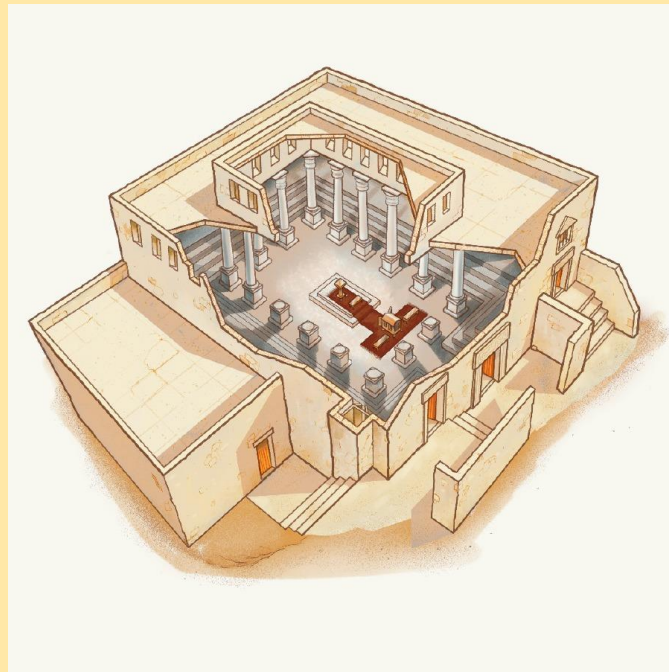


Research Article

Synagogue & Church: Comparative Structures



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**Take up our quarrel with the foe:
To you from failing hands we throw
The torch; be yours to hold it high.
If ye break faith with us who die [in the Church]
We shall not sleep, though poppies grow
In Flanders fields.**

In Flanders Fields by John McGrae (last stanza)



Synagogue and Church: Comparative Structures

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Our purpose and desire is to foster Biblical, historical and related studies that strengthen the Church of God's message & mission and provides further support to its traditional doctrinal positions.

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Related Reading:

- *A Genuine Minister with the Heart of a Shepherd? Or Fudging it?* by C White
- *Are Ministers Priests or Elders?* by C White
- *Biblical Eldership* by A Strauch
- *Commentary on the New Testament Use of the Old Testament* by G Beale & D Carson
- *Do Ministers sit on Moses Seat?* by C White
- *From Synagogue to Church* by J Burtchaell
- *So, What does a Deacon do?* by C White
- *Study Notes on the Melchizedek Priesthood* by C White
- *Was Peter the Leading Apostle?* by C White
- *What is Justice?* by C White
- *Will the Temple, Sacrifices and Tribal Allotments be restored in the Millennium?* by C White
- *Youth and their Elders in the Church* by C White

Introduction and Background

“He who knows only his own generation [eg, one without a knowledge of history or of the Church] remains forever a child.” -- Marcus Tullius Cicero

“Is this just another article on the controversial subject of Church governance or does it provide additional information on a valuable and important Bible subject?” This is the question I have to ask myself as I write this article.

“What is its intention and purpose? How shall I convey my message? And will it be helpful?”

Answering these questions helped me to frame the article and to ensure I included only that information I thought was necessary to avoid a lengthy tome that many would not wish to read. Yet a short article would not give justice to this cause. So, the attempt is for something in-between.

In this article I attempt to answer the question concerning how the first century church was organised and structured.

Did the administrative arrangements commence completely a-fresh with the establishment of the Church or did it continue – more-or-less – what it learned or inherited from the synagogue?

This article was originally written in 1996 with some very minor additions or amendments in 2006. In the original 1996 version of this article, I stated the following:

“NB: this paper is far from complete. Most of my research papers and resources are in a box which I am finding difficulty locating. In due course I shall fill in the details of this paper when I locate that box. In the meantime, I thought it would be beneficial to release this information.”

So, at long last the box of research was located and I endeavoured to finalise this article which was recommenced in late June 2009, but was not completed. There was a further attempt in 2020 to finish the article to no avail given that so many other projects raised their heads and took priority. At last, in early 2021 I managed to forge ahead and complete this project.

But this time I decided to keep a sharper focus on the goal – to forgo meandering into other areas of church governance which have been ‘thrashed’ and ‘bandied about’ for decades in the Church of God.

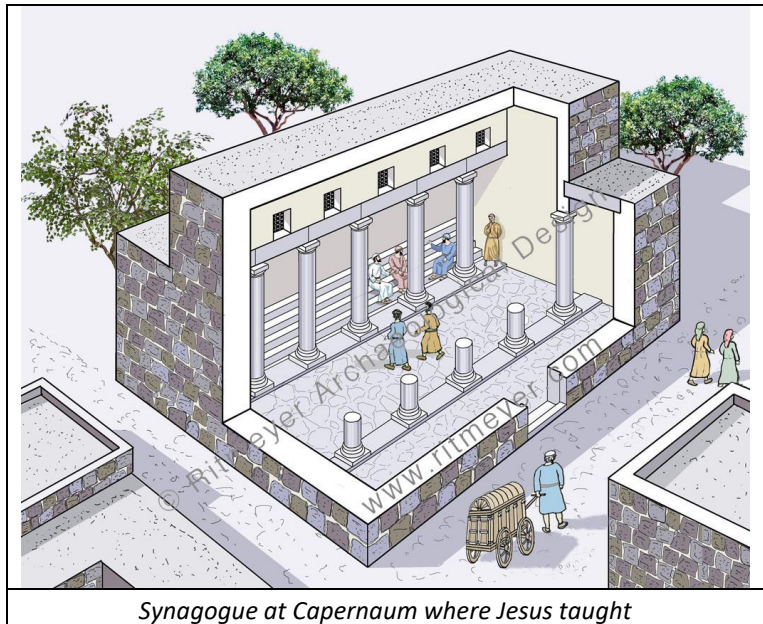
This has turned out to be a tedious and complicated process as I pore through scores and scores of articles, papers and books to summarise and to synthesise what is presented and sort through the complexities and even contradictions in some places, by the various authors. At times I met challenges given all the hopping around, sorting through all the views and making sense of both academics, pre-conceived ideas, items by non-academics yet just as valuable as they often raise some interesting points. Trying to get to the bottom of it all and to really grasp the structure of the synagogue of that time is my goal.

