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ONE LAND – MANY CULTURES

ARCHAEOLOGICAL STUDIES IN HONOUR OF STANISLAO LOFFREDA OFM

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The Synagogues from the Second Temple Period

According to Archaeological Finds and in Light of the Literary Sources

E. Netzer

The discovery of the synagogue from Hasmonaean times at Jericho enables us to draw a clearer picture of the character of the synagogues that existed in the Land of Israel at the end of the Second Temple period.[1] Aside from the inscription of Theodotos that was found in the City of David, the information about the existence of synagogues from that period that was available to scholars, up to the time of the Masada excavations, came mainly from the written sources – the writings of Flavius Josephus, the New Testament, the Mishna, the Talmud and the accessory literature. From these sources one learns of the dozens if not hundreds of synagogues extant in the Land of Israel during the period under discussion.

The exposure of the rebels' synagogue on the summit of Masada by Yigael Yadin's expedition caused great excitement (Fig. 1, 4:3). The discovery links up with the finding of the remains of (discarded) scrolls whose exposure was an impressive find in itself.[2] The presence of sections of scrolls below the floor of the synagogue at Masada (more precisely below a room that was built by the rebels in the rear of the hall), which can probably be considered a *genizah*, corroborated the identification of the hall surrounded by benches as a synagogue.[3] At Masada, the excavators for the first time exposed, in a clear archaeological context, a building that served as a place of assembly and was certainly intended primarily for Torah-reading.[4] The assembly hall was erected within a structure that had originally served a very different purpose, probably a stable for horses and mules. In the initial excitement after the synagogue's discovery, it was thought that even the structure's first stage, from the time of Herod the Great, had served as a synagogue. However, a rigorous analysis of the structure rules out such a possibility.[5]

The discovery at Masada was corroborated by the publication of the finds from the excavations

Fig. 1 *The synagogue built at Masada by the rebels (G. Laron).*

of Father Corbo at Herodium. In a similar historical, archaeological and architectural complex, in the mountain palace-fortress at Herodium, the rebels transformed the splendid *tridinium* of the fortified palace into a synagogue that was meant to serve them during their stay at that site (Fig. 2). In contrast to Masada, no *genizah* was found here, but on the other hand a ritual bath was revealed close to the *tridinium* that had undergone a transformation.[6]

The discovery of two halls surrounded by benches, both of them structures that had undergone transformation at the hands of the rebels, corroborates the assumption that here we are dealing with synagogues that were installed by the Zealots for the period during which they took a stand at the two sites. In any event, the existence of two similar structures in the same circumstances calls for further explanation. One is thus justified in asking where is the synagogue at Machaerus.

