and to follow the recital of the prayers.³⁵ At one time it was even suggested that women had the right to be called to the actual Reading of the Torah and to be included in the prescribed number of those who read the weekly portion on the Sabbath,³⁶ but to avoid possible disturbance to the congregation the suggestion was never implemented. The occupants of the ladies' gallery, however, were an esteemed part of the congregation,³⁷ and much of the exposition and interpretation of Scripture, which formed an essential part of the service, was directed to them so that the might follow the service closely and appreciate its contents.

VII. THE ANNEXE

Another essential feature of the synagogue of antiquity which has left its permanent impress on subsequent generations is the official annexe to the main building. This comprised one or more rooms adjacent to the main structure and formed an inseparable part of the composite construction. The purposes to which these rooms were put were various, but all reflect the intense activity which was conducted within the synagogue precincts. There can be little doubt that the synagogue of those days was the focal point of all major communal activities and was the ancient equivalent of what in modern times has come to be known as the Communal Centre.

The annexe was primarily used as a schoolroom where chil-

dren received their elementary education. Since the school was situated in such close proximity to the synagogue it was naturally influenced by it. The curriculum of instruction was wholly religious, based on the study of Scripture and its accompanying Rabbinic comment, and directed towards the ultimate participation of the pupils in the full life of the congregation. The pursuit of secular education had not yet made its claim on the organised community, and even when it did it could not have affected the school attached to the synagogue, as this was primarily concerned with elementary education. The tradition established in those early centuries has been sedulously maintained, with the result that the close proximity of the schoolroom to the synagogue has become a distinct feature of Jewish life as well as of synagogal construction.

Another use to which the annexe was put, and to which reference has previously been made,³⁸ was to provide hostel accommodation for the passing stranger who might find himself stranded immediately prior to a Sabbath or Festival. This was indeed a unique feature of the synagogue building and probably came into existence in the earliest days of the Rabbinic period. It was for the benefit of the occupants of this hospice that the Kiddush was recited in the synagogue on Sabbaths and Festivals; for whereas it was the normal practice to recite this benediction at one's domestic table prior to partaking of the meal, the Rabbis instituted its recital in the synagogue so that the traveller could hear it and then proceed to partake of his meal in the adjoining hostel. In spite of the disappearance of the synagogue hostel, the recital of the Kiddush in the synagogue has been retained and serves as an additional reminder of some of the practices current in former generations. In this connection it is of interest to note that the only occasion on which the hostel did not provide food to the traveller was during the first nights of Passover. Since the wayfarer would enjoy the private hospitality of members of the community he would not require to be fed in the hostel. This fact is still commemorated in the synagogue by the omission of the Kiddush from the synagogue service on the first two nights of the Passover.

In addition to the facilities made available to the traveller the annexe doubtless provided living accommodation for the Beadle,³⁹ the sole paid official of the early synagogue, whose

responsibilities extended to the general supervision of so many of the congregation's activities. Due to the fact that he was the permanent resident in this part of the building it was considered necessary for a *mezuzah* to be affixed to the synagogue door.⁴⁰ This in itself would indicate that the annexe was integrated into the general structure of the synagogue and considered an inseparable part of the main building.

Other essential communal services were housed in the annexe, though there is no evidence that those to which we now refer were regularly accommodated in it. In mediaeval Europe it was not an uncommon sight to see a *Mikvah* (ritual bath) installed in the building adjacent to the synagogue.⁴¹ This indispensable institution in Jewish religious life, which plays so prominent a rôle in the preservation of family purity, may well have been erected in this part of the building in order to attest to its importance, though it may also have been installed here because the synagogue at this period was the vital centre of all religious and communal activity.

The strangest of all functions performed by the annexe was its use as a temporary mortuary. A reference to this is to be found in the Talmud,⁴² where it is reported that a corpse was deposited in the room adjoining a synagogue in Babylon prior to its burial. This unusual incident impelled the scholars to consider whether a Cohen may enter this synagogue during the time that the corpse lies in this room, since he is precluded from even the most indirect contact with the dead. One can only presume that this was an isolated incident, but nevertheless it reflects the variety of uses to which a synagogue building could be put. It adds emphasis to the part which the synagogue has always played as a communal institution and its ability to serve as a centre for every aspect of communal activity.

NOTES AND REFERENCES

1. See I. Abrahams, *Jewish Life in the Middle Ages* (London, 2nd ed. 1932), p. 41.
2. Some have interpreted this practice as an expression of the sentiments contained in the verse, 'Out of the depths have I called unto thee' (Ps. cxxx. 1), but this appears to be more homiletical than historical, though it does reflect the anxieties which contemporary Jewry had to suffer.
3. See Kid. 73b, which refers to synagogues situated at some distance from the city.

4. Antiquities, xiv. 10. 23.
5. Acts. xvi. 13.
6. See Sukenik, *Ancient Synagogues in Palestine and Greece*, pp. 49-50.
7. This is the view expressed by Sukenik and also Krauss, *Synagogale Allertümer* p. 285 and is based on an interpretation of the Mechilta to Ex. xii. 1, which describes Moses and Aaron receiving communication from God 'at a place purified by water'.
8. Shab. 24b.
9. See Prayer Book, p. 120 (New Ed. p. 160) 'He with his word was a shield . . .
10. Prayer Book, p. 99-100 (New Ed. p. 121).
11. See comment in Baer's *Siddur Avodat Yisrael*, p. 168.
12. Prayer Book, p. 100 (New Ed. p. 121).
13. Succ. 51b.
14. Yoma 25a.
15. Ber. 30a.
16. Tosefia Meg. iv. 22.
17. See Maimonides, Hil. Tefillah, xi. 2 who urges that doors be placed at the eastern end without specifying any conditions. Since he lived in Egypt the synagogue must have been oriented towards the north-west.
18. Ber. 8a.
19. Cp. Aboth, iv. 21 which speaks of the vestibule and the inner hall.
20. Rashi preferred to interpret this to mean that were one to sit close to the main entrance the impression would be created that the worshipper was anxious to leave the synagogue in haste.
21. See *Kitve Maharil*, Vol. ii (Jerusalem, 1960) p. 189.
22. See J. Meg. iii. 3.
23. M. Meg. iv. 1.
24. M. Taan. ii. 1.
25. J. Meg. iii. 3.
26. See M. Avi Yonah in *Jewish Art* (London, 1961) p. 176.
27. *Wieder, Islamic influences on Jewish Worship* (Oxford, 1947) deals with this subject in great detail.
28. See Ex. xxx. 19.
29. Ber. 27a.
30. Ber. 8a.
31. This view is held by Krauss, *Synagogale Allertümer*, p. 352.
32. See Ex. xv. 20 and the comment of the Mechilta *ad loc.*
33. M. Midot ii. 5.
34. Succ. 51b and Tosefia Succ. iv. 1.
35. M. Ber. iii. 3.
36. Meg. 23a.
37. I. Abrahams, *Jewish Life in the Middle Ages*, p. 39 asserts that rigid separation did not come into force until the 13th century. But Rabbinic evidence cited would show that it was of long standing.
38. See Chapter I above p. 19.
39. See Eruv. 55b which speaks of the synagogue which has living quarters for the Beadle.
40. Yoma 11b.
41. See Baron, *Jewish Community* (Philadelphia, 1945) Vol. ii, p. 166.
42. Meg. 26b.

