

Synagogues began in Alexandria Egypt in 280 B.C.

Steven Rudd AD 2017

Archaeological and literary evidence supports the existence of 55 synagogues from the late second temple period. The synagogue system, a bridge connecting the temple and the church, emerges in Alexandria, Egypt in 280 BC, as a direct result of the Greek translation of the Septuagint (LXX) in 282 BC, which served the spiritual needs of the local Jewish community. Small groups likely met in homes to pray and study Torah. Being functionally illiterate in Hebrew, Greek was their *lingua franca*. These home groups became the millieu out of which the synagogue system emerges. Think of the Septuagint as synagogue seed because wherever copies were distributed, a synagogue, initially called a “house of prayer” (Greek: proseuche) was born.



The first synagogue, The Great Basilica Synagogue of Alexandria, appears around 280 B.C. and operates until its destruction by Hadrian in A.D. 117.¹ This synagogue and the hundreds that follow serve as a prototype of the church in form, function, and liturgy.

From Temple to Synagogue to Church

Daniel’s surrender in 605 B.C. not only marked the beginning of the 70-year Babylonian captivity, but it also began the transition from Mosaic Judaism to Christianity. Daniel’s two messianic “time” prophecies (Dan 2:44, 9:24) created a window of expectation for the coming of the messiah between 49 B.C., with the rise of Rome, the 4th kingdom, and the resurrection of Jesus in A.D. 33, which marked the end of the 70 weeks. Daniel 2 indicates that the kingdom of God (the 5th kingdom) would be established at the same time as the 4th kingdom (Rome). The 70 weeks of Daniel 9 starts at the decree to rebuild Jerusalem (Artaxerxes I in 458 B.C., Ezra 7:8) and ends with the coming of the Messiah (A.D. 33, resurrection), which is exactly 490 years to the solar day.

The overlay of messianic prophecy onto observable history reveals that synagogues may have been God’s provisional step between the temple and the church. The A.D. 70 destruction of the Jerusalem temple results in the extinction of Mosaic Judaism. Ironically today, the Rabbinical synagogue system is Judaism’s only liturgical option where weekly sabbath services have a church-like feel.

Two popular views:

Among Jews today, there are two contradictory theories about the origin of synagogues.

First, it is widely believed among the Rabbinical faith community that synagogues began in Babylon during the captivity of 605 B.C. in the absence of the Solomonic temple. However, there are no references to synagogues in the Old Testament, no early literary references or inscriptions, and no archaeological remains for any synagogue in Babylon. The Jerusalem Talmud (A.D. 400) references the “synagogue of Babylonians” which was in use in Zippori (not Babylon) around A.D. 160 in connection with Rabbi Yose who wrote the Sedar Olam.² The Babylonian Talmud (A.D. 500) references the “synagogue of Shaf VeYativ in Nehardea” at the time of the 605 B.C. captivity, but this very late source follows a pattern of defining a synagogue as any place Torah is read and is purely conjectural.³ The tradition that the exiles who were deported with Jehoiachin in 597 B.C., hauled stone and dirt from the Jerusalem temple site to build a synagogue in Nehardea lacks credibility. While

¹ Jerusalem Talmud, y. Sukk. 5:1, I.5.A–H, describing the second temple synagogue in Alexandria, A.D. 400.

² Jerusalem Talmud, y. Meg. 75B, A.D. 400.

³ Babylonian Talmud, b. Meg. 29A, A.D. 500.

Josephus records a sizable population of Jews at Nehardea Babylon who send their half-shekel temple tax to Jerusalem in the first century, there is no reference to any synagogue there.⁴

Second, some archaeologists reject the existence of synagogues before A.D. 70, theorizing their emergence was a replacement of the temple only after its destruction. The archaeological and literary evidence soundly refutes this conclusion. Their views are summed up by archaeologist Rachel Hachlili who says,

“New Testament accounts of activities in ‘synagogues’ do not necessarily reflect the historical reality of the time.”⁵

“Kloppenborg holds that it is possible that Luke (“for he loves our nation and it was he who built us our synagogue.” Luke 7:5) added these verses, thus they do not provide compelling evidence of the synagogue as a building; Luke might be presenting a later Diaspora practice rather than early 1st c. CE Galilean one. The Gospel writings refer to an assembly and make no comments that could clearly testify to the existence of an architectural structure called a synagogue.”⁶