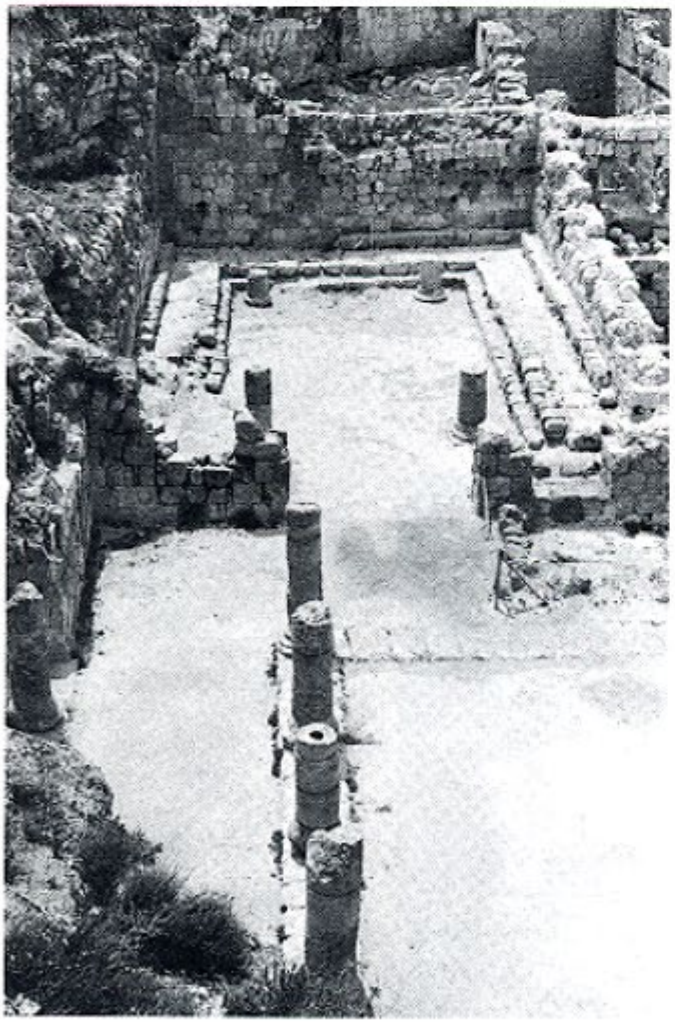

Fig. 2 *The synagogues built at Herodium by the rebels (E. Netzer).*

This site too was one of Herod's building projects and it is known to be the third site in which the rebels took a stand after the destruction of the Temple. Most of the summit of the mountain at Machaerus has been exposed and no hall surrounded by benches has been found; however, on the northern slope is located the "lower city," most of which has not been excavated, and the assembly hall apparently could have been located there.

A large step forward in the study of synagogues from the Second Temple period was taken with the discovery, by Shmarya Gutman, of the synagogue at Gamla (Figs. 3, 4:2, 5:2, 7). In a similar historical-archaeological context (though this time not as part of Herod's building projects), a synagogue structure was revealed, with a hall at its centre measuring ca. 20x16 m.[7] The hall at Gamla, which, in contrast to those at the above-mentioned two sites, was built as such from the outset, was surrounded by benches and formed an integral part of a larger structure. This structure was of a high architectural standard, much use being made of basalt, the local stone at Gamla. The basalt masonry was used for the walls, the columns supporting the roof, the benches as well as the paving. As at Herodium, here too a ritual bath was revealed in close proximity to the building. It received its water from a channel that passed through the synagogue's hall and on the way even fed a small pool, a basin of kinds, termed by its excavator a *gurna*.[8]

During the preparations for battle with the Romans, in the course of the same revolt, the hall of the synagogue building at Gamla was damaged, partly by a wall that passed through the row of

Fig. 3 *The synagogue at Gamla (E. Netzer).*

rooms adjacent to it on the east, and partly by the removal of some of the benches and apparently the major part of the basalt paving that had covered the floors of the hall and the aisles around it from the outset.[9] This partial damage makes it somewhat difficult to comprehend the building, but the available data are numerous and of significance.

The exposure of the synagogue from the end of the Hasmonaean period (ca. 75-50 BCE) in Jericho by the present author adds to the list of synagogues from the Second Temple period another building that was intended for this purpose from the outset.[10] This building (Figs. 4:1, 5:1, 6, 8-10)was constructed in three stages, and only in the second stage was the assembly hall (ca. 16.5x11.5 m in size) built, but with regard to the architectural layout, one can speak of a synagogue that was specially built for that purpose, and not a structure that underwent transformation. From this angle (and also from others, as we shall see below), one can note similarities between the building exposed at Gamla and the one in Jericho. Needless to say, the antiquity of the building in Jericho is of importance, and it thus makes an important contribution to the question of the development of the synagogues in the Land of Israel.

The list of synagogues from the Second Temple period contains a number of other tentative structures: a "missing" structure at Chorazin; the "mini-sinagoga" at Magdala; and the synagogue at Kiryat Sefer, a new settlement east of the city of Lod. The tentative synagogue at Chorazin was exposed by J. Ory in 1926 but was not actually published and later all trace of it vanished.[11] It is therefore difficult to determine both whether it indeed served as a synagogue, and if so, whether it was built during the Second Temple period.

The "mini-sinagoga" at Magdala was built as a spring-house and in our view it also served as such during the second stage, when, according to its excavators, Father Corbo and Father Loffreda, it was used as a synagogue. In an article published in 1987, I proved that the building, throughout its existence, served as a spring-house.[12]

The structure at Kiryat Sefer could indeed have served for assemblies, but it is difficult to discern a clear architectural layout with regard to benches in it.[13] We have certain doubts about the reconstruction of the hall, as published by its excavators, mainly with regard to the ceiling which could also have been built without arches and rather with a basilican section.

Further on in the discussion we will therefore relate mainly to the synagogues at Masada, Herodium, Gamla and Jericho, presented here in the order of their discovery.

