The Masada Synagogue and Its Relationship to Jewish Worship during the Second Temple Period

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The Discovery of the Synagogue at Masada

During the first season of excavations at Masada in 1963, Yigael Yadin and his crew discovered a strange structure adjoining the northwestern wall. The building was not like any other they had thus far excavated in the casemate wall. It contained clay-plastered benches along all the walls and two rows of pillars in the center of the main room. The inside dimensions were twenty-seven by thirty-six Roman feet (one Roman foot equals 0.2957 meters). A second, smaller room was on the western side and immediately adjacent to the casemate wall. On the floor were coins of the period of the revolt.

Because the entrance faced east and the building as a whole was oriented toward Jerusalem and because one ostracon found on the floor was inscribed "priestly tithe" and another "Hezekiah," Yadin decided that this structure must have been a synagogue.[1] Although the original structure apparently had been modified somewhat by the Zealots, it was quite likely built as a synagogue and used as such even by Herod or his entourage. This find was especially significant, because until that time, no synagogue earlier than the end of the second century A.D. had been discovered in Israel—certainly none from the Second Temple period.[2] This, in spite of the fact that the New Testament and Josephus's works contain numerous literary attestations of the presence of synagogues during that period.

If any doubts remained that this structure represented a synagogue, those doubts were removed during the second season when Yadin's team discovered a *genizah* (a place where orthodox Jews buried old or unuseable scriptures, since they could not destroy them) under the floor of the rear cell. Two scrolls were recovered from that area. The first was a portion of the book of Deuteronomy, and the second was a portion of the book of Ezekiel—parts of chapter thirty-seven to be precise (the chapter with the vision of the dry bones and the sticks of Judah and Joseph). Since these scrolls were obviously buried there before the destruction of Masada by the Romans, they must be dated no later than A.D. 73.

Synagogue at Masada. Lining the walls of the main room are clay-plastered benches.

The Masada Synagogue in Context: The Origin and Development of Synagogue Worship

To appreciate the significance of the synagogue at Masada, one must consider the broader context of Jewish religious practices that led to the development of synagogues as an institution.

Scholars generally assume that the institution of the synagogue arose after the destruction of Jerusalem and the First Temple in 586 B.C. because of a need to find a substitute form of worship when temple worship was no longer possible. There can be no doubt that the Jewish exiles in Babylonia faced a crisis in religious worship, and some scholars assume that Ezekiel may have played a role in establishing synagogue worship. This assumption is based on Ezekiel 11:16, where the Lord states that although he has removed his people to distant places and scattered them in various lands, he will nevertheless be to them as a "small temple" (*miqdāš mĕʾaṭ*). The "small temple" is interpreted as the synagogue.[3]

Some see a possible reference to the origin of synagogues in Jeremiah 39:8, which mentions the destruction of the palace and also of a structure called the *beth haʾam* in Jerusalem at the time of the Babylonian exile.[4] If the *beth haʾam* really represents a synagogue (or at least the forerunner to synagogues), that would mean that the institution was already in place *before* the destruction of the First Temple. Such an idea is not really farfetched. The temple and the synagogue, after all, had separate functions. The latter was not really a substitute for the former: the main activity at the temple was sacrificial worship, and such was never attempted in synagogues.

There are scholars who assume (based on later pronouncements that followed the destruction of the Second Temple) that, after the destruction of the temple, prayer was an acceptable substitute for animal sacrifice and therefore the synagogue was really a replacement for the temple. But this assumption ignores the fact that prayer and study always went hand in hand in Judaism, and there had to be facilities for such activities even when the temple was still functioning. It therefore makes a great deal of sense to assume that even during the time when the temple in Jerusalem was fully operational there would have been other institutions for religious education and the *beth haʾam* may have been just such an institution. Indeed, the mention of this building in the same context as the palace suggests that it was a meeting place for the general populace and hence quite possibly a center for religious discussion and education.