By way of background: in the 1970s, as a school student, I was fascinated by the Sabbatarian

movement and was able to collect literature and information from many Church of God, Adventist, Messianic and other groups.

The various Biblical statutes I found very interesting – after all, the Ten Commandments are, in a way, the table of contents for the various commandments, statutes and judgments found within the Torah. Familiarity with the table of contents is just not enough – the rest of the contents of a book should be read and understood.

At the same time, I sought to understand the structure of Church governance which is so very important and looking at the 'table of contents' of this subject was just not enough. One had to drill down into the detail. I wondered if the various Churches aligned themselves closely to the Scriptural model, if indeed, there was one. It soon dawned on me, from the scanty information I possessed, that the Church emanated out from the synagogue and more-or-less based its structure on the latter and thus began a study into what the Scriptures revealed on the subject of governance for the Church community.



What were the similarities and differences between the synagogue's office and those of the New Testament such as presbyters, bishops, pastors etc I wondered? And how did the synagogue's offices and structure relate to that of the early Church?

I wrote some notes and tried to undertake studies as time went by. In the early 1990s, I commenced assembling these notes and forming an article on the subject.

At that time, I undertook some further research by scouring through university libraries. It was about 1994 or 1995 that I made an important discovery in the Sydney University library: I came across a book titled *From Synagogue to Church* which contained many answers to questions and further proofs (it was in 1995/96 that the initial article was written and released). Below is a quote from the book – I regard the quote as the essence of what this article is all about:

"From their beginnings the communities of Christian believers had gathered into the shape already familiar from the Jewish synagogues ... the evidence is more respectfully treated if we conclude that the synagogue was the point of reference for the church ... There are also clear similarities in the structures of community offices. **The presiding officer, the college of elders and the assistant appear to carry over from synagogue to church ...**

"Jesus instigated no characteristic new organization or anarchy among those who

shared faith in him ...

"as the offensive and destructive abuses of office [in Catholicism and Protestantism] are believed now to be neither necessary nor inevitable (perhaps because, if not accorded absolute clout, the officers are not so likely to be corrupted absolutely) the inveterate ability of those officers to serve the needs of a unified church is once more credible."¹

Meeks makes a similar statement:

"Because Christianity was an offshoot of Judaism, the urban Christian groups obviously had the diaspora synagogue as the nearest and most natural model."²

This article is based on that premise and to this end I have scoured through scores of articles, papers and books to synthesise what they have presented and discovered and together with my own thinking on the subject have developed into this article.

Finally, the article is not a digest or just accepting the works of others because they sound good – it is instead pondering, comparing, cross-referencing and sorting through the rabbit warren of leads and dead-ends. Then assembling this into a meaningful order and ensuring it is readable and understandable, including referencing and a bibliography as always.

My intention is to fill a gap rather than just churning out what someone else thinks on this subject.

¹ Burtchaell 1992: 335, 339, 352, 356

² Meeks 2003: 80

The Purpose of Church Governance

"In order to be a leader, a man must have followers. And to have followers, a man must have their confidence. Hence, the supreme quality for a leader is unquestionably integrity. Without it, no real success is possible." - Dwight D. Eisenhower, 34th US President

Some suggest that God governs in an overall, particular way throughout history, with the exception of the New Testament Age. My response is "why is it that certain basic laws and principles have been in existence since the beginning of time, but are supposedly eschewed for this time period?" This thought connected intrinsically with the notion that so much of the Old Testament has been fulfilled and that Christ has, in effect, done away with the Laws and that He has fulfilled them for Christians. So, Christians, as members of the Kingdom of God, are not subject to them or any semblance of the Old Testament's ecclesiastical structure and liturgy, or so they believe. This just did not sound right let alone measure up to Scripture.

But what does the Bible and latest research have to say? The principle is this:

Love the Foundation of Governance

One might delve into what God's Word reveals about His administration in the heavenlies with councils, an Archangel, Cherubim, Seraphim, Zoa and such like. We can conclude that this represents the tip of the iceberg of what is going on out there.

There can be no doubt that there exists a basic or overall organisational form under God and Christ given the billions or perhaps trillions of spirit beings He has created. The administration of His eternal and unfathomable realm must be so complex and detailed to be bewildering to any human. Outside of human comprehension.

But we know His administration exists in perfect harmony, governed by love.

"And he gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the shepherds and teachers,

to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ, until we all attain to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to mature manhood, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ, so that we may no longer be children, tossed to and fro by the waves and carried about by every wind of doctrine, by human cunning, by craftiness in deceitful schemes.

Rather, speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ,

from whom the whole body, joined and held together by every joint with which it is equipped, when each part is working properly, makes the body **grow so that it builds itself up in love.**" (Eph 4:11-16)

It should be understood that prior to Moses and the flood of Noah, God's people were to live in accordance with Him in their personal lives, families and nation – with justice and in accordance with Divine Law and principles.

From Moses to the fall of Israel & Judah, some of the Priests, Levites (and common people)³ apparently must have had the holy spirit working with them to some degree. Their function included shepherding the flock. The holy men, patriarchs and prophets of old were in a sense proto-Christians, longing to see the Christ. They evidently had the indwelling of the holy spirit and lived a lifestyle commensurate with the need to develop Godly nature and mind. That means that they were not radically different to New Testament Christians. Indeed, they lived by God's Laws, inculcated the the beatitudes, prayed, fasted, meditated and developing Godly character that manifested the fruits of His Spirit.

Later during the restoration period under Ezra & Nehemiah, a system of governance based on Biblical principles was restored. And once again, God raised up a Torah-based Work under the helm of a strong leader who put His people 'back on the track'. This necessitated centralised administration for that time and a purifying of the doctrine.