* * *

We open our discussion with the question of the orientation and location of the entrance to the hall and building. Synagogues from the time of the Mishna and the Talmud lack uniformity with regard to these two important aspects, but one can nevertheless speak of trends or of a rule and exceptions thereto.[14] In certain of the four synagogues under discussion here, one can, *inter alia*, mention an orientation toward Jerusalem (Masada, and to a certain extent also Gamla and Jericho) or even entry from the east (Herodium, and to a certain extent Jericho and Masada).[15] However, if we analyze the choice of locality in each of the four cases, we learn that the choice of the entrance's location was not necessarily governed by considerations of orientation or direction of the doorway. At Masada the structure that was chosen ensured the creation of a very sizable hall, in a place accessible to the entire community without causing any disturbance in its vicinity.[16] In the mountain palace-fortress at Herodium, the selection focused on the only hall that was suitable for this purpose. Topographic considerations probably determined the location of the building in Gamla. It would have been very difficult to erect a similar structure on the steep slope on which the city was built if the required orientation had been different. The entrance at Gamla seems to face the direction of Jerusalem (as does the orientation), but unlike the Galilean synagogues, the doorway does not really open onto the area outside the synagogue but onto a small yard via which the hall was entered. The location in Jericho was also not accidental. The building was adjoined to the main water conduit passing through the palace complex and continuing eastward, beyond the row of buildings that probably served the staff of the palaces and the adjacent farm.[17]

Here it should be emphasized that according to the opinion of most scholars, as is also so clearly expressed in the inscription of Theodotos, the primary function of the assembly hall was to make possible public readings of the Torah (and in parallel also *targum* and sermons). A hall surrounded by benches, with the reader of the Torah probably located at its centre, did not call for any special orientation. In any event, prayers were probably introduced in the synagogue only after the destruc-

