

We Gather Together (Luke 4:16-17): Bible Commentary for the New Baptist Covenant

Luke chapter 4 is our oldest account of a synagogue service. Luke is focused on portraying Jesus as the central figure of his narrative and he does not recount the entire service. Our other evidence does not clarify exactly what would occur in such a service in the synagogues of Galilee in the first century C.E.

Luke recorded that Jesus returned to the community of his childhood at the very beginning of his ministry, and on the day of worship joined in the assembly of those who likely watched and shared in his growth. Jesus appeared at the synagogue, the institution that functioned as the heart of the community.

Jesus' world was radically different than ours. In his world, important realities such as respect, prestige, power and even identity did not result so much from individual effort and achievement. Instead, one's community defined, awarded and regulated them. A traditional agrarian society with most people living in villages and small towns permitted no clear distinctions between religious, economic and social issues. Jesus returned home and sought a hearing from those who had known him the longest. In this context, that setting could be either safe or dangerous depending on one's standing in that community.

The term synagogue is derived from a Greek word that means "bring" or "lead together." The term is used in the Greek translation of the Old Testament (Septuagint) as a designation for the entire gathering of Israel. It came to specify the assembly of local groups of Jews gathered both for worship and for social needs of the community. By metonymy, it eventually served as the designation for the structure in which local congregations of Jews participated in their religious and social activities.

This shift has hindered an adequate understanding of the nature of the institution because interpreters become so preoccupied with the building they disregard important elements of the institution. Before synagogues became a particular kind of structure, they were primarily religious gatherings of like-minded Jews. Horsley concludes that there is no evidence of synagogue buildings in Galilee

until the third century C.E.

Assemblies of Jews began to emerge during and after the exile began in 587/6 B.C.E. In particular, the Jews in Mesopotamia faced the need of reorganizing their religious existence in light of the destruction of the temple and their separation from the homeland. Perhaps they began gathering at various locations in small groups on the Sabbath to pray and read the sacred writings. This very functional kind of community structure was not dependent on being housed in a special building. It is important to keep in mind the degree of influence and power wielded by these local religious assemblies and that Jesus found it important to participate in such gatherings.

Just as the synagogue provided the context for much of the worship of Jesus during his childhood and young adulthood, according to this account it now provided the context for the inauguration of his ministry. It also became the setting for miracles, teaching and moments of conflict. Thus, it deserves our careful attention.

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- Public confession of the Shema (so named because it represents the first Hebrew word of Deut. 6:4-9 from which it is drawn.)
- Praying of certain set prayers.
- Reading sacred scripture.
- Reading a passage of the Torah (first read in Hebrew, then translated into Aramaic. Evidence indicates these readings were prescribed in a multiyear lectionary.)
- Reading a passage of the Psalms.
- Reading a passage of the Prophets (These readings do not appear to have been prescribed until later. This is apparently the point at which Jesus participated.)
- Sermon or exposition of the text.
- Blessing.

Jesus returned to be with a group in which he customarily worshipped set in a

familiar community to deliver the message that set forth his vision of God's work. From our highly individualized Baptist perspectives, it is nearly impossible to grasp the immensity of this moment.

In a world where honor, respect and power to a large degree depended on maintaining one's standing within the community, Jesus was about to present himself in a manner that challenged its deepest beliefs. In a world where it was bad to break faith with one's community and question its structures, Jesus would be perceived as doing exactly that.

Even so, challenge us Lord Jesus!

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This column excerpted from a Bible commentary for "The Agenda: 8 Lessons from Luke 4," a free, online study to help prepare churches for next year's New Baptist Covenant Celebration in Atlanta. The faculty of the School of Religion at Belmont University partnered with the Baptist Center Ethics to write the commentaries. The commentary, lessons are other resources are available [here](#).