Additional evidence for the existence of a synagogue type of worship during the First Temple period may perhaps be found in

the pericope of the Shunammite woman in 2 Kings 4. In verse twenty-three, her husband says, "Why would you go after him? Today is neither a new moon, nor a sabbath!" Louis Finkelstein sees this locution as an indication that there was already some institution of religious instruction given on a regular basis during the First Temple period.[5] He goes even further and interprets Solomon's dedicatory prayer in 1 Kings 8 as also substantiating that supposition, because in that prayer there is mention of people praying at the temple but no mention of sacrifices. He therefore thinks that exclusion indicates that prayer was an alternative form (perhaps we should say "supplemental form") of worship to sacrifice even during the time of Solomon.[6]

The term *synagogue* (Gr. *synagōgē*) had two meanings. Initially it referred to an assembly of people, without regard to any building. Only later did the term come to be applied primarily to the building where such an assembly took place. That history is significant, because the early "synagogues" were actually assemblies of townsfolk meeting for secular purposes as well as for religious purposes. These meetings usually took place in the town square or near the gate.[7] Eventually, these assemblies became increasingly associated with a particular building.

In the Diaspora, synagogue buildings were used for various types of religious activities, but in Palestine, while the temple was still functioning (particularly during the Second Temple period, for which we have the most information), the synagogue was a place for reading the law but not for much else of a religious nature. The presence of the temple presumably satisfied all other religious needs. Thus the synagogues were used for banking, political meetings, hostels for strangers, and sites where money for charity could be collected.[8] Functions such as marriages, circumcisions, and funerals took place in private homes.

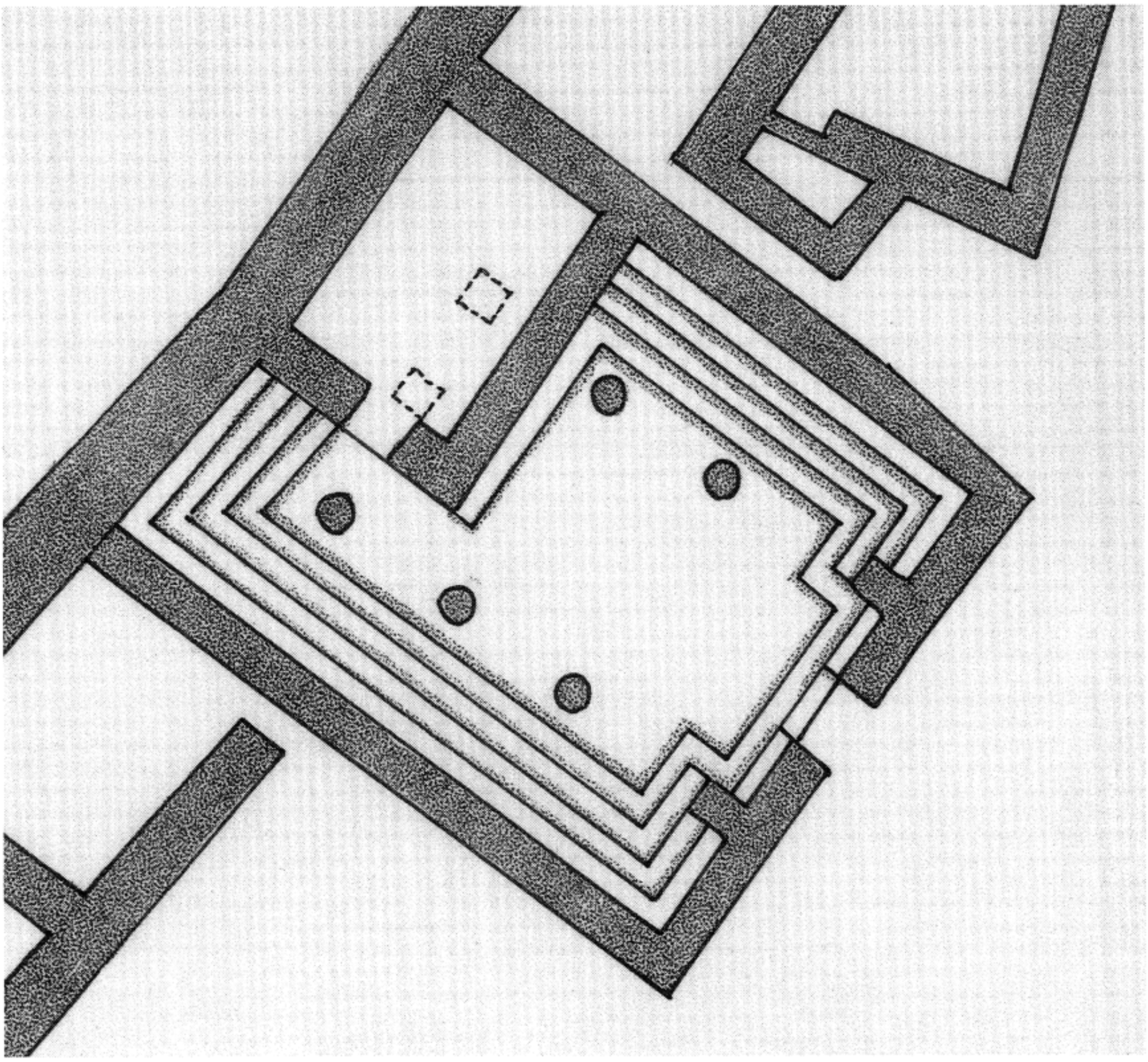
One fact that may be very significant concerning the role of the Masada synagogue in contributing to our understanding of the development of synagogue worship is the lack of any Torah shrine. In later periods—from at least the third century A.D. onward—one of the walls of a synagogue would always have a niche that contained the ark and the Torah.[9] Such a niche is lacking, however, from all known structures from the Second Temple period (namely,