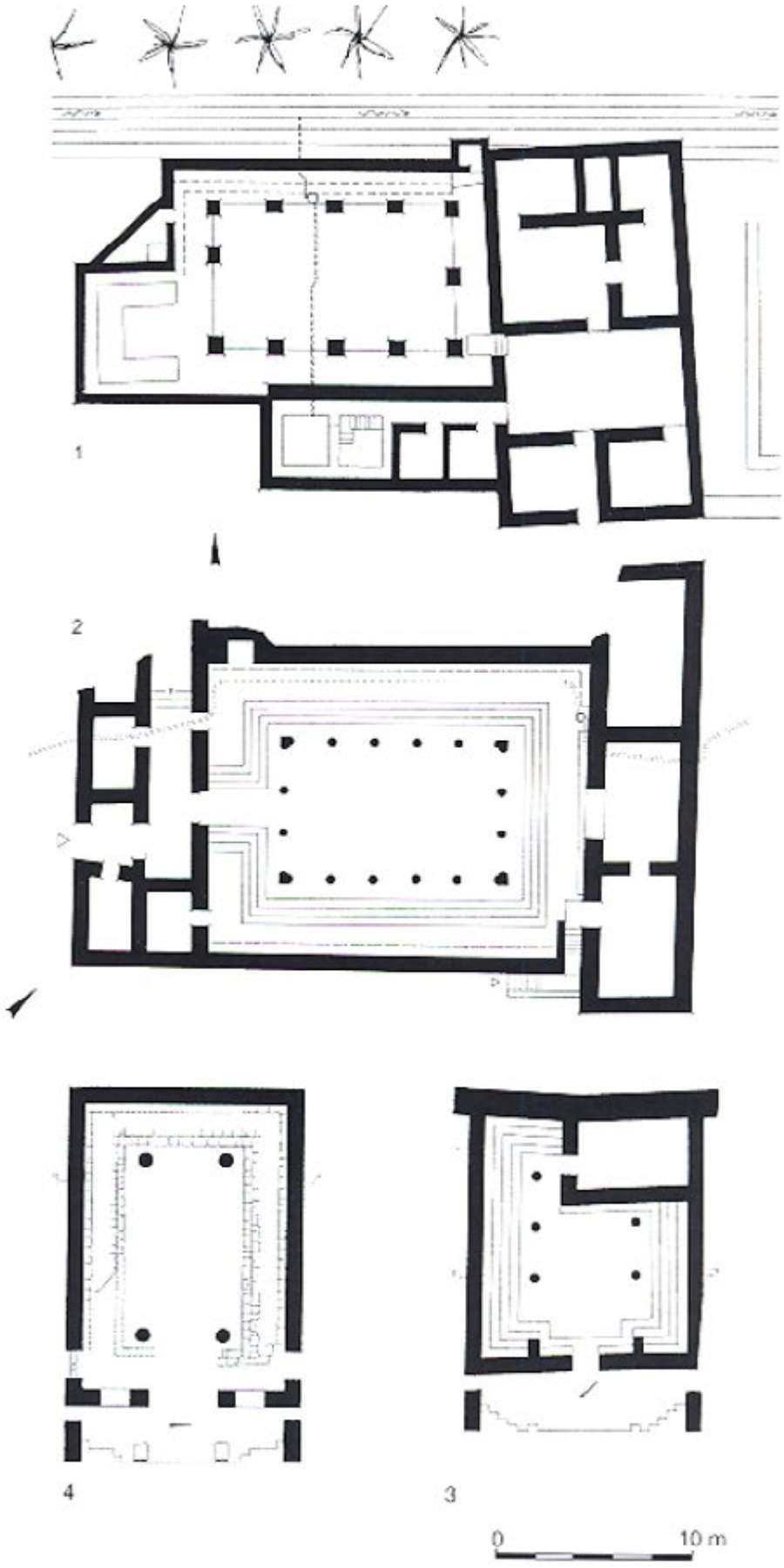

Fig. 4 *Ground plans of four synagogues, from the days of the Second Temple, in the same scale. Jericho (1). Gamla (2). Masada (3). Herodium (4).*

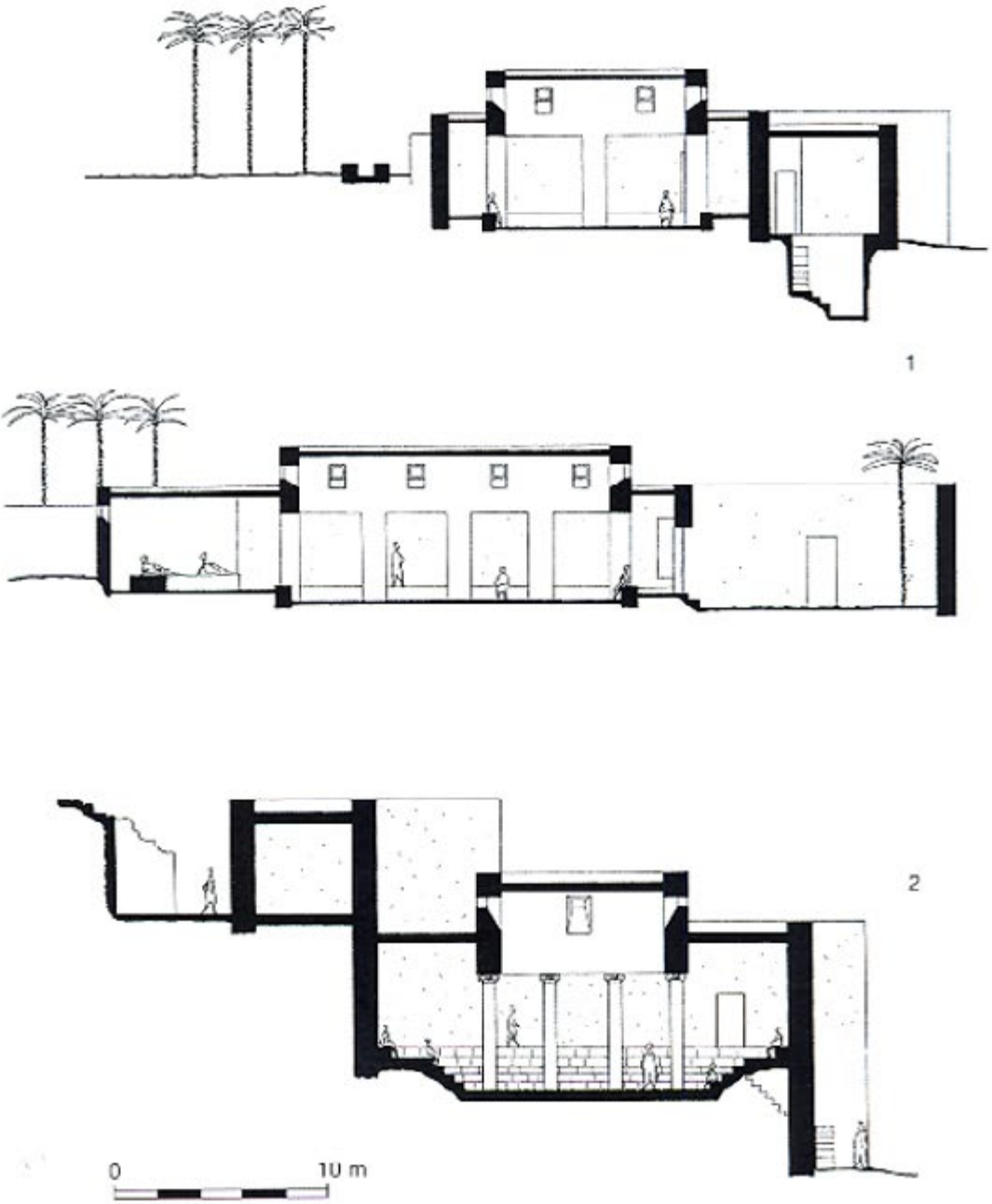

Fig. 5 *Cross sections through the synagogues in Jericho (1), and Gamla (2), in the same scale.*