At this juncture we should briefly ponder on the gradual decline of the influence of the priests after Ezra - which was either inspired or permitted by God. Why? Seemingly to allow for the gradual means to permit the rise of the Melchizedek Priesthood with as little conflict as possible with the Levitical priesthood. The Melchizedek priesthood comprises Christ as the High Priest and all true Christians in training to become a royal priesthood at the resurrection - but they still need, from among their numbers, shepherds. Thus, ministers are not priests over carnal humans, but shepherds guiding fellow priests in-the-making. Nor are they fathers over little children but adults guiding and serving adults.



Imagining the Centurion's Synagogue⁴

Form, Shape or Nature

Various clues about church governance are found in the book of Acts and in Paul's epistles. In addition, what can our knowledge of first century synagogue structure tell us about the early Church's structure? This needs to be explored and explained.

We might argue until we are blue in the face about problems extant in Church administration and government. We might examine various theories and structures. But one thing remains certain, there are problems with them all – as measured by spiritual growth, member happiness/contentment, treatment of the members, growth in knowledge and successful outreach.

³ More about the hierarchy of priests can be found in Frevel 2013 (details in the Bibliography).

⁴ Source: <https://www.thereignofgod.com/2019/09/03/imagining-the-centurions-synagogue-of-capernaum/>

As such, it is self-evident that some structural forms are better than others as they produce better fruits and enhance member growth and the utilisation of spiritual gifts the Father has granted to them.

What really is the issue then? Certainly, it cannot merely be the shape, form or structure, but rather also the nature of humans administering the Church's governance.⁵

It is humans that are the problem; not God's structural form; not God's Laws (Heb 8:8; Deut 5:29; Rom 8:3-4,7); very little that we might care to list: but rather fallible humans trying their best, or some abusers knowingly causing grief and stress. It is essential that we understand that.

Therefore, let us not throw the baby out with the bathwater but rather work at purifying and fine-tuning our systems.

God's modus operandi over the eras and centuries of human existence has been consistent. Have not the principles been the same? Is God given over to changing fundamentally (Prov 24:21; Eph 4:14)? Does not Almighty God roar that "For I am the Lord, I change not ..." (Mal 3:6)?

He does things in order and with a consistent spiritual doctrine and way of life. But that does not mean it is an inflexible system.

⁵ For those that advocate local congregationalism, be forewarned: "Ironically, some forms of congregationalism elevate the pastor, once he has been voted in, to near papal authority, in practice it not in theory." (Carson 1984: 230)

From Synagogue to Church

“The great composer...does not set to work because he is inspired, but becomes inspired because he is working. Beethoven, Wagner, Bach, and Mozart settled down day after day to the job in hand with as much regularity as an accountant settles down each day to his figures. They didn’t waste time waiting for inspiration.” - Ernest Newman

A quick peek is needed regarding the form of God’s system between the Testaments to see indeed if God ‘chops and changes’ constantly. For this is an important, nay key, part of the debate on the very structure and administrative basis of the Church of God. The debate continues and the search and research must go on. All of this helps us to sharpen our understanding in this area and to be sure of our beliefs. We must prove our beliefs to ourselves, and even to others as the need arises.

Historical Background

Some of my thinking and research was later encapsulated in an article I finally found time to write in 2018 *Study Notes on the Melchizedek Priesthood*.

During the intertestamental period, it would appear that gradually, subtly, God was preparing for a transition from the Levitical Priesthood to the Melchizedek Priesthood. God had used the Levitical Priesthood in a marvellous way. There were Priests and Levites being led by God’s Spirit (although all were not necessarily inwardly filled by the spirit of God). They in turn were the ecclesiastical shepherds and judges of the people - the nation Israel. They also functioned as administrators and in other ways as we shall discover in this article.

However,

“Religious life in ancient Israel was not simply left in the charge of priests – Levite, Aaronide, or otherwise – but was a far more textured and complicated phenomenon in which priests played an important but by no means exclusive role.”⁶

The Elders and others also played a role as we shall see later on in this article.

As we shall see, in the New Testament period (under Christ – the Melchizedek High Priest), men are appointed to offices via a certain method to shepherd fellow Christians. Both shepherds and members are Priests in the making under Christ’s over-arching Melchizedek Priesthood. No shepherd was permitted to come between the Christian member and God. No shepherd was permitted to act as a Priest toward other Priests in the making: all were sanctified and had direct access to God. Mutual respect toward one another and gratitude for God working in each other’s lives was and is the order of the day. Those that were not shepherds (ie did not hold offices) could be used in the Work of the Church in various service roles.

The Christian ‘Priests in the making’ are granted spiritual gifts by their Father (see ICor 12) which could be used in service toward others in the Christian community or the world at large. One would expect that these ‘gifts’ or talents are not always able to be used by the Church in the main thrust of the Work.

⁶ Leuchter & Hutton: 2011: 4

Today we could say that it is not possible for everyone to be used in tele-evangelising, writing articles for magazines, presenting sermonettes and so forth. However, the spiritual gifts that the Father has given to us can be used in service to the Church and others – one does not have to be ordained to serve others.

No one should be jealous of another's gift or talent, or feel threatened by them for they come from God ultimately. Blocking the use of talents is obscene – sinful – that of envy. Its results are a disaster for both parties.

One would also expect that many of these talents are those of natural ability and which the holy spirit sharpens up and are used in various ways serve others and to glorify God.⁷

Note what God's Word declares:

"Be kindly affectionate to one another with brotherly love, in honor giving preference to one another." (Rom 12:10)

"Render therefore to all their due: taxes to whom taxes are due, customs to whom customs, fear to whom fear, honor to whom honor.

Love does no harm to a neighbor; therefore love is the fulfillment of the law".
(Rom 13:7, 10)

Christians operate under the conditions of the New Covenant even though it will not be ratified until the Messiah returns when He will enter into marriage with the saints (and shall enter into the New Covenant with Israel and later all nations). The Covenants are simply agreements to obey already extant Laws of Love. They are not God's Laws in themselves. When Christ ratifies this New Covenant with Israel, converted Gentiles will have to be grafted into Israel spiritually and agree to obey these Laws. The physical Levitical Priesthood will again be elevated and made operative (Ezekiel 40-47) and the spiritual Melchizedek Priesthood will be in God's Kingdom as Kings and Priests (Rev 1:6; 5:10) during the Millennial reign of the Messiah.