“The destruction of Jerusalem and the Temple was a turning point in the creation of the synagogue, in terms of both architecture and the customs and rituals practiced. The response to the catastrophe of 70 CE was the adoption of Torah reading, study, and prayer as a replacement for the sacrificial cult, making public worship the custom of the synagogue. This new, important, and unique Jewish institution already existed during the Second Temple period.”⁷

“As long as the Temple existed in Jerusalem, the Jews were careful to avoid any competition with it.”⁸

“The evidence of structures dating from the first century B.C.E. to the first century C.E. at remote sites in the Land of Israel and in the Diaspora, taken together with the terms *proseuche*, *synagogue* and *beth knesset*, indicates that the communal structures we call synagogues served as multipurpose places of assembly. Certainly it is conceivable that the pre-70 C.E. structures had didactic functions as well as being centres for assembly and for the community, but they were not places of cult or worship.”⁹

The bias among some archaeologists against the NT as evidence that synagogues existed before A.D. 70 leads them to wrongly conclude that they were born in the religious vacuum after the temple’s destruction. However, when archaeologists dismiss a major literary source like the New Testament, it is a red warning flag they are very wrong. The recent discovery of the Magdala synagogue, which dates to 50 B.C., has become the Achilles' heel of their bias.

The Septuagint was the progenitor of the synagogue

Daniel 8:8 likely refers to both Alexander the Great and Ptolemy I. These rulers played pivotal roles in the transition from synagogue to church. After the destruction of the first temple on 10th Av 587 B.C. the Jews living in Babylon adopted Aramaic as their working language. With the conquest of Alexander in 333 B.C., Greek became the dominant language for the diaspora Jews.¹⁰ In Judea, the Jews were bilingual with Aramaic

⁴ Josephus, *Antiquities* 18.310-313. Neerda of Josephus = Nehardea of the Talmud.

⁵ Rachel Hachlili, *Ancient Synagogues - Archaeology and Art: New Discoveries and Current Research*, p. 10, A.D. 2013.

⁶ *Ibid*, p. 7.

⁷ *Ibid*, p. 4.

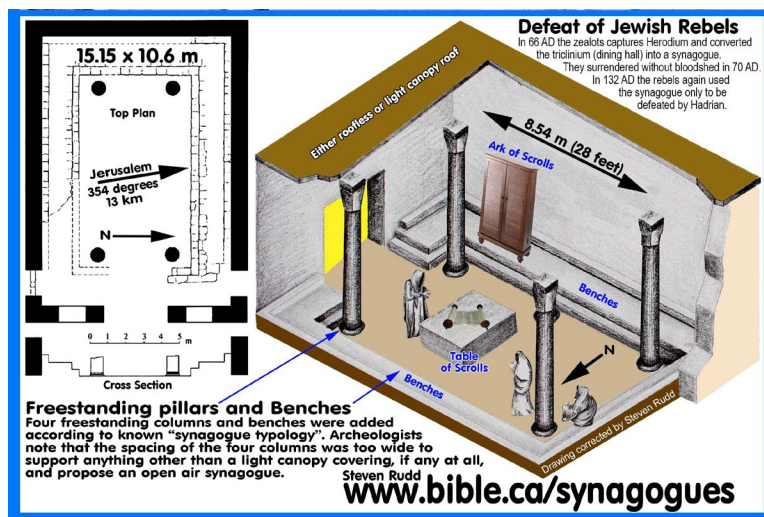
⁸ *Ibid*, p. 16.

⁹ *Ibid*, p. 16.

¹⁰ H. B. Swete, *An Introduction to the Old Testament in Greek*, p. 8, A.D. 1914.

continuing as the mother tongue in the home, but Greek served as the language of the marketplace.¹¹ Jesus was probably quadrilingual in Aramaic, Greek, Latin and Hebrew.¹² Ptolemy I built the Library of Alexandria, and his son Ptolemy II translated the Torah into Greek for the Library. It is reasonable to speculate that the Greek speaking Jews at Alexandria quickly made copies of the Septuagint and began gathering in small groups to read/study Scripture and pray. Wherever the new Greek Bible was distributed to the diaspora Jews throughout the world, they too would gather on the Sabbath to read and pray. The synagogue movement therefore, was born out of the translation of the Septuagint.

