

## A Historical Analysis of the Role of the Ancient Synagogue, and its Implication for the Contemporary Church

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### Abstract

*In this article, the importance, origin and function of the synagogue are surveyed using a historical analysis. Studies have shown that the origin of the synagogue is shrouded in mystery and may never be fully known. However, the synagogue was clearly a well-known institution in both Palestine and the Diaspora in the 1<sup>st</sup> century and the intertestamental period. The importance and function of the ancient synagogue are surveyed and classified into social and religious functions. The article argues that these functions have important implication for the Nigerian Church, since the church is understood to have taken over some of the activities of the synagogue.*

**Keywords:** Ancient Synagogue; Treasury; Place of refuge; Communal worship; Place of manumission; Charity

### Introduction

The synagogue was one of the most important social and religious institutions of antiquity in that it was not only central to Judaism, but also left indelible marks on both Christianity and Islam (Griffith 1987:150; Levine 2005:1; Horsley 1996:131). It was especially important during the Hellenistic and the Greco-Roman period in both Palestine and the Diaspora, in that it served as a locale in which the Jews expressed their piety and identity and function as a house of meeting, prayer, school, court and locale for other social services (Harding 2003:289).

Harding (2003:289) notes how Acts, Philo<sup>1</sup>, and Josephus,<sup>2</sup> testify to the presence of synagogues in both Palestine and Diaspora and how they were often partially accessible to non-Jews. In an account of the existence of the synagogue in Alexandria around 38 CE, Philo (Legat 20.132) remarks on how numerous and widespread the synagogues were in every section of the city. It appears that the synagogue was the primary institution

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<sup>1</sup> Philo was a first-century Hellenistic Jewish philosopher who influenced early Christian theology and biblical interpretation. His birth date is uncertain, but he is known to have been chosen by the Jews to present their complaints before Caligula around 40 CE (Hiebert 2009b:874–875).

<sup>2</sup> Josephus was a first-century Jewish writer who is an important source of information concerning Jewish history during the intertestamental and New Testament period. Josephus was born in Jerusalem around 37 CE. His father was a priest and his mother a descendant of the Hasmonean royal house. He was also a Pharisee (Stone 2009:791).

of the Jewish community in Alexandria (Schwartz 2009:17). Both Griffith (1987:2) and Schwartz (2009:17) have noted how archaeological and epigraphic records testify to the widespread existence of synagogues in Egypt around the 3<sup>rd</sup> century BCE. This implies that the situation was not unique to Egypt; as in antiquity, synagogues were found almost everywhere across the Mediterranean world.

In the New Testament, the gospel writers all testify to the existence and important role of the synagogue in Jesus' life and ministry (Mk 3:1–7; Matt 4:23; Lk 4:14–15, 43–44, Jn 18:20).<sup>3</sup> It was Jesus' custom to attend the services of various synagogues, which served as an important locale for both his teaching and preaching (Dunn 2006:221–222; Ryan 2016:1). In Acts 17:1–2 Paul is also said to have attended a synagogue which he used as a platform for preaching the message of Jesus Christ as the fulfilment of the of the Old Testament. His converts from the Jews, proselytes and God-fearing gentiles also seem to have been drawn largely from various synagogues.

Looking at the above information, one may be right to say that synagogues played an important role as far as the religious, social and political life of first-century Judaism was concerned. And in view of the importance of the ancient synagogue and its functions as noted above, one is compelled to ask, what could be the implication of this to contemporary church? This question becomes necessary when attention is given to the failure of the contemporary church in Nigeria to address the needs (religious and social) of faith communities. It is therefore beneficial to understand the importance of the ancient synagogue, its origin and function.

### **The origin and functions of the ancient synagogue**

Determining the question as to where, when, and how the synagogue originated has produced many theories (Saldarini 1989:1080). For many, the synagogue's origins are shrouded in mystery and may never be known (Runesson 2001:21, 70). The difficulty in searching for the origin of the synagogue is illustrated by the fact that every period in the history of Israel, including the time prior to the First Temple, has at some stage been considered by scholars as a possible period for the emergence of the synagogue (Runesson 2001:23). However, Levine (1996:427) suggests the need to revisit the origin of the synagogue from a different angle, stating that instead of exploring the earlier sources for clues about the time and place of the synagogue's origin, one should begin with a period for which more reliable evidence is available about what the synagogue was and how it operated. Equipped with what is known about the synagogue as clearly documented in history, it is then possible to work backwards and ask where the activities that were performed in the synagogue took place in earlier periods.