Fig. 6 *The synagogue at Jericho (G. Laron).*

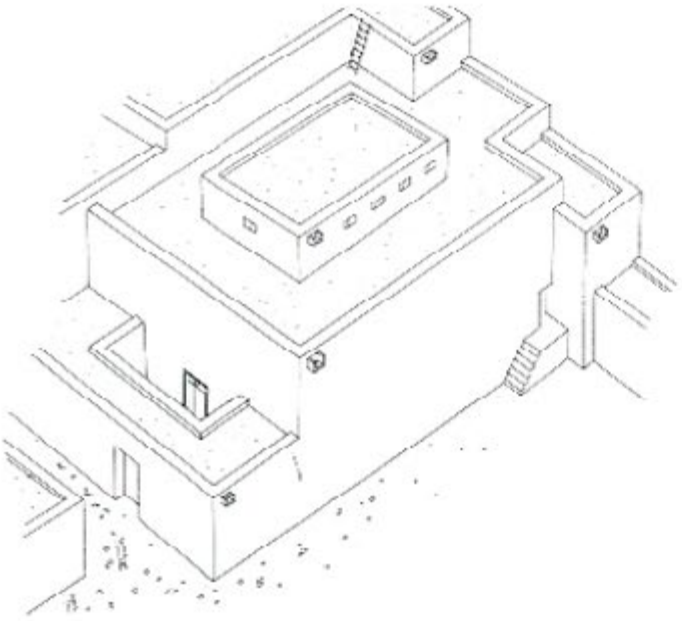

Fig. 7 *Isometric view of Gamla synagogue (by E. Netzer).*

tion of the Temple, and it seems that the custom of facing Jerusalem during the prayers (or parts of thereof), in practice leading to an emphasis of the orientation, came into being only after the Temple's destruction.

It is most logical to assume that the synagogues at Masada and Herodium were based on a model well-known to the rebels – the synagogues that existed at the end of the Second Temple period, at least some of which were certainly built according to this model. Against the background of the synagogues at Masada and Herodium, the exposure of the synagogue at Gamla made it possible to define the main characteristics of the synagogue hall, as well as to make assumptions regarding its architectural source.[18] The hall's characteristics can be defined as follows:

1. A hall surrounded by benches on all sides.
2. The use of columns in order to create a basilican section.
3. The synagogue hall lacked any architectural expression on the outside of the building (Fig. 7).
4. The hall lacked a clear orientation that generally also found expression in an emphasized entrance.
5. The hall contained a niche that was possibly intended for the storage of the Holy Scriptures (Figs. 8, 9).
6. The hall was connected to a water supply, thus making possible the presence of a water basin within the area of the hall and a ritual bath nearby (Fig. 10).

All the above-listed characteristics are actually discernible in the synagogue recently exposed in Jericho. There are a number of differences but they are not fundamental: the number of benches is different; the supports of the hall roof are different – pillars instead of columns – as is their location, adjacent to the lowest benches and not in front of them. On the other hand, owing to the good state of preservation at Jericho, the function of the niche is of clearer significance (both in the cell for storing the scrolls in use and in the subterranean cell that probably served as a *genizah*), and the connection between the water system and the ritual bath is also clearer.

It seems that all four of these synagogues had in common a flat ceiling. No roof tiles were found at any of the known Hasmonaean and Herodian sites, and the most common ceilings must have been based on horizontal wooden beams. The recently proposed reconstruction of the synagogue at Gamla[19] corresponds much more closely to synagogues from the period of the Mishna and the Talmud than do most of the buildings in the Land of Israel during the periods under discussion (see the author's proposed reconstructions of the synagogues at Jericho and Gamla).