CHAPTER THREE

RELIGIOUS APPURTENANCES

IN our observations on the architecture of the synagogue, the manner of its construction and the styles adopted in different periods, we found it necessary to refer to the external influences which inhibited the display of a uniform pattern that could be regarded as characteristic or traditional. As we examine the interior of the building and its religious components we shall again be impressed by the changes which have been recorded during the course of the centuries.

But these changes and their causation are essentially different from those which affected the rest of the building and especially its strictly structural aspects. The latter were dictated by prevailing conditions which dominated the attitude towards the general construction and necessitated the display of a measure of adaptability to current styles, but the former were invariably the result of variations in emphasis which emerged from a natural development within the Jewish community itself, independent of any social, political or economic considerations. No external pressure, even of the severest measure, could dictate the relative importance attached to the inner contents of the synagogue, such as the Ark, the *Bimah*, the pulpit, the preacher's desk or the method of the seating arrangements. Their construction, location, and the manner of their design and embellishment have evolved from within the developing pattern of Jewish life, reflecting the deeper religious significance attached to them and to their utility in successive generations.

Yet, as we shall have cause to show, all these essential elements of synagogue worship have been subject to drastic changes as the synagogue developed in accordance with its own momentum. It was as though the synagogue stood exposed to the pounding and buffeting of successive waves of pressure which, though powerful and almost irresistible, seemed only to affect the outer walls and general framework, leaving the interior impervious to onslaught. In this respect the synagogue

mirrored the life of Jewry which, throughout the periods during which it was subjected to intense struggle, strove to maintain its inner stability. Only the outward appearances showed signs of forced adaptability; the inner spiritual life refused to be influenced and continued to be conducted in accordance with historic tradition.

I. THE ARK

Of all the religious appurtenances with which the synagogue is equipped that which is called the Ark now receives the greatest measure of reverence and enjoys the greatest prominence. It occupies a commanding position at the eastern end or at that end which reflects the synagogue's orientation. It is invariably the most ornate structure of the interior, designed to leave the deepest impression on the worshipper. The sanctity with which it is endowed is derived from its contents—the sacred scrolls of the Torah which in themselves represent the source and fountain-head of all Jewish belief and practice. The worshipper turns towards the Ark during the recital of the major prayers and in so doing is mindful that he is directing his thoughts towards Jerusalem, the heart of the Jewish world. The Ark thus serves a double purpose; it is the physical repository of the scrolls and acts as the symbolic representation of the sanctuary. Its name is indicative of its centrality in religious emotions, for by its designation, *Aron HaKodesh*, the Holy Ark, it helps to recall the original Ark (*Aron*) which contained the two tablets of stone and occupied a similarly dominant position in the first sanctuary erected in the wilderness and later in the Holy of Holies of the Temple.

The fact that the Ark represents the holiest part of the synagogue has inspired some communities to call it the *Hechal*, the sanctuary; a designation which is still current in most Sephardi congregations, though the Ashkenazi communities still prefer to use the term *Aron HaKodesh*. In Talmudic literature this latter expression rarely appears,¹ and instead the Ark is referred to as the *Tebah*, which, surprising to note, bears little indication of sanctity. This apparent confusion in the use of appellations can only be dispelled if one disregards the misleading equivalent usage of the English word 'Ark' which has been applied in

translating both *Aron* and *Tebah*. The former has obvious close associations with the Torah scrolls because that was its original function in the first sanctuary, whereas the *Tebah*, in its Biblical context, was only used in connection with Noah's ark and the ark of bulrushes in which the child Moses was concealed.

The Rabbinic preference for the term *Tebah*, however, is not based on its Biblical usage, but on considerations of popular usages. It appears that meticulous attention was paid to such application of old terms. Were the word *Aron* used it was expected that full emphasis should be placed on its sanctity, but carelessness in expression might cause the elision of the appropriate adjective, *Hakodesh* (holy). We thus find Talmudic record of the objections raised by scholars to the use of the popular Aramaic equivalent of the Hebrew *Aron*, which in that vernacular was *Arna*.² Although no reason for this objection is explicitly stated in this context, it is the accepted view of such reliable commentators as Rashi that such a rendering of a sacred term in the vernacular was deemed an adverse reflection on its sanctity just because no descriptive appellation was applied to it.

The use of the term *Tebah*, current in Rabbinic literature, directs special attention to the function of the Ark in the early centuries of the synagogue's existence. The literal meaning of the word is 'chest' and although it was applied to the container in which the scrolls were kept, it may well have been used to describe the outer casing of each scroll. This form of container is still in vogue in most oriental synagogues. It is cylindrical in shape, consisting of two sections hinged together and fastened by a clasp. The two rollers of the scroll are attached to the interior of the two sections, so that when opened the scroll can be read as it stands in its outer casing. The application of the term *Tebah* to this individual scroll chest is clearly evidenced by Maimonides who, in describing the procedure to be adopted when reading the Torah states, 'when placing the *Tebah*, which contains a *Sefer Torah*, in an upright position (for the purpose of reading from it), one places it in the centre of the synagogue (i.e. on the dais) in such a position that its back is towards the *Hechal* and its front towards the congregation'.³

The clear distinction which he draws between the *Hechal* (Ark) and the *Tebah* would indicate that the latter cannot refer

to the Ark, but is a portable container designed to hold a single scroll. His use of the term *Tebah* and his reference to its portability is supported by an early Talmudic passage⁴ which describes a similar procedure. In almost identical terms it prescribes that the *Tebah* shall be placed facing the congregation with its back towards the sanctuary. The distinctive features of this passage are that the term *Hechal* is replaced by *Kodesh*, the Holy place, or the sanctuary, which clearly directs the manner of the synagogue's orientation towards Jerusalem; and in referring to the *Tebah* being 'placed' for the purpose of the service, one is again led to the conclusion that it was not a fixed structure but a portable container for the scrolls.

Further evidence as to the use of this term is available from the Mishna which describes the procedure adopted on special fast days.⁵ On these occasions they took the *Tebah* outside and placed it in the synagogue forecourt, where special penitential prayers were recited. This proves conclusively that the Ark was highly portable and that the *Tebah* was the acknowledged term employed to describe the container for the scrolls, either for each one individually or for as many as could be placed in it.

Additional testimony to the Ark's portability during the early centuries of the synagogue's existence may be adduced from various references in the Talmud to regulations governing the use of the scrolls and the manner in which they were deposited in the synagogue. There can be no doubt that during this early period it was not customary for the scrolls to be kept permanently in the synagogue auditorium. From contemporary records it would appear that they were deposited in a room adjoining the synagogue where they were kept in safe custody and only brought into the synagogue when required for the reading of the selected passages of the day. We thus find a strange incident reported⁶ when a synagogue official forgot to arrange for the transportation of the scrolls on the eve of the Sabbath and means had to be found to convey them from their safe deposit.