Runesson (2001:167), who uses the reading of the law as model for tracing the origin of the synagogue in his book *Origin of the synagogue: a socio-historical study*, in essence agrees with Levine and states that it is necessary to work on a theory based on an already-suggested period and location as the time and place of origin of the synagogue, and then put forward a credible explanation as to how and why it originated

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<sup>3</sup> Ryan (2016:2), in his recent study, makes a case that the synagogue as an institution was an important aspect of the historical Jesus' social, religious and cultural identity. Thus, according to him, the link between the synagogue and Jesus is not the creation of the different gospel writers but rather the reflection of the historical situation during the life of the historical Jesus.

there. Levine (1996:427) furthermore suggests a more sociological approach: searching for the sociological circumstances of the origin of the synagogue rather than searching for the moment of religious innovation that prognosticated its creation.

For Levine (1996:427–8), the Hellenistic and early Roman periods, especially the 1<sup>st</sup> century, provide us with an idea of how the synagogue looked and functioned. Runesson (2013:904) also argues that there are indications from the 1<sup>st</sup> century CE of the widespread distribution of synagogues in both the countryside and municipal areas from “Galilee and Judea” to the larger Mediterranean world, extending to the northern coasts of the Black Sea. Clearly in this period, synagogues were part of a wider pattern of Jewish institutions in the ancient world in which public and religious activities took place (Moon and Punt 2013:5). However, what makes the institution central in both “Galilee and Judea” is the presence of public synagogues (the urban and town assemblies) and association synagogues. Literary and archaeological evidence of the presence of the synagogue in the 1<sup>st</sup> century CE in both Galilee and Judea abound, but not Samaria. However, the presence of a synagogue in Samaria in the Diaspora around the 3<sup>rd</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> century BCE has been clearly established (Runesson 2013:904).

This article agrees with Levine and Runesson that the 1<sup>st</sup> century seems to provide the best window through which we can gather information about the synagogue. However, this should not be taken to mean that this article has accepted the 1<sup>st</sup> century as the possible period of the origin of the synagogue origin. It should also be noted that this article is on investigation of the role of the ancient synagogue and not the origin of the synagogue.

### **The role of communal institutions in the Greco-Roman world**

As observed earlier, the reason behind the creation of the synagogue by a local Jewish community was the need for a central institution that would provide a variety of ministries or services to the community.<sup>4</sup> This is because the basic word meaning “synagogue” in Greek, *συναγωγή*, refers to assemblies for judicial, communal or political purposes, and for Jewish communities for communal prayer or the study of the law (Cohen 1999:91; 2016:318). In view of this, as noted earlier, the synagogue became firmly rooted in Jewish communities of late antiquity as the Jewish communal centre par excellence. This understanding of the role of the synagogue resulted in some Jews giving the institution the name “house of people” (Levine 2005:381). It is therefore important to investigate to what extent the synagogue fulfilled the diverse needs of a community, and not just those of religious teaching and worship. This is important because of the interchange between religion and human activity in the ancient Greco-Roman world.<sup>5</sup> The Greco-Roman temples were not just intended for offering of prayers and sacrifices, they also formed the areas around which many civic activities were carried out (Binder

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<sup>4</sup> This supports the observation that the relationship between the synagogue’s origin and function cannot be separated. The synagogue came into existence to meet various needs of the community of Jews in the Diaspora and in Palestine.

<sup>5</sup> It is understood that in the ancient Greco-Roman world, religious activities were not limited to a narrow, privatised sphere, but cut across politics, warfare, family life, and just about everything else within the realm of human endeavour. The Roman emperor was not merely the emperor but was at the same time the Pontifex Maximus, the high priest of the nation. In the same manner, Roman legions as a matter of policy travelled with *augures* or priests, who took the auspices before battles or other major events (Binder 1999:389).

1999:389; Levine 2005:390). Thus, we turn our attention to the broader role of the synagogue.

### **The broader role of the synagogue**

The terms συναγωγή (place of gathering), προσευχή (place of prayer), τὸ ἱερόν (the sanctuary), εὐχέιον (place of prayer), σαββατεῖον (Sabbath meeting place), διδασκαλεῖον (place of instruction), *templum*, and amphitheatre may provide insights regarding the essential nature and functioning of the synagogue (Levine 1996:429–30; Cohen 1999:91). It is also possible that this institution served somewhat different purposes in different milieus. It is worthwhile noting that these names arose in the Diaspora, while the name for this institution in Palestine, with one exception, was always συναγωγή (Levine 1996:430). The two main terms, συναγωγή and προσευχή, may reflect two differing backgrounds. The latter appears to clearly indicate that synagogues in the Diaspora featured a religious dimension and may have even acquired a measure of sanctity that was absent in contemporary Palestine (Levine 1996:430). This development might have been due to its exceptional context, inter alia, being far from the Jerusalem Temple and surrounded by pagan religious models. Furthermore, the greater need of the Jews in the Diaspora was expressed clearly in religious-communal terms alongside their pagan environments, which indisputably also had an influence on the way of life, nature and emphasis of the Diaspora synagogues (Levine 1996:430).