The translation work at Alexandria paved the way for the ministry of the Apostles in two ways. First, by equipping thousands of synagogues inside and outside Judea, with an authorized translation of the Hebrew scriptures. Second, Christian baptism was facilitated because each synagogue had a Mikveh (immersion pool) in which worshippers would immerse every Sabbath before entering the synagogue for ritual purity.¹³ ¹⁴ Since weekly worship is absent from Mosaic Judaism, only the most devout Jews participated in synagogue worship by freewill. This is reflected in synagogue excavations where perimeter bench-seating capacity averaged 50 worshippers.



Herodium Synagogue with seating for 40

¹¹ Marcos, N. Fernández, *The Septuagint in Context: Introduction to the Greek Version of the Bible*, p. 333, A.D. 2000.

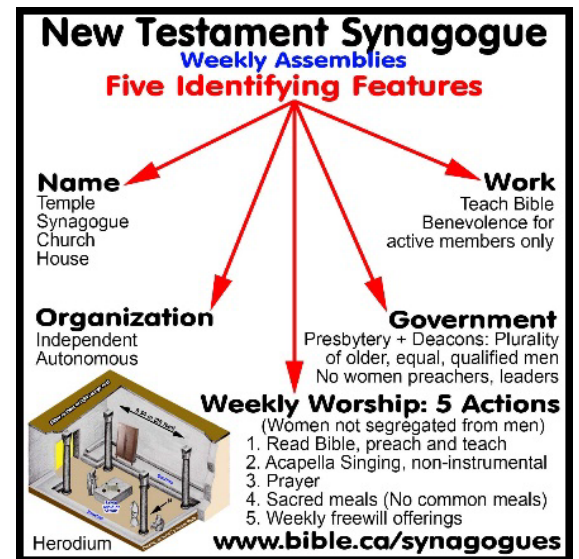
¹² Howard F. Vos, *Archaeology And The Text Of The Old Testament, Bible and Spade*, Vol. 7, No. 1, p. 19, A.D. 1978.

¹³ J. Eisenberg, J., *The Jewish Publication Society dictionary of Jewish words*, p. 107, A.D. 2001.

¹⁴ The Hasidic and Kabbalistic traditions practice immersion before entering the synagogue each Sabbath.

The church is an exact replica of the synagogue in work and worship:

There was no segregation of men and women in synagogue worship.¹⁵ Instead, husbands, wives and children worshipped together just like in churches today.¹⁶ Instead of segregation by gender, families were grouped by vocation and sorted by age.^{17 18 19} Each man read from and had access to a complete copy of the Greek Tanakh which was stored in the Ark of the Scrolls in the synagogue.²⁰ Singing in synagogues was in responsive acapella style.^{21 22 23 24 25} Weekly freewill contributions were collected each Sabbath and sent to Jerusalem.^{26 27 28} Local synagogue government was Presbyterian.^{29 30} Sacred communion meals were eaten several times a year with unleavened bread and leaven-free grape juice as witnessed by the Elephantine Papyri,³¹ and synagogue Mazzot ovens excavated at Masada and Ostia. The first century church was identical to synagogues in almost every way.



All this providentially prepared the Jewish people to become accustomed to what would become church worship, which was very different from temple worship. The Jewish synagogue was a prototype of the Christian Church in form, function and worship, just waiting for Apostle Paul to preach about Jesus the risen Messiah. Paul walked into Berea, quoted messianic passages which the Bereans “examined daily” for themselves from their own synagogue Septuagint Tanakh (Acts 17:11). The Septuagint was the standard issue Tanakh, and the accepted and trusted translation in every synagogue much like the King James Version was in up to the 19th century AD.³² They would then be baptized in the synagogue Mikveh. God created a vast

¹⁵ Rachel Hachlili, *Ancient Synagogues - Archaeology and Art: New Discoveries and Current Research*, p. 280, A.D. 2013.

¹⁶ Peter Richardson, *Building Jewish in the Roman East*, p. 130, A.D. 2004.

¹⁷ Philo, Good Man 81

¹⁸ Josephus, Antiquities 14.259–261: decree of 94 B.C.

¹⁹ Jerusalem Talmud, y. Sukk. 5:1, I.5.A–H, describing the second temple synagogue in Alexandria, A.D. 400.