Additional light is thrown on the subject from the instructions issued by the early rabbinic authorities regarding the respect to be shown to the scrolls. We are informed that they insisted that no worshipper should leave the synagogue until the scroll had been taken out of the auditorium and restored to the place of

its safe keeping; nor was the synagogue official permitted to strip the *Tebah* of its decorative hangings in the presence of the congregation.⁷ It was regarded as indecorous to 'roll the scroll', which presumably means to bind it together and replace its coverings, in the presence of the congregation;⁸ instead it had to be taken out of sight immediately after the reading had been completed. These instructions would indicate that the scroll and its *Tebah* were temporarily placed in the synagogue for part of the service, possibly at its commencement, but that once the official reading of the weekly portion was completed they were removed and placed in a special chamber in an adjoining room.

This procedure is most clearly defined in one of the later rabbinic compilations, primarily devoted to the regulations governing the use of the *Sefer Torah*, which states: 'This was the practice of the men of true piety in Jerusalem. When the Torah scroll was brought out of its chamber and when it was restored to it, they would walk behind the bearer of the scroll in order to pay honour to it'.⁹ This report, which faithfully records the manner of the *Sefer's* transference to and from the synagogue, also points to the origin of the practice which is still observed in our own synagogue ritual. There is every reason to assume that the two processions which accompany the carrying of the scrolls around the synagogue before and after the reading of the weekly portion are directly attributable in origin to that early practice associated with the welcoming of the scroll into the synagogue and its restoration to its place of safe keeping.

Having established the fact that the Ark was a portable structure and that the scrolls which it contained were only deposited temporarily in the synagogue for the duration of the service, we can proceed to consider the manner in which the Ark was conveyed into the synagogue and the place which it occupied. From our previous description of the early synagogue's orientation,¹⁰ which was based on the location of the main entrance and the façade of the building, and with the aid of the reference to the *Tebah* being erected with its back towards the sanctuary in Jerusalem, we have every reason to conclude that the Ark occupied a central position adjoining the main portals of the interior. It would appear that it was conveyed into the building through the centre door, and once having been de-

HA! READ
THE FOLLOWING
PARAGRAPH ← WHICH WE DO AT TEBI
DURING THE PROCESSION
OF THE SCROLL: SCROLL FIRST,
R. ABBI SECOND.

posited, the centre door was closed and only opened again to permit the *Tebah* and the scrolls to be removed when necessary. For this reason the worshippers who desired to enter the synagogue used the two side doors, and having been admitted into the auditorium, turned in the direction of the entrance and stood or sat facing the Ark which now stood centrally inside the building. Thus the Ark in its position behind the façade of the building added emphasis to the synagogue's orientation.

The transition from the portable to the static Ark must doubtless have been gradual, and no date can be assigned to this drastic change. Only the remains of ancient synagogues testify to the earliest date when the new dimensions seemed to have become an established feature of the interior. Those which belong to the 4th and 5th centuries of the Common Era already show the outlines of a recess or apse which, by the nature of those synagogues' orientation, indicate that this was the static position of the Ark. Hence one can assume that at this stage in the synagogue's development the need was already felt to lend prominence to the location of the Ark, and this in turn required a new approach to the concept of orientation. Clearly the façade of the building had to be adjusted to the demands of a permanent Ark structure, and since the service was directed towards the Ark, religious necessity determined the new location of the synagogue's entrance.

There is also evidence on these ancient sites of several steps which led up from the floor of the building to the recess in the wall and this too testifies to the commanding position which the Ark must then have occupied.¹¹

The fact that the Ark stood on such an elevated platform within the recess may well have been responsible for the creation of a new technical term applied to the act of conducting the service. To lead the congregation in prayer was termed 'to descend before the Ark,'¹² which presumably meant to stand on a level lower than that of the Ark. This presupposes that the Ark must have stood on a raised dais above ground level; hence the erection of a set of steps leading from the ground to the Ark platform would have been in accordance with the recognised practice of the time. In this connection it is of interest to note that many synagogues still maintain this tradition. In order that the Reader may 'descend before the Ark' a lectern is placed at

the foot of the steps leading to the Ark and from it the Reader conducts the service.¹³

The shape of the Ark which was installed in the recess seems to have assumed a basic and uniform pattern and only the measure of its ornamentation seems to have varied during the course of the centuries. Reproductions of ancient Arks as contained in inscriptions and in mosaics found in the remains of early synagogues testify to its main features. These comprised a square or rectangular closet in front of which were two doors which opened outwards and the whole surmounted by a roof which was either rounded or gabled. The scrolls inside the Ark were arranged on shelves, and in the early synagogues appear to have been laid horizontally, each enclosed in its own cover or mantle.¹⁴

Doubtless the early Arks were made of wood and were of this simple but practical design, but as new ideas were introduced, elaborate ornamentation applied and various designs developed and adopted, greater emphasis was laid on the proportions assigned to the Ark. To add to its dignity and impressiveness its size was enlarged and highly decorative themes introduced in all the media available to the architects, which in due course contributed to its dominance of the synagogue interior. But in spite of the many variations in form which have appeared throughout the centuries and the considerable efforts expended to embellish its outward appearance, its essential elements have remained unchanged. Basically it is still the closet which contains the scrolls, with perhaps this slight difference, that whereas in the early synagogues the scrolls were laid horizontally on the shelves they are now placed vertically in the stands which hold them in position inside the Ark.

II. THE *Parochet*

The installation of a fixed Ark in its permanent recess helped to resuscitate a feature of the ancient sanctuary which was once closely associated with the original Ark used in the wilderness, and also revived the use of a descriptive term which may have fallen into disuse during the very early period of the synagogue's existence. In that first sanctuary and later in the Temple in Jerusalem the Ark was placed in the Holy of Holies. This section

was separated from the rest of the interior by a curtain suspended across the width of the building. This curtain,¹⁵ called the *Parochet*, was made of fine embroidered linen and embellished with blue, purple and scarlet threads ingeniously woven into the texture. It served as a screen to conceal the Ark, which stood immediately behind it, from the view of the worshippers who foregathered in the main courtyard of the sanctuary. The *Parochet* is the name which is still applied to the curtain which hangs suspended in front of the doors of the Ark in those synagogues which follow the Ashkenazi rite. Like the original curtain which gave it its name it is invariably highly embroidered, frequently with such motifs as the Tablets of the Ten Commandments, the Menorah and similar traditional symbols which recall the contents of the original sanctuary.

Although there can be no doubt that the *Parochet* used in the modern synagogue is a direct adaptation of that used in the sanctuary, its function seems to have been subjected to some variations in accordance with local custom and usage. According to one report preserved in the Talmud its purpose was primarily to act as a screen with the object of enhancing the dignity of the Ark and the scrolls. Contrary to present usage it was suspended at some distance from the Ark and was probably attached to a frame or columns at the entrance to the apse, thus forming a partition between the top of the steps and the Ark.