The Palestinian synagogue, on the other hand, was exceptional, not only because it was referred to almost exclusively by one term, συναγωγή, which did not have a distinct religious connotation. Instead, the synagogue in Palestine is often described as a place primarily for social gathering and as a communal institution (Levine 1996:430; Olsson 2003:31). It is possible that the synagogue in Palestine as a communal institution partially had its roots in the gatherings at the city gate<sup>6</sup> and the many communal functions these gatherings fulfilled, instead of the Temple and its functions. The name synagogue itself, according to Levine (2003:7), is most appropriate for an institution of this nature, indicating a place for gathering without an exclusive religious connotation. A Palestine synagogue was therefore the largest, and often the only, public building in a Jewish town or community.

Given this widespread diversity among Palestinian and Diaspora first-century synagogues, the question arises: what was the common denominator among them? What features or functions were regarded as core functions? Levine (1996:430) and Rosenfeld and Meniray (1999:259) argue that the synagogue attended to all the needs of a community. Its functions included hosting political meetings, social gatherings, courts, schools, hostels, charity activities, slave manumissions, and meals (sacred or otherwise), while it also fulfilled some religious-liturgical functions. In terms of religious-liturgical functions, Levine (1996:430) and Rosenfeld and Meniray (1999:259) all refer to the study of the Torah and the saying of prayers. It is thus apparent that the synagogue played a variety of roles to meet the political, social and religious needs of the people. With this, attention will now be given to the discussion of the specific role of the synagogue as noted above.

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<sup>6</sup> The city gate will be discussed in 2.8.1 to present a clear picture of its function.

However, in discussing the role of the ancient synagogue, this article will classify the eleven functions of the synagogue discussed by Silas (2020:61–78) into religious and social functions. While all the functions are important, this article will focus on the most appropriate functions for aiding the Nigerian church. Below is the analysis of functions of the synagogue, beginning with the religious functions.

## **Religious Functions**

### ***Reading and exposition of Scripture in the synagogue***

It is generally accepted that the first function of the synagogue was as a gathering place for the reading and exposition of Scripture (Cohen 1999:89; Binder 1999:399). Kloppenborg (2006:278), for example, mentions that the Theodotos inscription explicitly lists the teaching of the Torah as a primary function of the synagogue. The exposition of Scripture (Torah) as a central act of congregational worship continues to the present day (Feinberg 1996:1143; White 2009:657). Griffith (1987:120–130) also refers to how both Philo and Josephus emphasise the importance of the instruction on the Torah in the synagogue. The Torah was subdivided into 154 (or 155) units and was read within a three-year-cycle (White 2009:657). This is proved by the writings of Josephus<sup>7</sup>, the New Testament, and the patristic authors (White 2009:657). This is also supported by literary, epigraphical and archaeological evidence<sup>8</sup> (Binder 1999:399). The Pentateuch was highly valued and respected as the true Word of God. As far as this system is concerned, a high degree of personal responsibility and competency was highly demanded.

### ***Prayer***

Unlike the Torah reading, scholars appear not to have a consensus on the saying of prayers as one of the functions of the synagogue (Binder 1999:404; White 2009:657; Cohen 1999:89; Yamauchi 1992:784; Feinberg 1996:1143; Ritter 2015:101–5). However, according to Kloppenborg (2006:279), prayer was one of the functions of the synagogue in Galilee and other places outside Jerusalem. Griffith (1987:5–6) also emphasises that prayer was a key function of the synagogue. Philo consistently refers to the meeting places of the Jews as *προσευχαί*, with only two references to them as

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<sup>7</sup> “for he [Moses] did not suffer the guilt of ignorance to go on without punishment, but demonstrated the law to be the best and the most necessary instruction of all others, permitting the people to leave off their other employments, and to assemble together for the hearing of the law, and learning it exactly, and this not once or twice, or oftener, but every week; which thing all the other legislators seem to have neglected.” (Ap 2.175). These weekly gatherings centered on the learning of the customs and the Law became the most excellent and essential form of study in the synagogue (Antiq 16.43; Antiq 4.12).

<sup>8</sup> In part, one can attribute the frequent appearance of this function in our sources to the distinctiveness of this Jewish customs. Other religions had their sacred writings, but these documents were typically reserved for the priests and never read in public. As Josephus was quick to point out to his Gentile readers, Jews did not make a secret of the precepts to which they adhered, but published them openly among the people (Antiq 16.43). Nor can the Jewish Scriptures be compared with the various philosophical writings debated by groups such as the Stoics. For the Jews, the first five books of the Old Testament (the Pentateuch) are the very Word of God. Most also accepted the divine status of the prophetic books and writings (see Luke 4:17–19). As far as this view is concerned, the correct knowledge of the books of the Law, and the traditions therein, played an important role in maintaining the right relationship with God and others (Binder 1999:399).

συναγωγή, when asserting how the Jews prayed together as a community (Legat 311; Vit Mos2.23–24).