So, it seems that God was preparing the way for the Melchizedek Priesthood over the decades and centuries in the period known as the intertestamental period. As is often the case, He worked in mysterious ways.

Suggested reading:

- *Study Notes on the Melchizedek Priesthood* by C White

Synagogue Origins

With this in mind, we should turn to the synagogue. Who established the synagogues in the first place?

Researchers believe that the Levites did so in cooperation with the elders, though there is no hard

⁷ Sermons and sermonettes are supposed to be interesting and positive. Not dumping one's frustrations on the congregation. Constantly being down on people while elevating the self leads to discouragement and boring sermons. For "We live by encouragement and die without it - slowly, sadly, angrily." (Celeste Holm)

evidence for this,⁸ but it seems most likely and logical given all that can be garnered on the subject.

Although no historical record exists as to the origin of the synagogue, the Jerusalem *Talmud* and tradition assumes that it dates clear back to the time of Moses (see Exodus 18:20).⁹

In terms of our historical knowledge of when synagogues first appeared, all that can be proven at this time is that they dated from at least the 3rd century BC or earlier.^{10 11} Tolder historical sources and those who have researched the subject of the origin of synagogues are of the opinion that they originated sometime after the destruction of Solomon's Temple 586 BC and the Babylonian conquest. It is thought that homes were initially used to teach the Torah but as the attendees outgrew the homes, there arose a need for religious instruction in a public place of worship – hence the synagogue.

The community of Jews after the Babylonian exile was termed the *assembly* (Heb *qahal*) or congregation (*edah*) of Israel. The Greek parallel word is *sunagoge* (= assembly or congregation and equivalent is *ekklesia* and reflects these Hebrew words and the Aramaic equivalent *kenista*. Thus it "expresses the community's conviction that it was the true remnant of the people of God"¹² which must have been well understood in that day.¹³

⁸ The gradual transfer of power from the priesthood to the elders is exemplified by this quote from the *Jewish Encyclopedia*: "In the Temple itself the Pharisees obtained a hold at an early date, when they introduced the regular daily prayers besides the sacrifice (Tamid v. 1) and the institution of the "Ma'amadot" (the representatives of the people during the sacrifices). Moreover, they declared that **the priests were but deputies of the people.**" (art. "Pharisees) [emphasis mine]

⁹ Philo in *De Vita Mosis*, III, 27 and Josephus in *Against Apion* II, 17 also subscribe to this tradition.

¹⁰ Beale 1997: 2 explains "Since the tenth century, scholarship has sought to uncover the origins of the synagogue. Because of the paucity of the evidence, countless theories exist, placing the synagogue in every period from time of the First Temple, through to the period after the destruction of the Second Temple. Without further support, however, it is impossible to validate either the position of the theorist or that of their critics."

¹¹ Jones 2005: 8920 "The priority of exile and hence distance from the Jerusalem Temple as a determining factor in the formation of the synagogue."

Pfeiffer 1975: 1641 "Prior to NT times it became the custom to conduct services on the great feast days for the benefit of the people who could not go up to Jerusalem. The services on these festive occasions were substantially the same as the sabbath morning service."

¹² Bruce 1972: 206

¹³ "... the Old Testament indicates that the practice of prayer, with or without sacrifice, which was to be so central to the synagogue, had already begun (Ps. 116:17; Isa. 1:11,15; 1 Sam. 1:10ff).

The beginning of the assembly of people for the purpose of study and prayer (the Jewish way of describing worship) appears to be the Babylonian exile after the destruction of the first Temple. Jewish scholars believe Ezekiel's reassuring promise that God would provide a "sanctuary" (11:16) for his people is a reference to the small groups that gathered in their homes during the exile to recall God's covenant, his law, and especially the redemptive promises of the prophets. It is likely that these godly people, having learned a hard lesson about the importance of obedience to God, assembled regularly to study his Torah to prevent the sins of their ancestors from being repeated. A group of experts in the law and its interpretation taught and studied in small associations at humble locations called "houses of study." These places of study, and the reflection on the need to be obedient, are the roots of the synagogue, a sanctuary to inspire obedience to God.

In spite of the later emphasis on prayer and study in the place of assembly, it is likely the main focus of the early gatherings of Jewish people was simply the need to maintain their identity as a people living in a foreign and pagan country. That the synagogue began as the center of the Jewish social life is confirmed by the fact that it was the community center in the first century as well. The synagogue was school, meeting place, courtroom, and place of prayer. In some towns, the synagogue may even have provided lodging for travelers. It was the place where small groups of Jewish students assembled for Scripture reading and discussion of the Torah and oral tradition. This meant that worship and study, friendship and community celebration, and even the governing of the community were all done by the same people in the same place.

It appears that the early church patterned itself after the synagogue and continued the same practice of living and worshiping together as a community, often in private homes (Acts 2:42-47)." (Ray Laan, "He Went to Synagogue," That the World May Know website, www.thatttheworldmayknow.com/he-went-to-synagogue).

The *Encyclopedia Britannica* supplies us with the following succinct historical background:

“The Hebrew *qahal* is translated variously in the Greek Septuagint as *sunagoge* and *ekklesia*. These Greek terms are subsequently translated in English Bible versions as *synagogue*, *church*, *assembly*, *congregation*, etc. **The perceived distinction between the terms *synagogue* and *church* is due only to centuries of polarization of Jews and Christians.**”¹⁴ [emphasis mine]

Any reading on the subject will indicate that the term *synagogue* is derived from the Greek *synagein*, (“to bring together”) – in other words a place of assembly. The Yiddish equivalent word is *shul* (derived from the German *schule* or “school”). Refer to the **Appendix: Study. The Highest Form of Worship** to understand the critical importance of learning to the Jewish community – and I might add, it should be of major importance to Christians too.

Further,

“its traditional functions are reflected in three Hebrew synonyms: *bet ha-tefilla* (“house of prayer”), *bet ha-kneset* (“house of assembly”), and *bet ha-midrash* (“house of study”). The term synagogue is of Greek origin (*synagein*, “to bring together”) and means a place of assembly. The Yiddish word *shul* (from German *Schule*, “school”) is also used to refer to the synagogue, and in modern times, the word temple is common among some Reform and Conservative congregations.