Masada, Herodium, Gamla, and Delos). These synagogues also lacked the platform (*bema*) that was characteristically present in later synagogues. These facts support the assumption that the synagogues of the Second Temple period were not just religious structures, but rather general purpose communal buildings where religious functions *also* took place on specified days.[10]

According to Solomon Zeitlin, the transition of the synagogue from a mainly secular establishment to a mainly religious establishment may have taken place when the Pharisees converted the continual daily sacrifice from a sacrifice made by the wealthy to a sacrifice offered of and for all of Israel.[11] In order to bring this change about, they divided Israel into twenty-four *ma'amadot,* and at least a few people from each *ma'amad* were expected to go to Jerusalem to participate in the prescribed sacrifices at the specified times. Those who stayed home in their villages were then expected to gather together in their local meeting places at precisely the time that sacrifices were being offered in Jerusalem and to read the portions of the Torah dealing with sacrifices. These meetings made the establishment of permanent gathering places more important than ever, but also converted the synagogue from a mainly secular to a mainly religious institution.

Synagogues thus eventually developed into the mainly religious institutions known from later Pharisaic Judaism. It is important to note in that regard, however, that initially the synagogues were not under Pharisaic control. That fact is especially true during the Second Temple period, but also for the first few centuries A.D. Indeed, they may not have come fully under rabbinic control until the seventh century.[12]

Summarizing the above discussion, we may conveniently divide the development of synagogues into three phases: (1) The assembly phase. During this first phase, the "synagogue" was an assembly of townspeople and was not associated with a special building because the meetings took place outside—at the city gates or in the town square. The transition from this phase to the next phase was very gradual, but for sake of discussion, we may arbitrarily set the boundary for that transition during the Hellenistic period (perhaps with the earliest mention of synagogues as buildings in the Diaspora in Egypt during the third century B.C.).



Floor plan of Masada synagogue. As modified by the Sicarii, bases of two of the original columns were under the floor of the rear cell. A genizah, a storage place for worn-out or unusable scriptures, was also discovered under the floor of that room.