Reflecting on how common prayers were observed in the ancient Near East, Binder (1999:406) is of the opinion that, even if prayer is not clearly mentioned as an element of worship in the synagogue, one should assume that it happened. To him, if gentiles could begin their public assemblies with prayers, “how much more would Jews have incorporated prayer within their weekly synagogue gatherings?”<sup>9</sup> In noting how the Babylonian captivity brought changes to the Jewish religion after they had lost their land, Temple and cultic ministrations, Wilson (2006:400) argues that the Jews adopted prayer as a non-sacrificial religious activity. Thus, prayers were likely a key function in the synagogue.

### ***Festivals, holy days and communal dining***

In considering festivals, holy days<sup>10</sup> and communal dining<sup>11</sup> as part of the function of the synagogue, White (2009:658) states that the Old Testament festivals of the Jewish religious calendar were observed according to the agricultural year. This confirms the proposition that the ancient Jews divided not only space but also time into categories of sacred and profane. Buildings, days, weeks and months were set aside for religious purposes (Binder 1999:415).<sup>12</sup> For Binder, this was not limited to Jews in Jerusalem and pilgrims, but also to Jews all over the world, who could participate in the worship and receive the divine favour of those who worshipped in the central sanctuary. According to him, it was not necessary for the Diaspora Jews in the Mediterranean world to go to the Temple in Jerusalem, as many of these feasts could have been practiced and observed in the local synagogue at the same date and time as in the Temple ceremonies. According to Binder (1999:415), in the *προσευχαί* of Alexandria, during the Jewish observance of Sukkoth, the Jews were effectively transported into the inner courts of the Temple as the high priest offered the customary sacrifice and blessed the assembled multitude. The view of Binder is supported by Josephus (Ant 14.213–215) in his reflection on Julius

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<sup>9</sup> Binder links the prayers that were said in the synagogue with the saying of prayers when sacrificing in the ancient Near East. He describes a typical pattern in which the king, or the high priest, would pray on behalf of the people and then direct the offering of the sacrifice. For example, on the morning of the triumph following the Jewish War, Vespasian rose and, covering most of his head with his mantle, recited the customary prayers. Titus is understood to have prayed in the same manner (Binder 1999:405). The link made by Binder is, however, a debateable one since there were no sacrifices made in synagogues.

<sup>10</sup> In the ancient world, festive holidays and the celebration of important events by honouring the gods was very significant in the private and social lives of the people. In both the Diaspora and in Jerusalem, the Jews were especially known for their strict observance of their feasts, which gave them a particular and regular “pattern to the days, weeks, months and years”. The New Testament, especially the gospels, mentions the “feasts of unleavened bread, Passover, Weeks, Tabernacle, Dedication, Purim and New Moon”. There were also seasonal feasts, such as the royal birthday celebration, enthronement of kings, military conquests, birth of a child, completion of structures including temples, marriage ceremonies, and shearing of sheep (Twelftree 2013:270–1).

<sup>11</sup> Regarding the practice of the synagogue in the Diaspora, Twelftree (2013:272) argues that meals were a common aspect of the synagogue’s activities.

<sup>12</sup> The tradition of dividing a year into sacred and profane times was not limited to the Jewish tradition. It is understood that during the early empire, the Romans also observed nearly a hundred separate festivals each year. During these festivals, communal sacrifices were offered, and no official business could be lawfully done (Binder 1999:415).

Caius writing to the senate on the need to reverse the decision that forbade the Jews from keeping their annual Jewish holydays.

This entails that the synagogue provided the platform whereby distance was overcome, giving the Jews in the Diaspora the opportunity to take their rightful place and fit into the larger community of Israel as they fulfilled their religious mandate on the specified sacred days as commanded in the Torah.

## **Social Functions of the Synagogue**

### ***Treasury/ Museum, archive and school***

In the Greco-Roman world, temples customarily served as banks and treasuries for both the general public and private funds (Jocz 2009:923; Binder 1999:426). The role of being a treasury was therefore a common feature of most of the ancient sanctuaries.

According to Binder (1999:426), the rationale behind this system was that money kept in the sanctuary was believed to be under the protection of the deity residing therein. However, the Jerusalem Temple was different to its pagan counterparts in terms of assuming the role of a sacred repository. The monies kept in the Temple were sacred funds partly donated by the Jews who were scattered all over the world (2 Macc 3:10-11). The main source of this money was the annual payment of the two denarii temple tax by Jews over the age of 20. Though Jews in Palestine also contributed to this fund, the greater part of this money came from the Jews in the Diaspora, since the Diaspora was the home of a good number of Jews (Binder 1999:427). Like their counterparts in the Diaspora, the synagogues in Palestine also served as local storehouses for sacred offerings destined for the Temple. This is apparent from Josephus' remark that "if any be caught stealing their holy books, or their sacred money, whether it be out of the synagogue [Sabbath meeting] or public school, he shall be deemed a sacrilegious person, and his goods shall be brought into the public treasury of the Romans" (Antiq 16.164). Binder (1999:167-168) also noted how Marcus Agrippa wrote to the magistrates in Ephesus that if any man was found guilty of stealing the sacred money of the Jews and then took refuge in a place of asylum, according to the decree such a person should be dragged away from them and turned over to the Jews under the same law by which temples were protected. The culprits should be considered as temple-robbers because they stole from the temple or the synagogue. Legally, the decree of Augustus and the letter written by Agrippa officially recognised that the Asian synagogue was as unfringeable grounds (Antiq 16.167-168). This indicates that they were protected, also from the theft of their possessions, such as their holy books.