The oldest dated evidence of a synagogue is from the 3rd century BC, but synagogues doubtless have an older history. Some scholars feel that the destruction of Solomon’s Temple in 586 BC gave rise to synagogues after private homes were temporarily used for public worship and religious instructions ...

Whatever their origin, synagogues flourished side by side with the ancient Temple ... and existed long before Jewish sacrifice and the established priesthood were terminated with the destruction of the Second Temple by Titus in AD 70. Thereafter, synagogues took on an even greater importance as the unchallenged focal point of Jewish religious life.”¹⁵

It was considered an extension of the Temple as local places of worship which were sometimes being referred to as “little sanctuaries.”¹⁶ What we do know for certain is that the synagogue’s earliest roots probably originated during the Babylonian captivity to enable the preservation of God’s true religion. There is no doubt that they gathered together in houses to study and proclaim God’s Word.¹⁷

The Apostle James himself declared that:

"For Moses of old time hath in every city them that preach him in the synagogues, where he is read every sabbath" (Acts 15:21)

¹⁴ “Synagogue”, *The New Encyc Britannica*, vol II, Micropedia, Chicago, 15th ed, 2007: 462

¹⁵ “synagogue”, *The New Encyc Britannica*, vol II, Micropedia, Chicago, 15th ed, 2007: 462

¹⁶ See Ps 74:8; Ezek 11:16

¹⁷ *Babylonian Talmud* Kethuth, 105a

This indicates that the synagogue has an ancient origin, long prior to Christ. In fact, at the time of the destruction of Jerusalem at the hand of the Romans in 69-70AD, there were about 394 synagogues in Jerusalem alone according to the *Babylonian Talmud*.

It also had authority to teach God's Laws and Commandments and permit or prohibit certain matters within their bounds. Notice Matthew 23:1-5:

"Then Jesus spoke to the multitudes and to His disciples, saying: "The scribes and the Pharisees sit in Moses' seat. "Therefore whatever [legally] they tell you to observe, *that* observe and do, but do not do according to their works; for they say, and do not do. "For they bind heavy burdens, hard to bear, and lay *them* on men's shoulders; but they *themselves* will not move them with one of their fingers. "But all their works they do to be seen by men. They make their phylacteries broad and enlarge the borders of their garments."

Compare I John 5:3; Hab 1:2-3; Deut 11:18; Prov 3:1-3; 6:20-21; 7:15 to throw further light on this important Scripture.

The major function of the synagogue was not worldly chatter and piffle: it was education and strong meat.¹⁸ From all accounts, it was thanks to Ezra that the synagogue arose with physical buildings to hold Sabbath services and to worship the Lord. After cleansing the Priests, Levites and people of their error and paganism, apparently, he set up institutions to educate people to become scribes and rabbis which led to the basic synagogue structure.¹⁹ Whether he set up the various offices based broadly upon the Levites and elders, it seems likely.

As the synagogues grew and flourished the elders grew in power and influence and the Priests' and prophets influence gradually diminished.

The priests were not the rulers of the synagogues but of the temple and the presence within the Christian community of any such converts continued with an ongoing reduction of influence over time. Their rulership was not meant to be – without a physical temple the requirement for their ongoing role was no longer necessary.

As we shall see, the elders came to preside over the synagogues – however this function had ancient roots. Have a look at the following Scriptures as evidence: Ex 12:21; Num 11:16; Lev 4:15; 11:16; 19:32; Ezra 6:7; Ezek 7:26; Matt 21:23; 26:3, 47; 27:1; 15:2; Acts 22:6.

After the destruction of the Temple in 70AD, many priests fled and some even attempted to set up the priestly system in distant locations.²⁰ But for all intents and purposes, the Priesthood which had been gradually declining in power was shattered and remains inoperable or in abeyance until the Messiah returns and institutes His restored and revised system on earth (Ezek 40:46; 44:15).

¹⁸ Indeed, "The earliest Christians were all Jews. Moreover, they did not regard themselves as having abandoned Judaism. Indeed, one of the earliest questions that the new religion addressed was whether gentiles--non-Jews--could become Christians or whether it was necessary to be a Jew in order to become a Christian (see Acts 15)." (Pizner 1990: 23-24)

¹⁹ "As only a small portion of the people could become proficient in the study of the law under the scribes, ... it was desirable that all should have at least an elementary knowledge, thus the synagogues main object was the religious education of the people, Philo called them 'houses of instruction.' " (Unger 1980: 1053)

²⁰ This is explored in detail in M Grey's PhD thesis *Jewish Priests and the Social History of Post-70 Palestine*. Details are in the Bibliography.

The purpose of this article is not to delve too much into this, but to assemble arguments that the Church of God structure of leadership (pastors and elders) is broadly based on that of the Synagogue's eldership structure and not on the priesthood.

Levites and Elders

It would appear that some of the functions of the Levites found their way into the post-Exilic eldership system. Below are some functions or duties that appear to have transferred into the synagogue's eldership roles²¹ such as the various offices or positions within the Levitical Order including teachers, money collectors, song leaders, gatekeepers:

1. Levites had to reach the mature age of 30 before working in the tent of meeting (Num 4:3). Christ Himself was 30 when He began His ministry (Luke 3:23)
2. Prior to serving in the temple, there were extensive purification rituals the Levites had to go through prior to serving in the Temple (Lev 11-15; Num 19) just as people must be baptised and washed clean to enter the presence of God and be considered holy by the Father
3. The congregation also laid hands upon the Levites prior to serving in the Temple (Num 8:9-10)²² – this would be similar to the congregation accepting the ordination of a minister
4. Interestingly, the Levites had no land inheritance and had to devote themselves completely to their service. Similarly, the New Testament pastors should not hold down a full-time job, or try and enter politics and such like. He must sacrifice himself in service to God's flock with time, effort, patience. If he is lazy, he is not worthy of the office and is rejected. Because the Levites had no inheritance of land, they were given 48 cities, indicating that they were dispersed among the tribes, working closely with the people – as pastors are supposed to be among the people, at grassroots level (Deut 18:1-2; Josh 13:33), getting to know each one and their needs
5. Tithes and offerings were to sustain the work of the Levites as they are used, in part, to hire ministers (Num 18:21-32)
6. Some Levites served as judges forming a court system, or part of a court system. The New Testament, like the synagogue, had a court system that abided by God's Law, due process, neutrality and therefore just, accurate and fair outcomes. This is known as justice! (Deut 17:9; IChron 23:4)
7. Keeping Israel clean from diseases (such as leprosy) was an important part of the work that Levites were responsible for. Similarly, pastors should be keeping the Church clean of impurities such as sexual lewdness and major doctrinal errors. But by going through due process first (Lev 13; 14; Num 19 etc)
8. They also warned of blessings and curses – a sort of pre-cursor to sermons (Deut 27) and teaching God's way of life (2 Chron. 17:7-9; 30:22; 35:3; Neh. 8:7-8)
9. Some aspects of worship were restricted to the Levites (eg temple furnishings, touching holy things). This indicates that some aspects of New Testament worship is also restricted, unless delegated (such as Passover service or baptising people) (Num 4:15; Deut 31:9; Josh 3:3, 6; Josh 15:14-15)

²¹ This list is an update to my own list, but also adapted from an article on the internet *OT Levites: Model for Pastoral Ministry*

²² According to the *Pulpit Commentary*: "Verse 10. - Before the Lord. As in chapter Numbers 5:16, either near the brazen altar, or more probably before the entrance of the tabernacle. And the children of Israel shall put their hands upon the Levites. **Presumably by means of their representatives**, probably the tribe princes. This laying on of hands signified that the obligation to assist personally in the service of the sanctuary was transferred from the whole congregation to the Levites." [emphasis mine]

10. The sons of Asaph and Korah were involved with the music and singing side of worship. Today, pastors arrange for song-leaders and music at church services (IChron 6:31-32, 39; 15:17-19; 16:4-7; IIChron 29:30). Note also the “sons of Korah” in the titles of Psalms 42-49 and 84; 85; 87-89 and “sons of Asaph” Psalms 50 and 73–83
11. Scribal work was also a part of the ‘job description’ of the Levites. Today we would say that some were writers, authors and researchers. This indicates a high level of literacy and intelligence
12. Others were gatekeepers or door keepers – that could indicate that people with major issues (such as homosexuality, slanderers etc) were kept out of the congregation (IChron 9:17, 21; IIChron 23; 29)
13. In addition others handled Temple finances or the treasury (IChron 9:26; IIChron 24:5; 31:11-12; Ezra 8:24-30,33)
14. Assisted Ezra (himself a Levite) in rebuilding the Temple (Ezra 3:9). Should not a pastor be instrumental in building up their local congregation instead of scattering it?

To iterate

“The priests had no official standing or privileges in the synagogue, though they were always honoured when present.”²³

You can read more about the role of the Levites in the **Appendix. Role of the Priests and Levites.**

The above provides some clue as to the continuation of aspects of the Levitical system into the synagogue and later into the Church of God.

²³ Freeman 1972: 335

The Synagogue's Organisational Form

"One ought never to turn one's back on a threatened danger and try to run away from it. If you do that, you will double the danger. But if you meet it promptly and without flinching, you will reduce the danger by half. Never run away from anything. Never!"
- Ralph Waldo Emerson 1803-1882, American Poet, Essayist

What was the form of organisation of the Jewish community between the Testaments? Did it impact at all upon the public service roles of the religious leaders and the framework of the structure of the early Church? Studies have been undertaken of the services and the offices of the leaders of the synagogue during that period which we can leverage off to come to an understanding on the influence of the first century synagogue on the structure and format of the early Church of God.

Several research works are available on the subject, but one which stands out with some unique thought and thorough research is *From Synagogue to Church* by James Burtchaell. It was obvious to Burtchaell that we should

"... assume that the pattern of community organisation in those earliest churches may also have been an heirloom from the Jewish past ... they would instinctively create communities in the way familiar to them: following the patterns of the Hellenistic Jewish synagogue ..." ²⁴

Notice also what one other scholar wrote: "The first Churches were synagogues". ²⁵ How true, for early, primitive Christianity was considered a sect of Judaism. Its major difference to Judaism was cleansing out of the corruption, false teachings in their midst and accepting the Divinity of Christ. It also followed Christ's example and command to observe the Sabbath, feast days, 10 Commandments and other aspects of God's Law.

And one might add that this was done under the inspiration of the holy spirit. The various offices which we are to meet shortly, were typical in the Second Temple Jewish synagogues and subsequently in the early Christian synagogues, assemblies or congregations. Their impact upon the early Church was enormous and the basic structure and offices were essentially borrowed by the Christians. The result?: the organisation and other principles of early Christendom were essentially Judaic. I do not mean that it was a clone, for the synagogue was not a perfect replica of God's system. Nor do we have all the facts with regard to the means of selection of offices and so forth. But my purpose is primarily to gesture that the basic structure or form of the synagogue and its various offices were repeated in the New Testament. They seemed to form a type of template or guideline for the early Church which we should ponder whether to continue.

It is also wise to consider and remember that the synagogues did not have complete structural

²⁴ Burtchaell 1992: xii-xiii. The contents for this essential book are: Preface; 1. The Reformation: challenge to an old consensus; 2. The nineteenth century: a new consensus is formulated; 3. The early twentieth century: the consensus is disputed; 4. The last fifty years: the consensus restated, rechallenge, reused; 5. A search for a new hypothesis; 6. Jewish community organization in the later Second Temple period; 7. The officers of the synagogue; 8. Community organization in the early Christian settlement; 9. A conclusion; Index auctorum [authors]; Index locorum [sources]. This work is a 'must read' for all serious researchers into early Church of God structure.

²⁵ Pizner 1990: 23. And Edersheim, 1993: 299 "The synagogue became the cradle of the Church, without it ... the conversion of the gentiles (would) have required a succession of millennial miracles."

conformity as there were some differences between them. This article does not explore all of them but concentrates on the overall agreement in the way they were administered and formed.