²⁰ Philo, Good Person 81–84

²¹ Babylonian Talmud, b. Git. 1:1, I.31.A–D

²² McClintock & Strong, *Cyclopaedia of Biblical, Theological, and Ecclesiastical Literature*, Vol. 6, p. 762, Music, Instrumental. Many Protestant reformers were opposed to instrumental music including Martin Luther (Erinnerungs Schriftt etlicher vom Adel vnd Stedten, 1597 AD, pp. 74–76), John Calvin (Commentary on Psalms 33), Adam Clarke (Commentary, Vol. 4, p. 684), John Wesley (Adam Clarke's Commentary, Vol. 4, p. 685), Charles Spurgeon (Commentary on Psalm 33:2 and Psalm 42:4).

²³ *Anchor Bible Dictionary*, Music, Volume 4, Page 934.

²⁴ Everett Ferguson, *A Cappella Music in the Public Worship of the Church*, p. 44, A.D. 2013. Ferguson notes that instrumental music was banned in first century synagogues.

²⁵ The Greek Orthodox and Roman Catholic church broke communion with each other in AD 1054 for four doctrinal reasons including the introduction of instrumental music in worship by the Western church. The Greek Orthodox church continues their first century practice of acapella worship down to the present day.

²⁶ Josephus, Antiquities 16.167–168

²⁷ Marcus Tullius Cicero, 106–54 B.C., For Flaccus 28, Speech of M. T. Cicero in defence of Lucius Valerius Flaccus, 59 B.C.

²⁸ Replicating the ancient pattern of synagogues sending freewill offerings to the Temple in Jerusalem, Paul instructed the churches of Galatian and Corinth to make freewill weekly 1st day collections (as opposed to tithing) and then send the money to Jerusalem to help needy Christians (1 Cor 16:2; 2 Cor 9:7).

²⁹ Xenephyris synagogue inscription: B.C. 139. JIGRE #24; *Corpus Inscriptionum Judaicarum II*, Jean-Baptiste Frey, 2.1441, A.D. 1952.

³⁰ First century synagogues and churches both featured a plurality of elders who functioned as co-equal overseers. Luke 8:49; Acts 13:15; Acts 14:23; Titus 1:5.

³¹ “Be pure: Do not drink [anything leavened] Do not [eat] anything leavened”, Bezalel Porten, *Context of Scripture*, The Elephantine Passover Letter, 3.46, 419 B.C. The New Testament never refers to the Lord’s Supper “blood” as wine (Greek, oinos) but instead calls it “fruit of the vine”. Matthew 26:29; Mark 14:25; Luke 22:18.

³² *A Greek-English Lexicon of the Septuagint*, J. Lust, E. Eynikel, K. Hauspie, Introduction, A.D. 2003

network of independent Jewish synagogues before the birth of Christ, that appear to be an exact replica of what the Christian church was to become.

The church adopted its format from the synagogue, not the other way around.³³ The earliest church was similar in worship, liturgy and function to the synagogue. Jewish sources call the synagogue a “church” [ecclesia]³⁴. James 2:1 called the church a “synagogue” [synagogos]. Jewish Rabbis of the first century even preached the same kind of uplifting sermon topics, designed to enrich every day life and endure daily battles as in the church today.³⁵

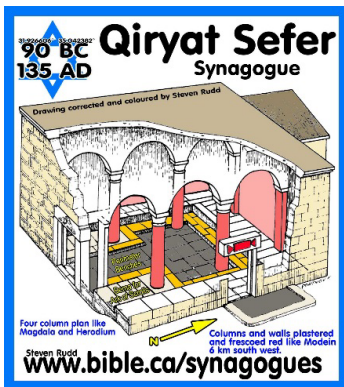
The Synagogue was the prototype of the Christian Church for Worship and Function Prototype			
Prototype	Jerusalem Temple	Synagogue	Church
Who controlled	Sadducees: Acts 5:17	Not initially, but by 100 B.C. Pharisees took over control. Lk 11:43, Jn 12:42	Christians: Jew and Gentile
Weekly attendance	No (3 times a year)	Yes: every Sabbath (7 th day)	Yes: every first day. Acts 20:7; 1 Cor 16:2
Government	Levitical High priest Sole top authority	Democracy: Body of equal rulers (Mark 5:22, 35-36, 38; Luke 8:41, 13:14)	Democracy: plurality of equal elders/ bishops/ shepherds. 1 Tim 3; Tit 1
Clericalism	Yes: Non-priests who entered the Holy Place were stoned.	No: Any Jew could lead any event in the synagogue.	No: Every Christian is a priest. Any man can preach, read, pray or officiate communion.
Age of participation	30 years for priests: Num 4. Ezek 1:1; John the Baptist and Jesus: Luke 3:23	Any pubescent boy	Any baptized boy
Independent and Autonomous	Yes	Yes	Yes until 4 th century when the diocese was invented.
Animal sacrifices	Yes	No	No
Focal point	Outward ritual of sacrifice & libation	Inward devotion of Torah study & prayer	Inward devotion of Bible study & prayer
Physical “no go zones” for common Jews in building	Yes	No	Not until the 4 th century when the clergy/laity distinction was invented.
Who can access the Torah inside the “Ark” (Bible).	Only Priests can touch Ark of Covenant.	Any Jew can access the Ark of Scrolls in the synagogue.	All Christians have equal access to Bible in church.
Instrumental Music in worship	Yes	No	No. Until 1054 A.D.
Who conducted public Bible readings in 30 A.D.	Priest in Hebrew which no one understood because the masses spoke Aramaic and Greek.	Any Jew in Greek which all understood	Any Christian in Greek which all understood
Language of Scripture	Hebrew	Greek Septuagint	Greek Septuagint
Physical worship	Most sacrifices kept at distance from the people.	All drew close to with spiritual events equally	Everyone directly shares the most sacred blood and body in Communion
Bible experts	High Priest	Pharisees	Ministers and overseers
Names	temple [hieron]	house of prayer [proseuche],	Synagogue [synagōgē],