Ancient synagogues also functioned as museums,<sup>13</sup> archives and schools. The function of an ancient museum was related to that of a treasury. However, while the latter housed the sacred donations in an area prohibited to the public, the former displayed

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<sup>13</sup> Even though the museum is understood to be a modern institution, its history reaches back into antiquity. In the ancient world, collections were first kept in temples and rulers' palaces, and later in private houses. While rulers validated themselves by displaying the spoils of war, trophies and tributes, temples became depositories of dedicatory gifts and votive offerings. Well-known treasure houses of the Greek cities and in the holy temples include the Apollon Sanctuary at Delphi and the sacred areas of Delos and Olympia. The erection of monuments honouring people at these sacred places unintentionally changed them into open air museums (Mohr 2010:620).

these gifts openly for all to see. In the ancient world, walking through a temple was walking through a museum as a sacred place, as these shrines were filled with all manner of statues, shields, altars, inscriptions, or other types of supplicatory offerings (Binder 1999:430; Mohr 2010:620). This was done to attract the attention not only of visitors but also of the gods in the shrine. The gods were expected to look upon the donors of the pious offerings with favour and answer their prayers (Binder 1999:430).

The temple in Jerusalem served as the central archive for Jewish public laws and notifications. Traditionally, the Jews maintained that the Ten Commandments were given to Moses on two tablets and that these were placed inside the Ark of the Covenant and kept in the Holy of Holies (Ex 25:16; 2 Chr 5:7–10). Apart from the Ten Commandments, other laws were also preserved in the Temple. The book of 1 Maccabees contains a decree passed by the Jewish people that Simon and his offspring retain the position of the high priest in perpetuity till a trustworthy prophet should arise (1 Macc 14:27-45). The same book shows that a decree of Demetrius II granting privileges to the Jews was kept in a conspicuous place in the Temple (1 Macc 11:37). In like manner, the ancient world did not differentiate between secular and religious education, and the synagogue also served as a religious archive for the studying and teaching of the Torah (Runesson 2013:904). The Torah scroll would probably have been placed in a position of honour such as inside a wooden ark or a niche covered with a veil. Since anyone who could read could also expound on portions of the text, individuals and groups such as the Jesus movement or the Pharisees could use the public Sabbath gatherings for proclaiming their vision of how Jewish traditions should be understood and lived (Jn 18:20).<sup>14</sup> The synagogue thus copied the archival function of the Jerusalem Temple and served as storehouse for Torah scrolls.

The synagogue, however, did not function only as a museum and archive but also as a school (Fine and Brolley 2009:421; White 2009:652). This fact has been established by Josephus.<sup>15</sup> The importance of teaching the Torah is evident from the actions of the Zealot defenders of Herodion in 66–70 CE who, even under siege, constructed a synagogue (Riesner 2009:193). The Torah was the main school text, with other subjects treated according to the Torah. While there were schools before 70 CE, especially Greek-speaking synagogue schools; many Jews however, were not happy with the way in which their culture was being subsumed by the dominant Greco-Roman culture, and therefore rejected the non-Jewish schools as unsuitable for their children (Riesner 2009:193). The reason for this was that Greek schools gave priority to the physical development of pupils, a practice had no place in the synagogue (Kee 1990b:5).

### *Place of refuge*

Asylum in the ancient Near East was associated with sanctuaries (Griffith 1987:10–11). The Torah reflects this perspective through legislation that allows a killer to flee to a place of refuge if the murder was not premeditated (Hawk 2006:678). For example, Exodus 21:12–14 states that “anyone who strikes a person with a fatal blow is to be put to death. However, if it is not done intentionally, but God lets it happen, they are to flee

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<sup>14</sup> Neusner (1983a:75–82; 1983b:81–5), however, does not mention that the Pharisees built any structures for their group to worship in during the 1<sup>st</sup> century.

<sup>15</sup> See footnote 7

to a place I will designate. But if anyone schemes and kills someone deliberately, that person is to be taken from my altar and put to death” (NIV). This legislation was in place as late as the United Monarchy, as attested by the stories of Adonijah and Joab, who took refuge by grasping the horns of the altar, although Joab was later taken from the altar and executed for the murders of Abner and Amasa (1 Kgs 1:50–53; 2:28–34). Binder (1999:439) thus states that it was not only monies that fell under the protection of the deity in temples, but also humans. In view of this, one may be right to assume that synagogue also served the same purpose.

