

Anders Runesson, *The Origins of the Synagogue. A Socio-Historical Study*. (Coniectanea Biblica, New Testament Series 37), Almqvist & Wiksell, Stockholm, 2001, 573 pp.

The work in question represents the author's doctoral dissertation supervised by Prof. Birger Olsson in Lund. The discussion goes beyond what the title indicates; we are also given a thorough review and a fresh attempt at a comprehensive picture of Israel's religion and cult from the exile on, the period in which we can say that what we call Judaism took shape.

The work is divided into six chapters. In the first chapter, "Introduction," several fundamental problems are taken up. There are two questions that the author attempts to answer here: First, what is a synagogue? Then, where are we to find its origin? The chapter, which deals with a series of methodological questions, provides clear evidence that the author is a researcher very conscious of methodological issues. The work is described as a socio-historical study in which the author works within parameters that define cult as local or supra-local, official or non-official. It is also important to distinguish the notion "synagogue" from that of "temple," where a regular sacrificial cult is maintained. At the same time the author claims that if sacrificial offerings only take place on isolated occasions and the institution is described as a *synagoge* or *proseuche*, then he will take into account the possibility that sacrifices could take place in a synagogue as well.¹

In the second chapter, "Important Views and Theories over 2000 Years," the author presents various earlier understandings of the origin of the synagogue. Runesson makes here a methodologically important distinction between "view" (an idea put forth without argumentation), "hypothesis" (intended to be supported by argumentation), and "theory" (a complex of ideas arranged into a broad picture and supported with argumentation). It is pointed out that it is here scarcely possible to come with a new suggestion, since every imaginable period, from patriarchal times until the fourth century A.D., has already been proposed. Earlier Jewish literature, such as that of Philo and Josephus, traced the origin of the synagogue to the time of Moses or even earlier; but these suggestions are to be placed in the category of "view." A common understanding among scholars during the latter part of the 20th century is that the synagogue arose during the Babylonian period (586-539 B.C.); but according to our author this theory is not tenable since it is based on weak arguments, primarily that the synagogue would have been the natural alternative once the temple was no longer available. Up to the 1970s and 1980s there was virtually a consensus in favor of this view, but it broke up when a series of new theories were proposed. The problem with nearly all these theories is that they relate the synagogue much too closely to the Jerusalem temple.

¹ An even more fundamental difference which could have been mentioned is that a temple is in principle a divine dwelling-place, where the task of human beings is to present offerings and praise the deity, often in the open space outside the temple. A synagogue, on the other hand, as the Greek word indicates, is a gathering-place for people.

If the first two chapters can be regarded as a kind of prolegomenon, the investigation itself begins in chapter three, “The First Century Synagogue.” The author here proceeds in a methodologically very deliberate fashion and builds his work with the simplicity and clarity of a logical syllogism, which can be described as follows:

1. When do we know that synagogues existed? We know that they existed during the first century A.D.
2. What characterized these synagogues? Public reading of Torah characterized these synagogues.
3. Where do we find the oldest testimonies to public reading of Torah? The oldest testimonies are from the Persian period.
4. Conclusion: The synagogue originated during the Persian period.

The starting-point is thus the period in which we can say with certainty that synagogues, i.e. institutions designated with the word *synagoge*, existed. This brings us to the first century A.D. The archaeological evidence also shows buildings with benches placed along walls from this period. These buildings are generally described as synagogues. From both the New Testament and earlier Jewish sources we discover that what took place in these buildings was primarily the reading and exposition of Torah. The existing sources indicate as well that the synagogue did not originate during this period, but that it had an older history, even if we cannot, with Philo and Josephus, date it as far back as the time of Moses.

In chapter 4, “The Origins of the Synagogue in the Land of Israel,”² the question is put how far back we can trace the phenomenon of public Torah reading. If we look for texts in the Old Testament in which the reading of Torah is mentioned without a direct connection to sacrifices, we note Deut 5:1 and 31:11 in particular as well as a number of texts in Nehemiah.

The author then uses perhaps a little too much ammunition in attempting to show that Deuteronomy originated during the Persian period. The argument here is taken from, among others, Philip Davies, a scholar known for prioritizing the Persian period in many contexts. Since the texts in question come from Deuteronomy’s introduction and conclusion, I am not in fact in disagreement with the author in his claim that these sections may come from the early postexilic period; but the author is not content with this, but maintains that the entire centralization of the cult has its place in Persia’s and above all in King Darius’s imperial policies. The extra-biblical source material from this period is not substantial, so that the train of argument proceeds to a great extent on the

² The author has an unfortunate preference for this Zionist terminology for the region between the Jordan River and the Mediterranean. For my part I think the term should be restricted to one of the following: (1) the modern state; (2) the people of Israel; (3) the iron-age state of Israel.

basis of what can be seen as probable. The question is whether we are dealing with anything more than what we may call (using the author's terminology) a "view."