³³ Peter Richardson, *Building Jewish in the Roman East*, p. 343, A.D. 2004

³⁴ Philo, *The Special Laws*, I 325. A.D. 30.

³⁵ “On the seventh day there are spread before the people in every city innumerable lessons of prudence, and temperance, and courage, and justice, and all other virtues; during the giving of which the common people sit down, keeping silence and pricking up their ears, with all possible attention, from their thirst for wholesome instruction” Philo, *The Special Laws*, II 62.

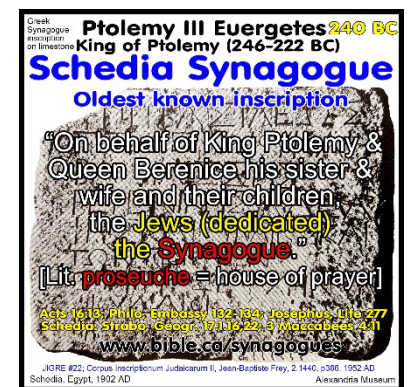
		Synagogue [synagōgē], Church [ekkleisia], Temple, House	Church [ekkleisia], Temple, House
Water of purification (Mode)	Brass Laver (Sprinkling)	Mikveh (immersion)	Baptism (immersion)
Water of purification (purpose)	Brass Laver (remove sin)	Mikveh (remove sin)	Baptism: Acts 22:16 (Remove sin)
Clothing after purification (clothed with garments of salvation)	Garments of salvation: Priests special clothing.	Mikveh: Isaiah 61:10 (wore white robe after immersion)	Baptism ("Put on" Christ: Gal 3:26-27)
Legal civil system	Levitical priests	Board of Elders	Christians 1 Corinthians 6:2
Worship liturgy	Animal sacrifices, song, prayer, bread, incense, candles	Holy bread, song, prayer, public reading of scripture, preaching, collections	Break bread, song, prayer, public reading of scripture, preaching, collections
Freestanding Columns	Solomon's two freestanding temple columns: (Jachin, Boaz) 1 Kings 7:21	The Herodium Synagogue had freestanding columns that were symbolic not structural	Christians are the freestanding columns and the church is the pillar of truth. 1 Tim 3:15; Rev 3:12. The first church buildings had columns.
Refugee sanctuary	Yes "horns of altar" 1 Ki 1:50; 2:28 Cities of refuge.	Yes: Refugee Asylum Sanctuary Status in Synagogues	Yes: Refugee Asylum Sanctuary Status in Churches
Sacred meals eaten	Yes Passover	Yes Passover	Yes Communion
Common meals eaten	Yes (priests ate the leftover portion of sacrifices animals)	No.	No: Forbidden in 1 Corinthians 11:34
Frequency of eating unleavened bread	Mazzot: yearly	Mazzot: yearly	Communion: weekly
Women segregated in worship	YES. temple had a separate court for the women, as seen in the Wailing Wall today.	No: women sat with husbands and children	No: women sat with husbands and children
Women reading, praying, teaching, leading worship	No	No: A woman is seductive (Talmud, b. Ber. 3:5, I.16.F)	No: Flat forbidden 1 Tim 2:12
Schools	No	Every Synagogue was a school	Every church is a school