One more word: there is no evidence that the Jewish structure was borrowed from that of the Persians, Greeks or Romans, despite the arguments of some. Although, of course, there were some similarities with Councils assisting sovereigns, which we find in most cultures. But an examination of the minutiae and each nuance of evidence disproves that theory. It was a thoroughly Judaic-Hebraic structure with principles based on the Old Testament.

Let us now explore the various offices and terms in common usage during the intertestamental period and first century to give us a background to the structure formed within the early Church of God.²⁶

Liturgy or Sabbath Service Format

Services commence with a hymn followed by the **Shema** – opening prayer of blessings for morning and evening (comprised of Deut. 6:4-9; 11:13-21; Num. 15:37-41).²⁷

This is followed by other **prayers** (these are often composed of eighteen benedictions and petitions).

Next is **the reading of the Torah** or Law which is done from behind a podium (a pulpit made of wood). Following that comes the **reading from the Prophets**. Finally the **Scriptural lesson** is given. Any one of the Jewish brethren might be called upon to present the "word of exhortation" (Acts 13:15).

Services close with a **Shema** – closing blessing for morning and evening.

Of course, we don't have to follow the Synagogue service exactly, but the basic outline is of interest.²⁸

The Assembly

To the Jews, gathered together, they constituted an assembly or congregation but also as a social community. The synagogue was the venue for all major events in the community and the central

²⁶ Whately 1847: 86: "He complied with the usages of public worship, and exercised the privilege, which seems to have been common to all worshippers, of expounding the scriptures to the people. This respectful compliance with existing institutions he continued to the last; and his example was followed by his disciples. When they went abroad to preach, they availed themselves of the facilities afforded by existing institutions and arrangements. They always, if they could, preached in the synagogues. The first preaching, even to the heathen, was in synagogues. It was only where they found no synagogues, or when they were shut out from them, that they began to form separate societies. When a separate organization did take place, it was on the ancient model. The first Christian church, as we have seen, was at Jerusalem. Now the organization of this "church that was in Jerusalem" is entitled to particular attention upon two accounts, first, because it was the mother church, from which the other churches were derived by propagation; then, because all the twelve apostles were, for a short time, members of it. So far then as apostolical practice and example can be binding upon us, the history of this church must be highly instructive, in relation to the local constitution of the early Christian churches."

²⁷ See Tim Hegg, *The Public Reading of the Scriptures in the 1st Century Synagogue*, TorahResources, 2007.

²⁸ Note: "from a very early date, perhaps from the beginning, Christians employed in their services the psalms found in the Jewish Scriptures, the Christian Old Testament ... We hear of at least one form of service in which, after the reading from the Old Testament, the "hymns of David" were sung ... Until the end of the fourth century, in the services of the Catholic Church only the Old Testament Psalms and the hymns or canticles from the New Testament were sung ... Gradually there were prepared versical paraphrases." (Latourette 1975: 206-07).

Synagogues had cantors (*Hazzan*) who blew the trumpet to announce Holy Days and Sabbaths; conveyed the scrolls of the Torah, led the prayers (many of the prayers were offered as song)

location for spiritual, educational and social gatherings.

As we have seen, the Hebrew for *assembly* is *edah* which *synagogue* was a common synonym. The Greek equivalent is *ekklesia* which may be found on twelve occasions on the New Testament.²⁹ In both cases the root meaning was *to call* or *to convene* elders at the town gates to discuss issues.³⁰ A certain degree of exclusivism pervaded because they believed that they were the true religion, although they consisted of several groupings or sects. Yet they acknowledged each other despite differences. This might be likened to the various Church of God groups today.

The Senior or Chief Elder

He was also known as the *Nasi* = president or prince or administrator. His job was to have oversight of the spiritual and physical needs of the congregation. We would call such a one pastor today (*episkopos* = overseer or bishop). A rabbi or elder could be appointed to this position.³¹

This person was the first officer, leading elder and the president of the local, congregational council of elders. He was the one, in effect, who made the final decisions and was looked up to with special respect. Particularly during periods of internal dissent or major upsets, he would be regarded as the man to quell the problems and to return harmony to the community.

He was also known as *ruler of the synagogue*:

“The "ruler of the synagogue", (Mark 5:22, 35, 36,, 38; Luke 8:49; 13:14; Acts 13:15; 18:8, 17), *rôsh hákkeneséth* (Sota, VII, 7) presided over the synagogue and its services. This presidency did not prevent the "sons of the synagogue" from freely officiating [probably best to state "participating" rather than "officiating"]. Witness the freedom with which Our Lord and St. Paul stood up to explain the Scriptures in the various synagogues of Palestine and the Diaspora. The *hazzan*, "servant", handed the scrolls to the readers and taught the children.”³²

Means of selection: he was pre-eminent among the elders and rose to lead them, apparently by their choice or selection. And he had to care for the flock.

“that a shepherd has a very close relationship to his flock, not just to feed them, but also to care for them, protect them, nurture them, and lead them (not drive them); that is, he is of service to the sheep, a "pastor.””³³

The Community Chief

The major sources of information on the subject comes from inscriptions rather than written text

²⁹ In the Old Testament the parallel word is *qahal* which means the *assembly* or *church* in modern English. It is also used on twelve occasions in the Old Testament (Num 16:3; 20:4; Deut 23:1-8; IChron 28:8; Micah 2:4; Lam 1:10; Neh 13:1) where it is used in terms such as "Assembly [or Church] of the Lord." In Acts 7:38 Stephen appears to be claiming that the New Testament Church had now continued the true religion – the legitimate assembly of God. Today we use the terms *Church of God* or *Assembly of God* or *Congregation of God* in modern English.

³⁰ The Church is called to assemble out of society – like Israel and as we are told to do so in Rev. 18:4.

³¹ It is thought that James (Jacob), the half-brother of Jesus, was the *nasi* of the early Jerusalem congregation (see Acts 15:19; 21:18; Gal. 1:19; 2:9, 12).