Regardless of how much influence we attribute to the Persians on the origin of the Torah, there is sufficient material in Nehemiah to support the author's thesis on the origins of the synagogue during this period; but we note that the readings of Torah here spoken of refer to individual times of crisis. When, then, did the custom of the regular reading of Torah on the Sabbath begin? Admittedly, the books of Chronicles presuppose regular cultic activities on the Sabbath, but there it is the temple cult that is in view. Not yet do we find a particular building for such reading. People gathered at the natural gathering place, i.e., inside the gates. It is first when we come to Hellenistic times that we can speak of particular buildings. Sirach admonishes in Sir 51:23 *aulisthete en oiko paideias*. In the middle of the second century B.C. we can speak of particular gatherings of people that could be designated as *synagogai*.

The Sabbath as a special day for the reading of Torah is attested, apart from Qumran, first in Pseudo-Philo (*Liber Antiquitatum Biblicarum*). The author claims that the synagogue developed gradually without (as has at times earlier been maintained) the loss of the Temple in 70 A.D. playing a particularly important role. At some point during the Hellenistic period the reading of Torah shifted from the city gates to a special building, though in Jerusalem the temple became the place for such reading as well. Outside Jerusalem there are excavated synagogue buildings in a number of places, i.e., buildings with benches.

In the same way, that part of the temple in which benches were found may also have functioned as Jerusalem's synagogue.³ It is interesting that there are a number of synagogue buildings from the period prior to 70 A.D., but none thereafter until the third century. To judge by the evidence, the Romans must have destroyed whatever synagogues there were in the intervening period.

The dissertation's fifth chapter, "The Origins of the Synagogue in the Diaspora," is devoted to developments in the diaspora. As mentioned earlier, Runesson takes it as a fact that the centralization of the cult, even if begun in a limited way by King Josiah, was not really carried out until the Persian period, and then only in the province Yehud. A further centralization of the cult was carried out later under the Hasmoneans. Runesson thus attempts to demonstrate that outside Yehud Jewish temples with sacrificial cults were found in a number of places in the diaspora. We know that there was a temple in Elephantine in Egypt in the fifth century B.C., and we know as well of Onias's temple in Leotopolis; the other examples given by the author must nonetheless be regarded as doubtful. That the term *proseuche* is often used for Jewish sanctuaries in the diaspora and also for the Jerusalem temple may speak in favor of Runesson's position. The author's thesis is that many Jewish synagogues in the diaspora were from the beginning temples to which the rituals of the synagogue were imported.

³ The author does not mention that many temples in antiquity had benches, not as seats, but so that worshipers could place their offerings on them.

As mentioned above, it is difficult to say anything definite about what may have taken place at possible Jewish temples in different places in the diaspora; but it is important for Runesson to maintain that developments in the diaspora and in the Jewish homeland were separate and that political factors played a significant role in the latter.

In the sixth chapter, “Some Decisive Stages . . .,” a summary of the whole work is provided, where the most important conclusions are brought together. The author here points out especially the semi-official synagogue’s function as starting-point for both the later rabbinic synagogue as well as for Christianity. The development of the semi-official synagogue may in turn have been affected by conditions in the diaspora, where Jews could be organized in *collegia* or communities.

Runesson’s dissertation is an engaging work. The book is comprehensive. Perhaps certain parts, e.g., the introductory survey of scholarship or the presentation of Persian politics in the province Yehud, could have been less comprehensive; nonetheless the book is a fascinating read. Runesson has a gift for breaking problems down into manageable parts that are each then treated with a logical rigor that is unusual. This means as well that his presentation is pedagogically framed and easy to follow.

As mentioned above, this reviewer is not ready to subscribe to everything in the book; but what is striking is the methodological deliberateness with which the author proceeds throughout the book. Even if one can say that in places he makes a little too much of what is in places scanty source material, his broad picture of postexilic Judaism seems plausible. The socio-historical perspective is pioneering, and no scholar in the future who focuses on the period in question can afford to overlook Runesson’s work.

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