This reconstruction is based on reports contained in the Jerusalem Talmud¹⁶ and in a later Rabbinic compendium¹⁷ which refer to instructions given by a Palestinian scholar, Rabbi Jose, to the synagogue beadle on the procedure to be adopted for the rolling of the scroll after the official reading had been completed. He insisted that the scroll be taken behind the *Parochet* and there rolled prior to its replacement in the Ark. This clearly presupposes that adequate provision was made for such a procedure in the space available between the curtain and the Ark. Since this scholar was concerned for the dignity of the scroll and regarded it as indecorous to roll up the scroll in the presence of the congregation,¹⁸ one must assume that the *Parochet* acted as a screen which could conceal the act of preparing the scroll for its replacement in the Ark.

Whether this was the generally accepted practice throughout the then known Jewish world cannot be stated with any measure

of certainty, for other literary evidence would lead us to believe that the *Parochet* served a different purpose. Another Talmudic passage¹⁹ discusses the problem raised by a Babylonian scholar, Raba, who refers to a *Parochet* which was sometimes folded and used either as a cover for the scroll when it was placed on the reading desk, or alternatively was placed on the desk so that the scroll should rest on it. Such use of the *Parochet* clearly differs considerably from that previously described and obviously shows that in the present instance it could not have been a fixed screen, but a small removable curtain which prior to its use as a desk or scroll cover probably hung either on the inside or the outside of the Ark doors.

Indeed, the commentators differ considerably even on this point. Rashi held the view that this *Parochet* was attached to the inside of the Ark, whereas a later generation of scholars insisted that it was suspended on the outside.²⁰ This difference of interpretation has long since passed beyond the realm of academic discussion and finds itself reflected in the variation in custom which differentiates the modern Ashkenazi and Sephardi synagogues. The former prefer to place the *Parochet* on the outside of the Ark, whilst the latter invariably attach it to the inside immediately behind the Ark doors. This variation in the use of the curtain in the modern synagogue may be regarded as a true reflection of the major differences which obtained in earlier times, for a close examination of the Talmudic passages cited point not only to the variant functions of the *Parochet* but, what is more significant, to the degree of difference which existed between one country and another. The fact that the first passage is cited in the name of a Palestinian scholar and the second in the name of a Babylonian would lead one to conclude that whereas in Palestine the *Parochet* was essentially a screen used to conceal the Ark, in Babylon it was merely used as a detachable curtain.

This conclusion receives a measure of support from evidence provided by archaeological discoveries. Among the remains of a 4th-century synagogue found in El Hammeh,²¹ northern Palestine, were found sections of a highly ornate marble screen decorated with such motifs as the Menorah, Shofar, Lulav and Ethrog. This screen was apparently fitted into sockets sunk into pillars which once stood in front of the Ark recess. There is little

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reason to doubt that this screen, although made of marble, served as a *Parochet* and its purpose was to act as a partition between the apse and the rest of the auditorium, thus enhancing the appearance of the Ark and the dignity to be shown to it by the congregation of worshippers. There is no doubt that this is still its primary function whether it hangs suspended in front of the Ark doors or immediately behind them.

III. THE PERPETUAL LIGHT

Another feature of the modern synagogue which enjoys distinction and prominence is the *Ner Tamid*, the Perpetual lamp, which hangs suspended in front of the Ark. There are no prescribed regulations governing the quality of the light or the method of its kindling, so that it may be supplied by any available medium. In most synagogues oil is preferred both for historical and practical reasons. The oil lamp has always been associated with divine worship and recalls memories of the Temple; but other modern media are equally permissible. Electricity is the obvious substitute though this may threaten the perpetuity of the light. A power cut or other interruption in the supply of current might extinguish the light, whereas a carefully tended oil lamp would be more reliable.

One of the particular characteristics of the *Ner Tamid* is its location. It is invariably placed in close proximity to the Ark and this, like the *Parochet*, is directly traceable to the first sanctuary, where a constant oil light 'burned outside the veil of testimony'.²² That original perpetual light, however, differed considerably from its modern counterpart in that it was not a single and separate lamp but was an integral part of the seven-branched candelabrum, from whose perpetual lamp the other branches of the Menorah were kindled each day. What the exact character of that original lamp was is not specifically defined in the scriptural context and only Rabbinic sources supply the requisite information. That which the scriptural text describes as the *Ner Tamid* is explained by the sages as the *Ner HaMaaravi*, the western lamp, because, according to their interpretation, it was placed in such a position within the candelabrum that it constantly faced westwards.²³

The connection between the perpetual light and the can-

delabrum only remained operative during the Temple's existence, but with its destruction the physical association was permanently severed. The seven-branched Menorah was never reproduced as part of the synagogue's equipment, but its perpetual lamp was represented by a separate lamp which was destined to occupy the same prominent position in front of the Ark and the *Parochet* as did the original whose existence it commemorates. This attachment to the lamp throughout the centuries subsequent to the Temple's destruction can only be evaluated on the basis of its inherent symbolism. Light, according to Rabbinic teaching, is demonstrative of the Divine Presence; hence, to quote a Rabbinic dictum, the preservation of the perpetual light in the synagogue is 'a testimony to all future generations that the Divine Presence rests on Israel'.²⁴ The Torah and its commandments, too, are compared to light, 'Thy words are a lamp to my feet' (Ps. cix. 105), 'The commandment is a lamp and the Torah is light' (Pr. vi. 23), sentiments which lend additional emphasis and symbolic significance to the proximity of the perpetual lamp to the Ark of the Torah.

In spite of the close association of the lamp with the Ark and the historical justification for its position in front of the Ark, the view has been expressed²⁵ that some alternative place should be found for it in the synagogue. The objections, though somewhat unrealistic, are based on the assumption that such a siting might convey the impression that the synagogue is imitating the church, where a similar device is so often found in front of the altar. In view of the distinctly Jewish background to the practice and its undeniable association with the Temple, it is not surprising that such objections have not been regarded seriously. Jewish sentiment would indeed be outraged were the perpetual light to be moved to the further end of the synagogue, as is suggested by those who hold this view, merely to avoid a possible misrepresentation.

IV. THE *Bimah*

Secondary only to the Ark in importance and prominence is the dais known as the *Bimah* (platform) or the *Almemar*—a corruption of the Arabic *Al-Minbar*, meaning pulpit, lectern or

stand. Its original and primary function was to serve as a platform on which a lectern was placed to support the scrolls during that part of the service in which readings from the scriptures took place.²⁶ This is still its essential function, although in most synagogues it is invariably associated with the *Shulchan* (table) at which the Reader stands and from which the service is conducted. The latter is a distinctly later development and from a purely historical viewpoint has no association with the *Bimah* for, as has been previously stated,²⁷ the Reader originally stood on ground level immediately in front of the Ark, and according to Rabbinic prescription was not permitted to conduct the service from an elevated dais.²⁸

The origins of the platform specially erected for the Torah reading are to be found in the period of the Babylonian exile, when Ezra convened his public gatherings for the purpose of re-educating the exiles. It is in that context that we read that Ezra stood on 'a pulpit of wood' i.e. a large wooden platform, and together with the elders of the people publicly read and expounded 'the book of the Law of God'.²⁹ Similarly it was the practice during the period of the Second Commonwealth for a wooden platform to be erected in the Temple courtyard on the occasion when the king convened the great assembly at the termination of the Sabbatical year and publicly declaimed passages from the Torah.³⁰ This historical precedent for public scriptural readings from a raised dais was later adopted as the accepted procedure in the synagogue; hence the *Bimah* became an established feature of the internal structure.