Evidence for 55 second temple synagogues:

Synagogue Occupation Date = SOD. The SOD equals the earliest possible date from any combination of archaeological sites, inscriptions, and literary sources. For example, the SOD for Nazareth is A.D. 30 because the New Testament says there was a synagogue in Nazareth, even though no inscriptions or sites are known. The SOD for Schedia, Egypt is 240 B.C. based upon the oldest synagogue inscription ever found, even though no literary

sources or sites are known. The SOD for the archaeological synagogue site at Qiryat Sefer, near Modein, is 90 B.C. even though no literary sources or inscriptions are known. It features red fresco walls and four red columns like Magdala.



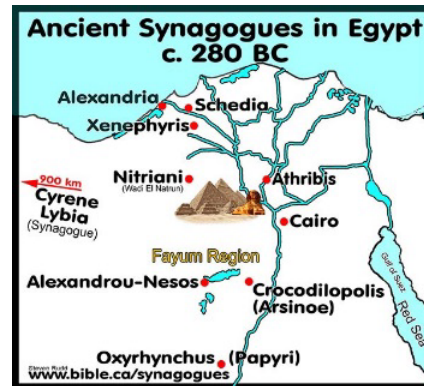
The Synagogue at Magdala

The SOD for the recently discovered synagogue site at Magdala is 50 B.C., and it is likely mentioned in Mk 5:21-43. This town is the home of Mary Magdalene, the place Jesus healed the daughter of a synagogue official named Jarius, the site of the healing of the hemorrhaging woman. Magdala was also the rebel base of Josephus during first Jewish war in A.D. 66.³⁶

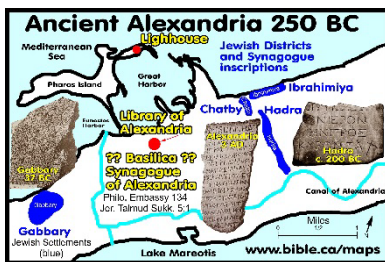


The oldest synagogue inscriptions are from Egypt

From the archaeological record of extant synagogue inscriptions, the first formal synagogue buildings were either converted from houses or built from scratch, at the time of Ptolemy III. (246 B.C.) Indeed, the three oldest synagogue building inscriptions all dedicate the synagogue to Ptolemy III in the cities of Cairo, Crocodilopolis and Schedia in Egypt.



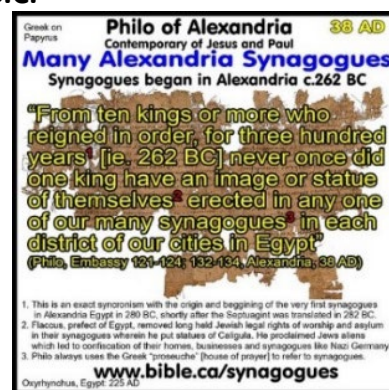
First Synagogue was the Great Basilica Synagogue of Alexandria, Egypt: 280 B.C. – A.D. 117.



Alexandria is where the greatest number of inscriptions have been found in one city. As early as Philo³⁷ A.D. 38 and as late as Babylonian Talmud³⁸ (A.D. 500) the “Great Basilica Synagogue of Alexandria” was considered the oldest and the largest synagogue in the world as a witness to the birthplace of Synagogues. The Tosefta A.D. 250 called this second temple synagogue “the Great Glory of Israel.”³⁹ The Jerusalem Talmud said Hadrian destroyed it.⁴⁰ It is also informative that 90% of the oldest synagogue stone inscriptions are written in Greek and not Hebrew.

Philo explicitly dates the origin of Synagogues to 262 B.C.

Philo explicitly dated the origin of Synagogues to 262 B.C.⁴¹ This incredible chronological synchronism has been missed by most scholars! Just as Jephthah’s 300 years (Judges 11:26) gives us the date of the Conquest at 1406 B.C., so too Philo’s 300 years gives us the date for the first synagogues IN EGYPT in 262 B.C.!



³⁶ Josephus Life 155-164

³⁷ Philo, Embassy/Legat. 132-139, Alexandria, A.D. 41.

³⁸ Babylonian Talmud, b. Sukk. 5:1d, l.2.A–H, describing the second temple synagogue in Alexandria, A.D. 500.