As already mentioned above, both the synagogue at Gamla (Fig. 7) and the one in Jericho certainly reflect larger and grander synagogues that existed in the big cities: Jerusalem, Sepphoris, Tiberias, Caesarea, etc. An allusion to this is to be found in the description in Tosefta *Sukkah* 4:6 of the magnificent basilica that existed in Alexandria in Egypt. In this synagogue the nave was probably surrounded by two aisles, and apparently two rows of columns, on each side.[20]

Fig. 8 *Niche for Torah scrolls and* genizah *in Jericho synagogue (G. Laron).*

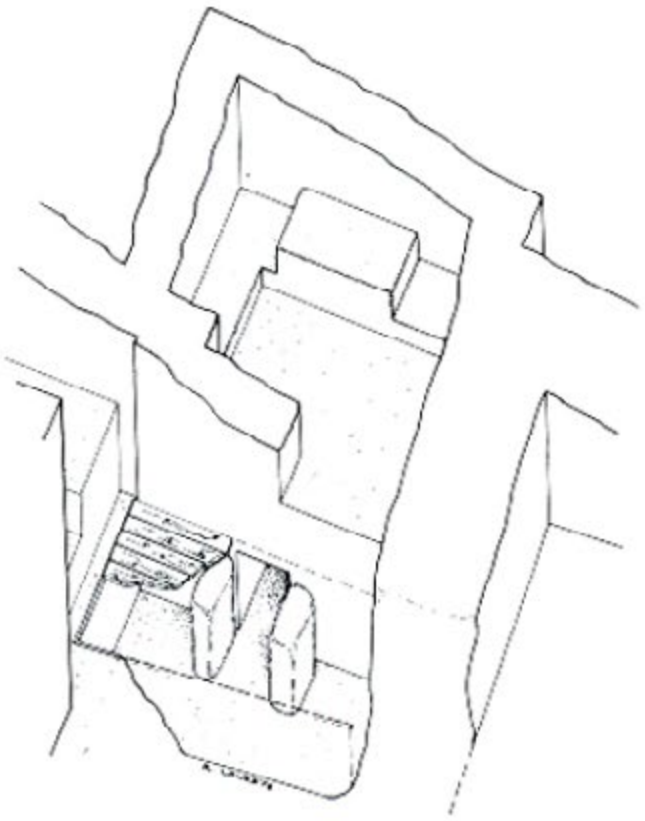

Fig. 9 *Isometric view of the niche for Torah scrolls and genizah in Jericho synagogue (by L. Lauryes).*

Fig. 10 *The ritual bath* (mikveh), *adjacent to the synagogue at Jericho (G. Laron).*

The origin of the synagogue

The problem of the synagogue's origin still engages the attention of scholars and will continue to do so in the future. It has many aspects:[21]

1. When and where did the process begin: in the Land of Israel or the Diaspora? at the end of the First Temple period? during the Babylonian exile? in the days of Ezra and Nehemiah? during the Hellenistic period or at the end of the Second Temple period?

2. What was the nature and significance of the process that led to the erection of the synagogue and to assemblies during the reading of the Torah?

3. What was the architectural prototype?

One of the views, only recently put forward by Lee I. Levine,[22] proposes that the rudiments of the synagogue institute were to be found at the city gates. This opinion is based on an analysis of the various functions that can be associated with the synagogues from the Second Temple period, and on literary sources as well as archaeological finds (like those revealed at Tel Dan). An important cornerstone of this school of thought is the great assembly held by Ezra and Nehemiah in Jerusalem, in a street or square next to the Water Gate, at which the Torah was read before a large crowd, as is related in Nehemiah 8:1: "The entire people assembled as one man in the square before the Water Gate, and they asked Ezra the scribe to bring the scroll of the Teaching of Moses with which the lord had charged Israel." Beyond the fact that this was a unique assembly, and not one of the common gatherings, we hold that the following two data should be taken into account:

1. Here we are dealing with an event that was regarded as an "official" ceremony by the returnees to Zion.

2. Whether the assembly was held, according to an existing tradition, at the city gate, or the site, close to the Water Gate, was chosen due to the presence of a square that could accommodate such a large number of participants.