Its close association with the Torah heightened its significance and called forth the desire to display towards it all the affection which could be expressed in terms of material embellishment. The elaborate ornamentation designed for it frequently competed with that used for the Ark, at times even dwarfing the Ark because of its highly ornate design. We thus find in some medieval synagogues, especially those constructed in the Gothic style, that the whole of the interior appears to radiate from the centrally placed *Bimah*, conveying the impression that it alone wields the dominant influence on the rest of the structure. Other examples of both early and later styles of construction led additional enchantment to the *Bimah*, for it appears to have been a common practice to construct it in the

form of a circular platform surmounted by a highly ornamental crown. This exceptionally decorative motif seemed to give physical expression to the Rabbinic concept of 'the Crown of the Torah', emphasising the allegiance which should be displayed to its sovereignty in Jewish life.

This respect for the *Bimah* and its historical function has been sadly overcast by the bitter and at times acrimonious controversy which has raged around the subject of its location in the synagogue. The accepted tradition, which seemed to be generally observed was that it should be erected in the centre of the auditorium, but attempts were made during the early part of the 19th century to move it to the end of the building and to erect a combined dais which would contain the *Bimah* and the Ark. The purpose of the transposition was doubtless to dispense with the open space which would normally exist in front of the *Bimah*, thereby providing additional seating accommodation. This new mode of construction was especially favoured by the founders of the Reform Movement in Germany.

The crisis was reached within the orthodox community when a request for such an adaptation was submitted by a Hungarian congregation for the approval of the learned Rabbi of Pressburg, Moses Schreiber (1763-1839), known as the *Hatam Sofer*. His reply was a categorical prohibition.³¹ He regarded it as an innovation contrary to established tradition, and in support of his contention cited the authority of Maimonides, who had stated that the *Bimah* is to be erected in the centre of the synagogue for the reading of the Torah³² and for the purpose of the circuits to be made with the Lulav during the festival of Succoth.³³ The *Hatam Sofer's* ruling, however, did not deter the Reform congregations of Germany from adopting this new mode of synagogue construction, and their apparent disregard of tradition evoked the condemnation of the orthodox Rabbinic authorities of Hungary and Galicia, who, in 1866, issued a solemn edict forbidding such violation of historical practice. Communities were urged to adhere strictly to the traditional pattern and not to imitate the Reform Temples, which were accused of aping the church and substituting the Christian altar by this combined *Bimah* and Ark.

In spite of the opposition to the alteration in the siting of the *Bimah*, a considerable number of orthodox synagogues have

adopted the alleged innovation but deny that it is a tacit surrender to Reform, claiming that there is both historical and halachic justification for their action. The Rabbinic authority cited as their chief advocate is Rabbi Joseph Caro (1488-1575) who, in his commentary on the Code of Maimonides, wrote, 'There are those who at present erect the *Bimah* at the end of the synagogue and not in the middle . . . the location in the middle is *not obligatory* but varies according to the place and time. When the synagogues were exceedingly large it was necessary to place the *Bimah* in the centre in order that all the congregation should hear (the reading), but in these times when the synagogues are small and all the congregation can hear, it is more attractive to place it at the end rather than in the middle'. Caro's reference to the *Bimah* at the end raises one pertinent question which, in the welter of argument, seems to have been overlooked. Did he intend to convey that the *Bimah* could be installed at the eastern end, i.e. adjoining the Ark, or at the opposite end, as was the practice in medieval Sephardi synagogues, particularly in the 16th and 17th-century synagogues of Italy, where an elaborate *Bimah* was erected adjoining the western wall? The support derived from his ruling is somewhat limited in that it merely removes the character of obligation with regard to the central position.

Historical evidence from antiquity, however, is more conclusive, for the remains of the ancient synagogues clearly show that they did not have a central *Bimah*. The relics of the synagogue of Dura Europos contain a small raised platform adjoining the Ark erected at a higher level than the adjacent seats and this, from all appearances, served as the *Bimah* for the Torah reading. In the Beth Alpha remains there is also evidence that the *Bimah* stood in close proximity to the Ark recess. On the other hand the evidence provided by the Beth Shearim synagogue, whose remains were unearthed in 1938, testifies to the validity of Caro's view. This synagogue contained a *Bimah* in the form of a raised platform situated at the end of the auditorium opposite the Ark. Having regard to the fact that Beth Shearim was the seat of the Patriarch and the Sanhedrion, such a form of construction must have received the official approval of the religious authorities. It was this archaeological evidence which led Professor Sukenik to conclude that the

'custom of having it (the *Bimah*) in the middle of the hall is not attested to in antiquity'.³⁴

Those who desire to defend the tradition of the central siting of the *Bimah* frequently refer to the literary evidence contained in the Talmud. Their favourite citation is the description of the internal structure of the great Synagogue of Alexandria, where a wooden *Bimah* stood in the centre of the vast basilica on which the beadle would stand and wave a kerchief to indicate to the congregation when the requisite responses had to be made. The weakness of the argument based on this citation lies in the fact that in this instance even the central *Bimah* did not facilitate the congregation's participation in the reading of the Torah since the vastness of the auditorium precluded their hearing the service. One might also apply the arguments of a modern traditionalist³⁵ and claim that if the Biblical and Talmudic precedents are to be strictly adhered to then every *Bimah* should be made of wood and all the varieties of materials which have since been employed should be strenuously proscribed. In the final analysis therefore it would appear that the erection of a central *Bimah* cannot be regarded as mandatory, but merely as a practice which has become embodied in popular usage, though that usage bears no relation to the religious significance which has subsequently been attributed to it.

V. THE PULPIT

The pulpit from which addresses and sermons are delivered to the congregation is a comparatively recent innovation, and in spite of the fact that it has no genuine historical precedent, its adoption seems to have aroused no adverse comment. In most synagogues, even in those where the *Bimah* is centrally placed, it is situated immediately in front of the Ark; but in some synagogues it is to be found on one side of the auditorium. This latter pattern closely resembles the pulpit frequently found in some of the larger churches. Surprisingly enough this obvious imitation has evoked no opprobrium, unless one is to assume that it has been passed over in shocked silence.

From a purely historical viewpoint the pulpit and the *Bimah* are inseparable, for the purpose of the former is to expound the word of Scripture read from the latter. Indeed there is

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* ample evidence that at one time such addresses were in fact delivered from the *Bimah*. We thus find that in the same passage in which Maimonides prescribes that the *Bimah* shall be centrally placed for the purpose of reading the Torah, he adds that the same dais shall be used 'by him who shall deliver words of exhortation, so that the congregation shall hear him'.³⁶ Similarly if we re-examine the reference to the 'pulpit of wood' erected by Ezra for the purpose of publicly reading the scriptures to the assembly, it will be recalled that this dais was also used for the purpose of expounding the Torah—'to give the sense that they might understand the reading'.³⁷

It would therefore accord with historical tradition to associate the function of the pulpit with that of the *Bimah*, and where the latter is centrally sited to use it also for the purpose of delivering public discourses. But it would appear that neither logical argument nor historical tradition could in this instance influence the progress of events. All too few synagogues were erected with such a combined pulpit and *Bimah*; a unique example being the old Sephardi synagogue of Bevis Marks which was modelled on the pattern of the Portuguese synagogue of Amsterdam. With the introduction of the modern counter-part of the Torah exposition, the pulpit and the *Bimah* were severed. The latter was used for its original purpose, but also by the Reader for the conduct of the services, though this was contrary to strict Rabbinic regulation, whilst the former was installed in its present position to be used by the preacher for the delivery of Sabbath and festival addresses.