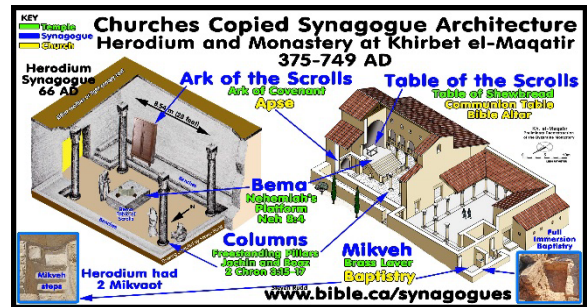
³⁹ Tosefta, Sukkah 4:6A–G, describing the second temple synagogue in Alexandria, A.D. 250.

⁴⁰ Jerusalem Talmud, y. Sukk. 5:1, l.5.A–H, describing the second temple synagogue in Alexandria, A.D. 400.

⁴¹ Philo, Embassy/Legat. 132-139, Alexandria, A.D. 41-45.

Synagogue architecture present in every church today:

Every church on earth today has physical architectural remnants of the ancient synagogue. The first church buildings were erected in the early Byzantine era around A.D. 327. The church at Khirbet el-Maqtar⁴² dates to A.D. 375-749 and shares most of the architectural features of first century synagogues including a full immersion baptistry (mikveh), double columns and a bema (raised area where the readings were done). Yet even the simplest “house churches” today have a table, however crude, that the elements of the communion rest upon which was derived from the Table of the Scrolls. In a long list of ways, the early church was a mirror replica of Jewish synagogue architecture. The Synagogue Mikveh became the Church baptistry. The Synagogue bema derived from Ezra became the Church Pulpit. The Synagogue Niches and Ark of the Scrolls became the Church Apse. The Synagogue Table of the Scrolls became the church Communion Table. The Christian church will forever show vestiges of its ancient Jewish heritage formulated in Egypt.



Synagogue Architectural Typology incorporated into the Christian Church			
Architecture	Probable Mosaic origin	Synagogue Typology	Church Typology
Mikveh (baptistry)	Tabernacle and Temple Brass was basin for cleansing	Every synagogue had a nearby Mikveh for full immersion for ritual purity. Many Jews became Christians in their synagogue Mikvehs.	Mark 16:16; Acts 2:38; 22:16; 1 Pe 3:21 Ritual purity by washing away sins through the blood of Christ in obedience to the great commission: Mt 28:18-19.
Freestanding columns	Solomon's temple freestanding pillars: Jachin and Boaz	Freestanding columns at Herodium and Magdala	Antitype of Individual Christians and the Church as a Pillar of Truth
Bema (raised area)	Ezra's platform on top of which he read the Law (Torah) Nehemiah 8:4	Raised area in center where the reader or speaker would stand	Prototype of the Pulpit: Raised area at front where preacher stands
Synagogue perimeter bench seating	None	Center focused benches lining the perimeter of the assembly room.	Metaphor for our equality in Christ.
Moses Seat (government)	Moses authority	Privilege, preference, being first, special recognition.	Metaphor for pride. Replaced by Christ: Deut 18:18
Niches and Ark of the Scroll (storage)	"Ark of Covenant" inside was the ten commandments on the side was the Torah	"Ark of the Scrolls" wooden cart, cabinet sometimes placed in a niche in a outside wall.	Architectural Prototype of the Church Apse
Table of the Scrolls	Table of shewbread	Stone or wooden table scroll were placed upon during worship services.	Prototype of the Lord's supper table

⁴² The author was a square supervisor of the church at Khirbet el-Maqtar excavations from 2011-2016 with ABR, under directors Dr. Bryant Wood and Dr. Scott Stripling.

Conclusion:

The Septuagint was the providential agent that gave birth the synagogue movement in 280 B.C. as a prototype for the church in A.D. 33. When the Jews who had worshipped in a synagogue their entire life converted to Christianity, church worship was a familiar and easy transition except Jesus, not Moses was the central lawgiver. This is exactly what God had intended from the beginning of time. (Eph 3:8-12) "When the fullness of the time came, God sent forth His Son, born of a woman, born under the Law, so that He might redeem those who were under the Law, that we might receive the adoption as sons." (Galatians 4:4-5) "to Him be the glory in the church and in Christ Jesus to all generations forever and ever. Amen." (Ephesians 3:21)

Steven Rudd, 2017