### **Charity**

Donating charity and alms appears to be a common practice in Judaism. Both Jewish and non-Jewish texts testify that this social welfare system was highly developed and respected in the ancient Jewish community (Levine 2005:396; White 2009:656). Josephus (Ap 11.210–215) states that sharing was enshrined in Jewish laws and that it was mandatory to share food and water with all, even enemies, who asked. It was, however, at the individual’s discretion to help and show compassion to those in need (Bell Jud 11. 133–138). Both the Old and New Testament<sup>16</sup> allude to the requirement to aid the needy<sup>17</sup> (Hiebert 2009a:126, 129; Kim 2006:105–6). The Torah not only requires people to care for the needy, but also requires that the gleaning of fields, olive trees, and vineyards should be left for the poor, especially the widow, the foreigner and fatherless (Lev 19:9–10; 23:22; Deut 27:19–22) (Hiebert 2009a:126). The pronouncements of the prophets, who worked among the Israelites, also advocate for the rights of the poor.<sup>18</sup>

With regard to charity, certain administrative changes seem to have taken place in the synagogue over time as new positions appeared in the synagogue, one of which is the collector or “almoner”, whose responsibility was to collect and distribute funds for the poor (White 2009:656). The collector of the synagogue, who was also responsible for ministering to the poor, was probably the prototype for the deacon in the early church recorded in 1 Timothy 3:8 (White 2009:656). It appears then, that there was organised charity for the needy, an official charged with the responsibility thereof and a system of taxation to provide funds for it.

A pagan emperor, Julian, also noted how the Jewish communities cared for their own and complained about how pagan society lacked any concern for their own needy. His complaint, translated by Levine (2005:396), reads: “For it is disgraceful that when no Jews ever have to beg, and the impious Galileans (that is Christians) support not only their own poor but ours as well, all people see that our people lack aid from us.” It appears from his concern that charity was a way of life in the Jewish community (synagogue)

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<sup>16</sup> Though charity, or almsgiving, is not explicitly alluded to in the Old Testament, giving aid to the poor is strongly emphasised throughout; Israelites were charged with the need to be generous to their brothers and sisters and those in need, especially the poor (Deut 15:11) (Hiebert 2009a:126). It is, however, difficult to differentiate between general benevolence and almsgiving.

<sup>17</sup> The word used in the Septuagint, ἐλεημοσύνη, does not refer to almsgiving but to the righteousness or kindness of God. And as a value system in the Old Testament, interest on loans was forbidden for the sake of the poor, so that the poor could borrow when the need arose (Ps 103:6; Isa 1:27; 28:17; Lev 25:39–55) (Kim 2006:106).

<sup>18</sup> It should be noted that Jesus did not condemn giving to the needy but rather hypocritical giving (Matt 5:42; Lk 6:38). (Mk 12:42–44). Jesus’ concern for the poor is best demonstrated in Luke 4:16–21.

and a system of social welfare that was not only limited to the Jewish needy but extended to non-Jews.

### ***Place of manumission***

Slavery was a fundamental social institution in the Greco-Roman world<sup>19</sup> (Cho 2014:101; Harrill 2009:304). Slaves had no legal rights throughout Roman antiquity. Slaves were regarded as commodities to be used and disposed of in whatever way the owner wished (Cho 2014:103; Judge 1996:1110). They were found at every level of society and the economy, at least in Italy, Sicily, and a few urbanised provinces (Rupprecht 2009:538, Harrill 2009:304). Either inherited or purchased, they were expected to do whatever their masters asked them to do (even sexual favours). Although they were provided for with food and shelter, their exploitation was real (Cho 2014:103).

It has been suggested that one in every five persons in ancient times was a slave. In Greek society, many families owned at least one slave, while the imperial family possessed some 20 000, and each was given a designated responsibility, such as water carrier, chef or doctor. While masters might have had sincere feelings towards their slaves, slaves were viewed as household assets, and charity shown towards them was usually motivated by their masters' own financial benefits (Cho 2014:102). They were sold despite their family status, which indicates the level of contempt shown for them. Even though they were bound to their masters for life, manumission<sup>20</sup> was certainly possible, and in fact, arguably desired by most slaves (Binder 1999:439; Cho 2014:102–3). While there were a variety of possible reasons for a slave-owner to manumit a slave, either as a sign of gratitude or the desire to marry a slave, in most instances the manumission of a slave was inspired by the master's desire to be seen as a patron or to benefit from the manumission price. The conditions attached to manumission were determined by the slave's master. Freedom was, furthermore, often not granted completely, as masters could retain services from their previous slaves even when they are not accountable for their maintenance. Freedmen often found themselves tied down by continuing obligations (Cho 2014:302).