The importance and status of the gates to which Levine refers in his writings correspond to the situation in cities of the Land of Israel during the period of the First Temple, which were populated mainly or totally by Jews. This does not necessarily conform with the situation in all those cities in which the Jews lived throughout the Diaspora, particularly in the Hellenistic period during which the character of the cities differed significantly from those in the Land of Israel in the days of the First Temple. The prototype of the

buildings in which assemblies were held in that period (if synagogues, aside from the *proseuche*' in Egypt, indeed existed at that time) should thus be sought in buildings that were used for assemblies, primarily in bouleterion structures.[23] An assembly in a closed and roofed structure has a completely different, in fact opposite, character to that conducted in a public place! The possibility that those who assembled had a common denominator, i.e., were of the same origin, had the same occupation, came from a certain social stratum, or shared some other background factor, and the desire for intimacy that could stem from this, were unattainable at the city gate, which was probably accessible to everyone. Irrespective of whether the assembly took place initially in a private home similar to the *domus ecclesia* or in a hall that was large and differed from a reception room in a private home, the gathering of the community, in our opinion, called for the existence of a building framework that was adapted or constructed especially for this purpose and was not necessarily available to all inhabitants of the city. In any event, the First Temple period is separated from the days of the Second Temple not only by a time gap but also, and mainly, by a difference in the demographic setup, in which the Jews resided in settlements that were also inhabited by people of other nations and religions.

It is self-evident that the assembly of people with a common denominator for a certain activity could have brought in its wake various activities that were of interest to all the members of the community. A Torah-reading assembly could probably have led to other activities, such as the discussion of social and political problems of concern to everyone, or litigation between members of the community. The last-mentioned activity could have been included in the community's agenda without any necessary connection with the trials that were held at the city gates during the First Temple period.[24] Everyone agrees that even the origins of the custom of providing accommodation in the synagogue building for members of the community who lived far away, or of the presence of ritual baths in the building, should not necessarily be sought at the city gates. This discussion could incorporate the question of which came first – the public-political-social activity or the reading of the Torah. In any event, the second possibility seems more reasonable.

The function of reading the Torah finds clear expression in all the synagogues from the Second Temple period that have survived in the Land of Israel, without any indication of a religious ceremony or hierarchy that necessitated the use of architectural axes, the presence of a *bemah*, the separation of the congregation from officeholders, orientation in a special direction, an emphasized entrance, etc. On the other hand, all of them contain a hall surrounded by benches on three or four sides, lack an obligatory orientation or entrance of importance, and in none of them are there signs of a built *bemah* or partitions between people of different status. It can be assumed that the Torah scrolls, when being read, were placed on a table in the centre of the room or along one of its sides (depending on the number of people present at the time). Such a table was certainly made of wood and was readily movable.

* * *

The synagogue in Jericho is the earliest of all those revealed to date in the Land of Israel. Its remains not only contribute to our understanding of the way the synagogue institute operated, but also reflect its popularity. The possibility that the community of workers who ran the palaces at Jericho, as well as the large agricultural farm adjacent to them, needed a synagogue building of their own calls for further explanation. In the present writer's opinion, other synagogues from the Second Temple period will be exposed in the fairly near future, including some that are even earlier and more splendid than the buildings that have been revealed at Gamla and close to the Hasmonaean palace in Jericho.[25]