VI. SEATING ARRANGEMENTS

* A description of the seating arrangements in the synagogues of antiquity recorded in early Rabbinic literature states, 'the elders sat facing the congregation with their backs towards the sanctuary and the congregation sat facing the sanctuary'.³⁸ These elders, the lay dignitaries of the community, were given the privilege of sitting in special seats installed on the east wall or alongside the Ark recess. As for the members of the congregation, their seats were so arranged that throughout the service they faced the Ark. This implies that they sat either in parallel

rows in the body of the auditorium or round the sides of the building facing inwards towards the Ark.

From the evidence supplied by archaeologists it would appear that the latter arrangement was most popular, at least in the early centuries of the Common Era, since in most of the ancient synagogues whose remains have been unearthed the only permanent seats which have been preserved are those which are installed on the sides of the building. This however does not preclude the possibility that in the larger basilicas seats were also to be found in the body of the hall. In our contemporary synagogues both methods are employed; hence where the *Bimah* is sited at the eastern end the seats are arranged in the body of the hall, and where it is centrally placed the seats run parallel with the sides of the building facing inwards. Similarly the special seats allocated to the Wardens, the modern counterpart to the elders of antiquity, follow the ancient pattern, although in some synagogues their seats are located directly in front of the *Bimah*, especially where the latter is centrally placed.

The allocation of a special seat on the east wall for the Rabbi of the congregation, and in some synagogues an additional special seat for the Chief Rabbi, has become an established practice. Although this is generally deemed a token of respect for the spiritual leader of the community, the custom has a long and interesting history traceable to the precedent established in antiquity. Among the remains of the ancient synagogues and especially in those found at Hamat (near Tiberias), at Chorazin (at the northern end of Lake Tiberias) and at Delos in Greece, there were found in each site well preserved relics of an elaborately designed chair or throne which had originally been situated adjacent to the Ark. These unique discoveries excited the curiosity of the archaeologists who attempted to identify the possible occupant of these special seats. In accordance with the Talmudic record previously cited, these seats might have been occupied by the lay head of the community since they were placed in a position which faced the congregation; on the other hand their remarkable construction would lead one to believe that they were designed for some eminent personality who held some specially prominent office.

In this connection literary evidence aided the scholars in their quest for a solution and, indirectly, a new and conclusive

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interpretation was given to a passage in the New Testament which had previously proved somewhat elusive. Matthew, in his characteristically caustic remarks, spoke of 'the scribes and Pharisees who sit in *Moses' seat*' (xxiii. 2), an observation which had always been interpreted metaphorically. This passage however assumes a new significance when interpreted in the light of a Midrashic exposition which compares the throne of King Solomon³⁹ to '*this kathedra of Moses*'.⁴⁰ Such a positive reference in the Midrash to a seat which actually bore this designation clearly indicates that this was a recognisable feature in the synagogue of that period. It must therefore have been a seat reserved for the scholar whose task it was to interpret the Torah of Moses, and it now seems beyond doubt that it was against such scholars, the scribes and the Pharisees, that Matthew directed his disparaging remarks.

Another literary record, preserved in the Jerusalem Talmud,⁴¹ when describing the appurtenances of the synagogue, speaks of the benches used by the congregation and makes reference to the 'litter'. The expression used for this exceptional accommodation appears in our editions of the Talmud as *kaltura*, a word which has been subjected to a variety of emendations. With the aid of the previously cited Midrash it is now possible to identify the expression as a corruption of *kathedra*, which would again point to the practice of installing such a special seat in the synagogue.⁴²

Another feature of the seating arrangements prevailing in the modern synagogue which can claim to be established in accordance with ancient tradition, is the allocation of fixed places to regular worshippers or members. Whilst there is no record that such a practice was based on the payment of a statutory fee as is the custom in our synagogues, there is evidence that worshippers were encouraged to occupy fixed places in the synagogue. This appears to be the natural deduction from such a Talmudic statement as 'whoever fixes the place for the recital of his prayers, the God of Abraham shall aid him',⁴³ and there is no doubt that this sentiment led Maimonides to incorporate in his Code the recommendation that 'one should fix the place for one's prayers'.⁴⁴

Although one cannot state with certainty when the practice to pay for such seats came into being there can be no doubt that

by the Middle Ages it had become firmly established and was regarded as normal to sell seats to worshippers, presumably in order to raise funds for the maintenance of the synagogues. By such transactions the seats became the private property of the purchaser and could be transmitted to one's heirs as part of their inheritance. They could also be claimed by creditors in payment of outstanding debts. It is even recorded that such seats sometimes fell into the hands of non-Jewish creditors who sold them by auction in order to realise their capital value.

The modes and customs prevailing in the synagogue in respect of its seating arrangements seem to have witnessed little change during the course of the centuries, especially since the Middle Ages, for whilst permanent ownership of seats may have lapsed in many congregations, though still preserved in some, the method of calculation of their value has not altered. The computation in relation to the proximity to the Ark and the east wall—the '*mizrach wand*' as it was so popularly designated in Eastern European communities—is still a marked feature of the gradations of seat rentals. The east wall still holds its attraction for those who vie, often without any justification, for the privilege of being allocated a seat in its vicinity.

VII. DECORATION

It is a characteristic of personal piety to manifest the desire to adorn a place of worship by using the best materials available or by embellishing its appurtenances. By such means one gives added expression to the act of adoration which in itself is frequently impelled by the sense of sacrifice. To offer anything but the best of one's material good would be a virtual profanation; to refrain from applying one's talents to the act of beautification would be to reduce the sacred to the level of the mundane. Hence the synagogue, like the first sanctuary and the Temples which succeeded it, has always laid claim to the artistic ability of its devotees. In this respect the Jew has differed little from the adherents of other faiths who also trace the beginnings of their artistic expression to sacred spheres rather than the secular.

But the Jew has a longer tradition to support him and from which to draw renewed inspiration. He can recall the skill of

Bezalel and his associates whose talents were employed 'to devise curious works in gold, silver and brass', the cutting and setting of stones, the carving of wood, and the 'embroidery in blue, scarlet, purple and fine linen',⁴⁵ all of which were directed towards the enhancement of the beauty and glory of the sanctuary. The same spirit of dedication moved Solomon to employ the most expert craftsmen and the finest materials that could be obtained for the establishment of his Temple; and likewise Herod's Temple, which took nearly eighty years to complete, was without doubt the most magnificent edifice that Jerusalem had witnessed, constructed as it was on the grand scale of the contemporary style.