The activities of the synagogue, among others already discussed, also included the manumission of slaves, and the condition for their release was that the freed slaves would be faithful in attending the synagogue and that they would honour God (Runesson 2013:904).

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<sup>19</sup> In the New Testament, there is no record of Jesus or his disciples condemning slavery as intrinsically evil or sinful. There are several references to slaves and slavery in the gospels and the Acts of Apostles, for example, the centurion's slave (Lk 7:1–10; Matt 8:5–13) and the temple slave of the Jewish high priest (Mk 14:47; Matt 26:51; Lk 22:50–51; Jn 18:10, 26). Jesus told several parables of which the plots revolve around slave characters, for example the parable of the unforgiving slave and the parable of the dishonest manager (Matt 18:23–35; Lk 16:1–13). Paul in his epistles also uses the metaphor of slavery in key passages. He, for example, refers to himself as a "slave of Christ" as an apostolic designation (Rom 1:1; Phil 1:1; Gal 1:10; 1 Cor 9:16–18) (Harrill 2009:306).

<sup>20</sup> In the ancient Near East, having slaves was common (Albert 2009:299, 301), a fact that is also noted in the Old Testament (Ex 20:22–23; Deut 12–26; Lev 17–26); however, manumission was practiced. In the 50<sup>th</sup> year of the Jubilee, slaves were released along with their children to allow them to go back to their own families. On their manumission, their ancestral property was returned to them. However, foreign-born slaves enjoyed no such Jubilee manumission or protection from harsh treatment (Harrill 2009:302).

## **Overview of the synagogue as a communal institution**

Defining the synagogue primarily as a communal institution is justified (Levine 2005:383). The communal activities noted above are documented as having taken place therein (Levine 1996:531). Thus, even when a location is not specifically mentioned for similar activities, it is more than likely that the venue of these activities was also a synagogue, since no other public building or institution is ever mentioned as playing a similar role. Besides, the very name συναγωγή indicates that the building was primarily a place of meeting that could and did serve these purposes (Levine 1996:431; Spero 2004:61). It is also understood that by the first century, the synagogue was fully established and that it had become the locus of the Jewish community and was recognised as such by both Jews and non-Jews. When pagans, for example, wished to attack the Jews or defile Jewish property, they vented their wrath on the synagogue (Meyers 1992:260). This was the case in Dor, Alexandria, and Caesarea during the first century (Levine 1996:431; 2005:136). Archaeological remains also indicate that we are essentially dealing with a communal institution, featuring the centre of its hall as a focal point with benches along all or most of the walls, similar to the plans of contemporary Hellenistic and Roman communal buildings.

However, religious activities also played a role in the synagogue as prayers, Torah-reading, Readings from the Prophets (*haftarah*), recitation of Targum, and sermons are noted to have taken place. Philo, Josephus, New Testament,<sup>21</sup> rabbinic literature, and archaeology attest to this fact and affirm that the synagogue was a uniquely Jewish religious institution (Rosenfeld and Meniray 1999:259; Spero 2004:61; Levine 1996:431–2; Levine 2005:148–9; Runesson 2013:904).

## **The synagogue and ἐκκλησία**

Since this article is based on historical analysis of the role of the ancient synagogue and its implication to the contemporary Church, there is need at this point to have a look at the relationship between the synagogue and the church. This will prepare the ground for a proper application of the study to the contemporary Church. It is also believed to provide a justification of how applicable the functions of the synagogue could be to the contemporary church, especially the church in Nigeria.

For Judge (2009:29), the Greek terms συναγωγή and ἐκκλησία both refer to a meeting or assembly. Both terms are not necessarily cultic terms, nor do they intrinsically have something to do with an association or a particular community. However, they did come to refer to the buildings where communities met. According to White (2009:656), the early church retained and reclaimed the model of the synagogue's organisational structure, arguing that "the most important legacy of the synagogue in the 1<sup>st</sup> century was the form and organisation of the church" (White 2009:650). If this is indeed the case, one would expect that all the functions (religious and social) of the synagogue, as explained above, were replicated in the church and that the same should be done today. After all, Christian gatherings (the ἐκκλησία) and the synagogue are both understood to have been "cultural minority groups", since they shared a loyalty to one God

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<sup>21</sup> In Luke 4:16–22, Jesus enters the synagogue on the Sabbath, as was the custom, stood up to read and was given the book of the prophet Isaiah. Acts 13:14–15 also explains how Paul visited the synagogue.

(“monotheism”) in a context where worship of many gods (“polytheism”) appeared to be an acceptable order and tolerated.

Leithart (2002:29–32), who argues that the early church embodied the form of the Temple rather than the synagogue, also states that the idea that Christian worship developed out of the synagogue service is not completely without merit. Others confirm that the practice of church worship, with a few exceptions, replicates worship in the synagogue (religious function). As far as it is possible to determine, the mode of worship in the synagogue appears to have centred on scriptural reading, teaching and prayer. This ensemble of liturgical actions closely matches Luke's descriptions of the meetings of the early Christians and thus the religious function.