Notes

1. Within the framework of this article, we do not intend to enter into a general discussion of the essence of the synagogue in the Second Temple period, but will concentrate only on the architectural aspect. For this general discussion and the relevant bibliography, see L.I. Levine, *The Ancient Synagogue, the First Thousand Years* (New Haven and London, 1999): 19-26, and P.V.M. Flesher, "Prolegomenon to a Theory of Early Synagogue Development," in: A.J. Avery-Peck and J. Neusner (eds.), *Judaism in Late Antiquity* (Leiden, 2001): 121-153.
2. Here we will mainly mention the clear archaeological context in which the scrolls were revealed, which differs from the situation at Qumran where the scrolls were found in caves, isolated from the structure, thus giving rise to some of the problems in dating them and determining clearly the connection between them and the structure revealed at the site.
3. Yigael Yadin's initial definition of the structure at Masada as a synagogue was based solely on an analysis of the remains. The discovery of the (tentative) *genizah* merely corroborated the reasonableness of the identification.
4. Under such circumstances, it is difficult to assume that the rebels would have built a similar structure for non-religious purposes.
5. See E. Netzer, *Masada*, III: *The Yigael Yadin Excavations 1963-1965, The Buildings: Stratigraphy and Architecture* (Jerusalem, 1991): 402-413.
6. See G. Foerster, "The Synagogues at Masada and Herodium," *Eretz-Israel* 11 (1973): 224-228 (Hebrew).
7. From the outset, the building was defined as a public one by its excavator, but later it was generally considered to be a synagogue. See S. Gutman, "The Synagogue at Gamla," in: L.I. Levine (ed.), *Ancient Synagogues Revealed* (Jerusalem, 1981): 30-34; and see S. Gutman and Y. Rappel, *Gamla – a City in Rebellion* (Ministry of Defense, Israel, 1994): 99-109 (Hebrew).
8. Gutman and Rappel, *Gamla*, 100.
9. On this point, the present author's opinion differs from that of the site's excavators. The latter claim (and this was also the view held by S. Gutman) that the original floor of the hall was made of packed earth. These scholars regard the surviving pavings at the foot of the benches as a stylobate for columns, and they apply a similar rule to the row of pavings that have survived at the centre of the hall, which in their opinion formed the base for another pair of columns in addition to the peripheral ones. We hold the view that by an analysis of the way in which the surviving paving was laid, it can be proved that no stylobate existed here and that other paving stones were looted. For this or some other reason, the row in the centre survived, which, in our opinion, was not meant to bear columns. With regard to the thickness (30 cm) of the floors in the surviving row and much thinner pavings in other cases, one should mention that during laying of floors the labourers often laid a number of "key" rows at a distance from one another, and then filled the spaces between them. From the nature of the work, these key rows should have been more stable and therefore the pavers in them were probably thicker. See D. Syon and Z. Yavor, "Gamla – Old and New," *Qadmoniot* 34 (2001): 2-33 (Hebrew). In pages 9-10 of this article, the present author's position, as to these questions, is mentioned.
10. See E. Netzer, "A Synagogue from the Hasmonean Period Recently Exposed in the Western Plain of Jericho," *IEJ* 49 (1999): 203-221.
11. Foerster, "The Synagogues," 227.
12. See E. Netzer, "Did the Spring-House at Magdala Serve as a Synagogue?," in: A. Kasher et al. (eds.), *Synagogues in Antiquity* (Jerusalem, 1987): 165-172 (Hebrew) and also references there to the publication of the results of the excavations at the site. It should be mentioned that no opinion attempting to refute this view has since been published.
13. See Y. Magen, Y. Zionit and S. Sirkis, "Kiryat Sefer – a Jewish Village and Synagogue of the Second Temple Period," *Qadmoniot* 32 (1999): 25-32 (Hebrew).
14. In any event, the subject of the entrances and orientation in the time of the Mishna and the Talmud will not be discussed here.
15. For example, this was the view expressed by Foerster ("The Synagogues," 227-228) in the article on the synagogues at Masada and Herodium, published prior to the exposure of the synagogue at Gamla.
16. The alternatives were either in the northern palace, the access to which was complicated, or in the western palace which perhaps served a certain community with different customs. See Netzer, *Masada*, III, 633-634.
17. Apparently it can be said that the connection with the conduit was intentional, as in the case of synagogues at Delos and Miletos, which were close to the sea. However, the supply of water in Jericho was not problematic, and it seems that the place was chosen because of the available open area and not on the account of the proximity to the conduit.
18. See Z.U. Ma'oz, "The Synagogue in the Second Temple Period – Architectural and Social Interpretation," *Eretz-Israel* 23 (1992): 331-344 (Hebrew).
19. See isometric drawing in Syon and Yavor, "Gamla – Old and New," 10. This reconstruction has a number of weak points: (1) there is no architectural or engineering justification for the row of columns dividing the aisle in two; (2) in the classical world in general, the incorporation of Doric and Ionic columns in the same hall or peristyle was in fact unacceptable; (3) wall sections containing clerestory windows above the colonnades were a common feature in such halls, and they are absent in this reconstruction; (4) the building's plan does not call for a symmetrical set-up in the entrance façade.
20. "Whoever have not seen the double stoa of Alexandria... It is a kind of large basilica, a stoa within a stoa..." S. Lieberman, *Tosefta Ki-Fshutah, A Comprehensive Commentary on the Tosefta*, IV, 889-892 (Hebrew).
21. Levine, *The Ancient Synagogue*, 26-29.
22. Ibid., 26-41.
23. Ma'oz, "The Synagogue," 336-337.
24. Apparently the opposite can also be claimed, i.e., that from the outset the assembly was for a different purpose and only later on was the reading of the Torah affiliated with it. However, this does not seem reasonable.
25. A yet unknown synagogue was recently excavated by the IAA to the south of Modiin. It was apparently built during the 1st century CE, on top of the foundations of an earlier structure that may have served a similar purpose. Following a visit to the site, the author gained the impression that this synagogue is in full accordance with the above-mentioned characteristics of synagogues from the Second Temple period.