(2) The secular edifice phase. During this period (especially in Israel), the temple was still functioning in Jerusalem. This phase would therefore extend from approximately the middle of the third century B.C. to the appearance of the first synagogues with Torah shrines as part of their architecture (third century A.D.). (3) The sacred edifice phase. Characterized by the inclusion of the niche for the Torah (approximately third century A.D. to present).[13]

The Significance of the Genizah in the Masada Synagogue

Documents and utensils of a sacred nature could not simply be destroyed; they were therefore deposited in compartments in

walls or hidden under floors of synagogues or even in nearby caves (in the case of the Qumran writings). The genizah at Masada is important because the only other such find from the Second Temple period is that of the Dead Sea Scrolls from Qumran. Fragments of sixteen scrolls were found at Masada. Two of these fragmented scrolls, both from the book of Ezekiel, were found in the genizah. The Ezekiel text was very significant to the Zealots because of the apocalyptic nature of the vision of the dry bones and because of the zealots understanding that the message contained in that text was one of eventual political redemption for Israel.

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NOTES

[1]Yigael Yadin, *Masada: Herod's Fortress and the Zealots' Last Stand* (New York: Random House, 1966), 184.

[2]Actually, some of the synagogues formerly thought to date from the end of the second century A.D. may have been built later than that. An example is the synagogue at Capernaum, which was originally thought to date from the end of the second century but has since been shown to date no earlier than the end of the fourth or beginning of the fifth century A.D. See also Doron Chen, "The Design of the Ancient Synagogues in Judea: Masada and Herodium," *Bulletin of the American Schools of Oriental Research* 239 (summer 1980): 37–40.

[3]One scholar who points to this passage in Ezekiel as indicating the origin of the synagogue is Azriel Eisenberg, *The Synagogue through the Ages* (New York: Bloch, 1974), 30. Eric Meyers, "Synagogue," in *The Anchor Bible Dictionary,* ed. David Noel Freedman, 6 vols. (New York: Doubleday, 1994), 6:252, on the other hand, questions any such involvement of Ezekiel in establishing an alternative to Jerusalem temple worship in view of the fact that he was a priest who supported the temple cult and eagerly anticipated the prospect of a restored temple. One must keep in mind, however, that the synagogue was not really a substitute for temple worship, because the two had differing roles, and Ezekiel's support of the one does not necessarily mean that he did not support the other.

[4]For example, Leopold Loew, *Gesammelte Schriften,* 4 vols. (Szegedin: Alexander Baba, 1875), 4:5–7.

[5]Louis Finkelstein, "The Origin of the Synagogue," in *The Synagogue: Studies in Origins, Archaeology, and Architecture,* ed. Joseph Gutmann (New York: Ktav, 1975), 4.

[6]Finkelstein, "Origin of the Synagogue," 4.

[7]See Lee I. Levine, "The Second Temple Synagogue: The Formative Years," in *The Synagogue in Late Antiquity,* ed. Lee I. Levine (Philadelphia: American

Schools of Oriental Research, 1987), 9; or Richard A. Horsley, *Galilee: History, Politics, People* (Valley Forge, Penn.: Trinity Press International, 1995), 226.

[8]Attestations of these activities in the early literature is listed by Levine, "Second Temple Synagogue," 14.

[9]For a list of ancient synagogues with such niches, see Rachel Hachlili, "The Niche and the Ark in Ancient Synagogues," *Bulletin of the American Schools of Oriental Research* 223 (October 1976): 43–53.

[10]See Levine, "Second Temple Synagogue," 12–13.

[11]Solomon Zeitlin, "The Origin of the Synagogue," in Gutmann, *Synagogue,* 14–26, especially 21–23.

[12]Horsley, *Galilee,* 234.

[13]The sacred character of the later synagogues is indicated by references in the Babylonian Talmud (for example, Berachot 6a and 6b) to the divine presence in the synagogue, a phenomenon formerly thought to occur only in temples.