It is also evident from Acts that Paul drew many of his early converts from the synagogue. It is therefore possible that they carried some of the functions (religious and social functions) from the synagogue and continued to worship in much the same way as they had before their incorporation into the church. This further underscored the fact that, the connection between the synagogue and the early church was a close one.

According to Luke 4:16, Jesus began his earthly ministerial work in the synagogue as a place where he expounded the Torah. In Acts 13:14 and 14:1 Paul is also portrayed as beginning his ministry in the synagogue. It is thus plausible that early Christians borrowed from the synagogue in Jerusalem as a model for worship and evangelism (Filson 1944:86).

Though they later adopted private houses for their assemblies, the Christian ἐκκλησία was clearly indebted to the synagogue. According to Meeks (1983:80–1), it is impossible to deny the similarity between the synagogue and the ἐκκλησία. Several functions, including the reading and the interpretation of Scripture, communal prayer, and the eating of common meals, were taken over from the synagogue (1 Cor 11:17–34, 14:26). Paul's instruction to the Corinthian church in 1 Corinthians 6:1–7 to settle their legal affairs within their assembly also reflects a similar practice to that of the synagogue (2.8). The collection of offerings from the gentile churches for the mother church in Jerusalem (1 Cor 16:1–3; Rom 15:25–27; 2 Cor 8:9) also resembles the sending of envoys bearing the temple tax from the Diaspora synagogues to Jerusalem (2.7). It is also interesting that in James 2:2, the author calls the assembly of Christians a synagogue. Similarities between the church's leadership and that of synagogue officials have also been suggested, for example, ἐπισκόποις (Phil 1:1) is similar to ἀρχισυναγῶγων, the Christian πρεσβυτέρους (1 Pet 5:1; Jas 5:14; Acts 20:17) has an equivalent in the Jewish πρεσβυτέρους, while διακόνος (Phil 1:1; Rom 16:1) corresponds with the ὑπηρέτης in the synagogue. This underscored the fact that the religious and social functions of the synagogue as discussed above were carried over by the church and thus should be replicated today.

Architecturally, as stated by Chiat (1982:423), “Christianity witnessed the building of churches throughout the Empire, churches that, I suggest, borrowed elements from the synagogue and the Temple”. Binder (1990:500) also indicates how various structures that were taken to be churches of the Byzantine period were later identified as synagogues. It is clear that in terms of function, organisation and form, the synagogue and church are closely related. Thus, this implies that today's church needs to have a look at the functions of the synagogue as discussed here and see how they can be applied to address the needs of its various faith communities today. However, it should also be

noted that, while the architectural and assembly aspect of both the synagogue and church has been noted and reflected upon, the concern of this article is on the assembly and the functions it played in addressing the needs of the various communities. Moreso, the New Testament concept of the church focuses more on believers rather than physical place of worship. So, one should expect the concern here to be on the church as a people and not as a building.

### **Conclusion: Implications for the Nigeria Church**

In this article, the importance, origin and function of the synagogue were surveyed. Studies have shown that the origin of the synagogue is shrouded in mystery and may never be fully known. However, the synagogue was clearly a well-known institution in both Palestine and in the Diaspora in the first century and the intertestamental period. The importance and functions of the ancient synagogue were underscored and classified into social and religious categories. In relating the church to synagogue, it has been established that Church and the synagogue are related and that the Church took over almost all the religious and social functions of the synagogue, and that they are thus applicable to today's church.

On this note, as synagogues fulfilled a variety of functions that served its broader community in ancient times, churches today can also have a powerful impact if they align all their ministries to address the needs of the people. The Lukan Jesus, who is understood to be the head of the Church, started his public ministry in the synagogue, where he declares his ministerial agenda. His primary agenda centred on addressing both the social and religious needs of the faith communities. He did this by reading, teaching and declaring good news to the poor, the captives, and the oppressed, and granting recovery of sight to the blind. This implies that Jesus understood meeting the needs of the people as a sole function of the synagogue and thus, the church in Nigeria needs to do the same. If they do this, churches in Nigeria will become a transformative locale for ministry in Nigeria and live up to their primary assignment.

Like the synagogue, the functions of providing care, banking, and schooling that have been left to the state need to be practices by today's church. The church needs to become a space that is fully involved in these activities, but in an ethical and non-corrupt manner. The strength of the synagogue was that it was a space for the whole community that also ensured that there was no corruption. The church today has become a worship service for the faithful on Sundays. It should become a place that fulfils many functions (social and religious) for the poor and the faith community in general. The idea is not to enrich the church but to provide a trusted and safe space for all. The Church can also be a place that preserves the memories and history of a community, provide basic care, and partner with just banks and non-governmental organisations to provide services to its faith communities.

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