It was this tradition which inspired later generations to apply their talents to the adornment of their synagogues and the appurtenances, although from a purely historical viewpoint it was probably the appurtenances of worship which enjoyed priority of attention. Only at a later date could the building itself receive the artistic embellishments which congregations desired to lavish on it. If therefore one examines the process of synagogal decoration in its chronological sequence, one finds that the first item of equipment to receive attention was the scroll of the Torah which, in view of its centrality in the scheme of worship, is highly understandable. We thus find that in addressing itself to the need to beautify the act of worship the Talmud specifies the necessity for 'a beautiful scroll, written in fine ink with a fine reed pen by a highly skilled scribe, and wrapped with beautiful silks'.⁴⁶ The piety which prompted such an act of adornment of ritual objects was regarded by the Rabbis as *Hiddur Mitzvah*, which literally means the adornment of a precept with the beauty of majesty. Such motivation was logically applied to the performance of all religious acts which required a measure of personal effort to enhance their outward appearance.⁴⁷

Having equipped the synagogue with a beautiful scroll, it was natural to extend the act of embellishment to the mantle which covered the scroll; hence the reference in the passage just quoted to wrapping it in beautiful silks, or, as is found elsewhere in the Mishna,⁴⁸ to 'ornamented mantles'. This custom still prevails in the modern synagogue where the Torah scrolls are invariably encased in highly ornate, decorative covers bearing a

variety of traditional symbols and motifs all of which offer a wide range of expression for the embroiderer's art.

Similar artistic talent, inspired by the sanctity of association with the Torah, has been directed to the designs used for other scroll accessories. The crown which often surmounts the scroll, symbolic of the concept of the 'Crown of Torah', eloquently expresses the majesty associated with the beauty of holiness. The breastplate suspended in front of the scroll, to which such scrupulous attention is paid, recalls that part of the High Priest's apparel which bore this name and is invariably of a highly artistic quality, ranging over a wide field of expressive representation. The bells form an integral part of the scroll's ornamentation and serve to remind the worshipper of the bells which were once attached to the hem of the priest's robe to warn the assembly in the Temple of the priest's approach to the sanctuary.⁴⁹ The gentle tinkle of these bells as the scroll is carried in procession round the synagogue lends an added charm to the ceremony and serves to awaken the historical recollection of the glories which were once part of the Temple ceremonial.

The pointer, called the *Yad* (hand), a reproduction of the human hand clenched in a pointing position with forefinger extended, has primarily a utilitarian function. It is to be used by the Reader, as he points to each word of the scroll, in place of his own finger which, by constant contact with the script, might contribute to its erasure. But utility in this instance is invariably combined with artistic expression and this accessory, too, is enlivened by the many designs which have been created to beautify it.

The same quality of artistic talent used in the decoration of the appurtenances was directed to the fabric of the building. Simplicity was replaced by grandeur and the humble meeting place for prayer by a sanctuary endowed with all the gifts that could be lavished upon it. The services of architects, artists and craftsmen were engaged to devise the media which would inspire the worshippers to greater devotion as they stood in these impressive surroundings. To this end even the plastic arts were employed, in spite of the long-standing aversion to their use and their implied proscription in the Second Commandment. The zeal to beautify the building seemed to outweigh the possible

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danger that the attention of the worshipper might be diverted to adoration of the object of his artistic creation. We thus find, even in the synagogues of the early centuries of the Common Era, a galaxy of artistic designs such as elaborate friezes containing a variety of motifs—flowers, animals, palms, the Magen David, eagles, the Menorah and devious geometric patterns. Such embellishments were not only embossed in bas relief, but were also modelled in the round, and it was not an uncommon sight to see figures of lions prominently displayed at the foot of the Ark steps.

Even more striking are the intricately constructed mosaic floors which, in addition to their floral patterns and the popular symbols of the Zodiac, contain reproductions of scriptural scenes even to the extent of displaying the human figure in their exquisite compositions. The floor of the synagogue at Beth Alpha is probably one of the most outstanding of this type of pictorial mosaic. In it the Zodiac occupies a central position, but in addition the reproduction of the scene of the Sacrifice of Isaac is given due prominence. Such mosaic floors were not unique to the synagogues of antiquity and were doubtless in vogue for a considerable period. But even though such exceptional designs as the human figure were permitted for decorative purposes, care was taken to avoid any infringement of the regulation which forbade their being used directly or indirectly as objects of worship.

Particular attention was paid to the problem of prostration on such mosaic floors, which could involve a violation of the prohibition to 'place any figured stone in your land to bow down on it' (Lev. xxvi. 1). Indeed, such mosaics may once have been included in this forbidden category, and it is therefore not surprising that the Talmud records that the eminent Babylonian scholar, Rav, who lived in the third century, refrained from prostrating himself on a stone floor.⁵⁰ Presumably such a floor comprised a mosaic pattern, and this scholar felt impelled to display his displeasure with such practices. The same awareness of the dangers involved in such practices seems to have continued well into the Middle Ages, for Maimonides records the custom to spread mats on the paved floors of synagogues in order that the face of the worshipper should not touch the stones as he performs his prostrations.⁵¹

The employment of the plastic arts for synagogal decoration finds its most exceptional and provocative expression in the famous third-century synagogue of Dura Europos, where the walls are completely covered by frescoes depicting a variety of Biblical scenes. Among these are David's anointment by Samuel, the childhood of Moses, the Purim story, Jacob blessing his sons, Moses and the Burning Bush, the Exodus, Aaron and his sons in their priestly robes, the valley of dry bones, and similar reproductions of great events in scriptural history. In these delicately executed pictures all the figures are represented in contemporary Greek costume and no attempt is made to disguise the subjects depicted. That permission should have been granted for such a lavish display of the arts in a place of worship excites curiosity.

One can only presume that the conditions of the period must have been exceptional, or that these pictures were designed to familiarise the public with the contents of Scripture, as was the practice in the medieval churches where illiteracy was so rife and this medium was employed to educate the masses. The fact that these frescoes have survived in such a fine state of preservation would indicate that no serious objection could have been raised to their original installation. Possibly the need was felt for such visual aid to convey the lessons of past history, and an educative medium was not frowned upon by the religious authorities of the time. What is more remarkable in this instance is the fact that the Jerusalem Talmud bears witness to the trends prevailing at the time, for we are informed that 'in the days of Rabbi Yochanan they began to paint on the walls and he raised no objection'.⁵² It is indeed a striking coincidence that this scholar lived in Palestine in the third century and was thus contemporaneous with the foundation of the synagogue in Dura Europos.

Equally interesting is the reference in the Talmud⁵³ to the presence of a statue in an ancient synagogue in Babylon in which the scholars Rav and Samuel used to worship regularly. This too concerns the same period, the third century, but whilst such human representations in stone would have called forth the unqualified condemnation of all sections of the community, this instance must be regarded as exceptional in the extreme. Doubtless this figure was installed by some superior political

authority, since it was probably a representation of the reigning monarch and therefore no action could be taken to remove it.⁵⁴

The artistic productions of this period must however be regarded as unique and in no way indicative of the general practice adopted in other parts of the world or at other times. Indeed the evidence evinced from the remains of other ancient synagogues would prove that in the course of time even such innocuous forms of embellishment as animal figures were deeply resented. The fact that many of those which have been preserved show distinct traces of defacement would reflect the objections raised against them. Doubtless the reasons which prompted such violent opposition to artistic representations were based on the belief that they constituted a distraction to the attention of worshippers during their prayers or, what is probably more feasible, that they were regarded as graven images and therefore an intrusion of foreign influences into the synagogue which, unlike the church, should preclude the use of such forms and symbols.

With the passage of time, however, the gulf separating these two extreme views was bridged, and a measure of compromise was reached whereby the use of the human image was forbidden whilst floral and animal representations were permitted. But even this solution was not attained without an intense struggle, for opposing views continued to be heard and expressed throughout the subsequent centuries. When, for example, in the 12th century stained glass windows were introduced into the synagogue of Cologne many discordant voices were raised against them. The famous Meir of Rotenberg (1215-1293) not only forbade them but extended the ban even to the illuminated decoration of Prayer Book manuscripts. The echo of the controversy was even heard in our own generation, when considerable controversy accompanied the introduction of artistically rendered symbols in the decor of the Yeshurun synagogue in Jerusalem.

In whichever form this artistic talent expressed itself, it is clear that it was actuated by honourable motives. Those who installed the decorative additions to the synagogue were moved by the desire to enhance the beauty and impressiveness of the house of worship. Indeed from evidence available both from the past and from current practice, there is every reason to be-

lieve that these adornments were invariably donated to the synagogue by pious well-wishers. Many of the mosaic floors, to which reference has been made, bear inscribed plaques stating the name of the donor and the occasion which prompted the gift. Such practices, which are still a recognised feature of our communal life, are frequently referred to even in the Talmudic records. One of the most popular gifts was a candelabrum, and this was invariably inscribed and bore the name of the donor. Even non-Jews are recorded to have presented such gifts. One such well-wisher, whose name was inscribed on a candelabrum, was a Roman named Antoninus,⁵⁵ another was an Arab named Shazrek.⁵⁶ Other gifts in kind presented by Jews and non-Jews were materials for the construction such as beams, which also bore such pious inscriptions as 'given to God'.⁵⁷

More significant perhaps are the inscriptions found on the walls, pillars and floors of some of the ancient synagogues which combined the record of the gift with a prayer for the wellbeing of the donor. There seems to have been a regular formula for such records of generosity, for the commemorative plaques usually commence with the words 'May he be remembered for good'. These pious prayers on behalf of such contributors to the embellishment of the synagogue recall our modern practice of offering the *Mi she'berach* prayer which invokes blessing on those who donate gifts in cash or in kind to the synagogue. Indeed, in this respect we closely resemble our forebears who in similar manner acknowledged the generosity of those who were prompted by their piety to contribute to the adornment of the synagogue and the furnishing of its equipment in order to heighten its splendour and extol Him to whose worship it is dedicated.

NOTES AND REFERENCES

1. Shab. 32a; Ber. 47b.
2. Shab. 32a.
3. Hil. Tefillah xi. 3.
4. Tosefta Meg. iv. 21.
5. M. Taan. ii. 1.
6. Eruv. 86b.
7. Sot. 39b.
8. Sot. 41a.
9. Soferim xiv. 14.
10. See *supra* p. 37.

11. See Sukenik, *Ancient Synagogues in Palestine and Greece*, pp. 52-53.
 12. See Elbogen, J.Q.R. Vol. xix (1907), pp. 704 ff, who draws attention to the distinction between 'descending before the Ark' and 'passing before the Ark', a frequent alternative expression. He suggests that where the former expression is used, the Ark was on a higher level, and in the latter case the Ark was not raised. Müller in Soferim, p. 148, suggests that the ancient synagogues were built in the shape of an amphitheatre. Some prefer to interpret the practice as expressive of 'from the depths have I called unto thee' (Ps. cxxx. 1).
 13. See Sukenik, *Ancient Synagogues*, p. 523.
 14. Ex. xxvi. 31-33.
 15. J. Meg. iv. 5.
 16. Soferim xi. 3.
 17. In the same passage this scholar instructs that if two scrolls are used, each shall be taken out separately and the first shall be replaced before the second is used.
 18. Meg. 26b.
 19. See Rashi and Tosafot to Meg. 26b.
 20. See Sukenik, *The Ancient Synagogue of El Hammeh* (Jerusalem, 1935) pp. 58-69.
 21. Ex. xxiv 2-3.
 22. Shab. 22b.
 23. *ibid.*
 24. See Eisenstein, *Ozar Yisrael*, Vol. vii. p. 112.
 25. See Meg. 26b, which makes reference to a 'throne' on which the scroll was placed.
 26. See *supra* p. 54.
 27. Ber. 10b.
 28. Neh. viii. 4, 8.
 29. M. Sot. vii 8.
 30. See Responsa of *Hatam Sofer* to Orach Chayim, No. 28, also Responsa of *Neziv, Meshiv Davar* to Orach Chayim, No. 15.
 31. Hil Tefillah xi. 3.
 32. Hil Lulav vii. 23.
 33. See *El Hammeh*, p. 77.
 34. See Rabbi Mordechai Hacohen in *Noam* (Jerusalem, 1962), Vol. v. pp. 60-69.
 35. Hil Tefillah xi. 3.
 36. Neh. viii. 8.
 37. Tosefta Meg. iv. 21.
 38. I Kings x. 19.
 39. See Pesiktah d'R. Kahana (Lyck, 1868) ed. Buber, p. 7b.
 40. J. Meg. iii. 1.
 41. With regard to the use of the 'litter', cp. Sukenik, *Ancient Synagogues* p. 17, note 2, and his description of a bas-relief found in Capernaum which was in the form of a wheeled, chariot-like structure. This bears some resemblance to a litter though its purpose is not clearly defined. On the other hand the reference to the *kathedra* may throw some light on the 'Throne' (Meg. 26b) on which the *Sefer Torah* was placed. This may also have been used as the seat of the scholar.
 42. Ber. 6a.
 43. Hil Tefillah v. 6.
 44. Ex. xxxv. 32-35.

46. Shab. 133b.
 47. This concept was derived from a homiletical interpretation of the verse 'This is my God and I shall *make a habitation* for him' (Ex. xv. 2) which, by slight adjustment of the original Hebrew, was translated as 'I will beautify him'.
 48. M. Kelim xxviii. 4.
 49. Ex. xxviii. 34-35.
 50. Meg. 22b.
 51. Hil. Akum vi. 7.
 52. J. Ab. Zara iii. 3.
 53. Rosh Hash. 24b.
 54. See D. Kauffmann in J.Q.R. Vol. ix. (1897) pp. 263 ff. who suggests that this figure would have been disregarded by the scholars during their worship as they would probably close their eyes or refuse to look at it.
 55. J. Meg. iii. 2.
 56. Arachin 6b.
 57. Tosefta Meg. iii. 5.