³² *Catholic Encyclopedia* 1912: vol 14, art. "Synagogue"

³³ Difley 1996: 4

alone. This office was known in the Greek as *archisynagogos* or synagogue/community chief = angel of the Church or overseer.³⁴ His primary role was that of the leader or presiding officer of the notables' and synagogue's meetings rather than chief of the congregation.

He presided not just at worship, but at all community functions. He was at the forefront of the people, working in a professional manner as executive of all programmes and activities. He preached from behind a wooden pulpit or lectern.

In Acts 13:15 (cp Heb 13:22) he is shown as sending an attendant to Paul and Barnabas (the visitors)

Elders

This group had an early origin in ancient Israel:

“The first major recorded example of a full-fledged assembly of *elders* for the purpose of giving counsel was the assemblage of the seventy leaders (elders) of families and tribes who gave counsel to Moses (Numbers 11:16). These were definitely not young men, and you will note that they were already *elders*, Moses did not make the determination of who were *elders*, but only selected from those who already were. The *elders* also were the counselors to the kings (Josh. 23:2, I Kings 12:8). In light of the quality of counsel, it may be worthwhile for you to review the differences in the counsel given to Rehoboam by his young friends and that given by the elders (II Chron 10, I Kings 12).”³⁵

By New Testament times, these became known as the *zakane* or *bearded one* – that is, an elder. He was normally at least 40 years of age and able to teach from the Bible and lived a good, righteous life.

The elders formed a council (*presbyterion* in the Greek) or college which in effect was a local council of elders formed from among the older men of a local congregation and chaired by the Community Chief). They functioned as statesmen and jurists: representatives of the people's interests to outsiders, while maintaining unity within the community.

Means of selection: They were men of station who were groomed over many years in the art of eldership. Thus, when they were selected, there were no surprises or forcing on the congregation men unfit for duty (ie inept in the Scriptures, jealous, sickly, severe, competitive). They were older men, at least 40, who were set aside and ordained from the group of older men in the Church.

Various sources throw further light on the subject of elder. For example, *Easton's Bible Dictionary* states:

“**Elder** - a name frequently used in the Old Testament as denoting a person clothed with authority, and entitled to respect and reverence (Gen. 50:7). It also denoted a political office (Num. 22:7). The "elders of Israel" held a rank among the people indicative of authority. Moses opened his commission to them (Ex. 3:16). They attended Moses on all important occasions. Seventy of them attended on him at the giving of the law (Ex. 24:1). Seventy also were selected from the whole number to bear with Moses the burden of the people (Num. 11:16, 17). The "elder" is the

³⁴ See Lightfoot, Vol. 11: 89-99

³⁵ Difley 1996: 3

keystone of the social and political fabric wherever the patriarchal system exists. At the present day this is the case among the Arabs, where the sheik (i.e., "the old man") is the highest authority in the tribe. **The body of the "elders" of Israel were the representatives of the people from the very first, and were recognized as such by Moses.** All down through the history of the Jews we find mention made of the elders as exercising authority among the people. They appear as governors (Deut. 31:28), as local magistrates (16:18), administering justice (19:12). They were men of extensive influence (1 Sam. 30:26-31). In New Testament times they also appear taking an active part in public affairs (Matt. 16:21; 21:23; 26:59).³⁶ [emphasis mine]

The Teacher or Rabbi

These were known as "disciples of the law"³⁷ and Christ was recognised as one of these.³⁸ Due to their insights and study, these men became the teachers of the God's way of life and His law who would expound the Torah each Sabbath.

Two types of Rabbi were extant in the first century, though a Rabbi could function interchangeably between both:

First of all there was the *Magid* = a *story-teller* who would travel around from town-to-town to visit the various synagogues preaching the Word to the community as well as to those that he would encounter along the way. Much like an evangelist would today. Or even a prophet as they would rail against sins in the synagogue, urging the Jews to return to God and His tender mercies.

The other was the *Batlan* = a *man of leisure* which indicated that he was able to devote his time to study and was either self-funded or supported by others in his ministry. His role was academic and detailed knowledge

"Rabbis (teachers, master-teachers) within the synagogues were appointed and promoted based upon their ability to teach, but there is no indication that these rabbis had any official capacity in the congregations."³⁹

However, some were appointed to become elders and pastors later in life.⁴⁰

The Assistant or Deacon

These were known as the *Shamash* or *Gabai* in Hebrew and *hyperatai* = *diakonoi* in Greek = or servants. It meant assistant, attendant or deacon in today's language.

³⁶ Easton 1897: art. "Elder"

³⁷ According to Unger 1980: 1053: "The peculiarity here is that just for the acts proper to public worship - the reading of the Scriptures, preaching and prayer - no special officials were appointed. These acts were, on the contrary, in the time of Christ still freely performed by members of the congregation." So, teachers could be visiting rabbis, visitors, lay members.

³⁸ By age 12 or 13 boys could be recognised as having the gift of teacher and thereafter groomed in this role! See Luke 2:39-52.

³⁹ Difley 1996: 1. NB Mosely 1996 ch "Evidence of the Jewish Background of the Early Church": "The *rabbi* was a prophet after the manner of the post-exilic prophets of Judaism. He carried the responsibility of reading and preaching the Word and exhorting and edifying the people (1 Corinthians 14:3)."

⁴⁰ Read *Social World of Ancient Israel. 1250-587 BCE* by V Matthews & D Benjamin, (chapter 7 "The Chief") for further information on the role of the elder in ancient Israel.

The original Assistants were Levites who helped the older Priests, the elite of their tribe. They were known in later rabbinical literature as the *hazan*. Often, they would serve under the overall supervision of the Community Chiefs as masters of ceremonies at Scripture readings. They served also as offices of the court and they would scourge the guilty or summons those accused of crimes. Other duties included serving as clerks of the treasury, teachers of children and so forth.

They could assist the Community Chief in any aspect of the community's program that he asked them to perform. For example, the Community chief would send the Assistants to look after visitors to the synagogue⁴¹, care for the needy and poor. In addition, they had to be Torah scholars.

A council of Deacons was formed, chaired by the Community Chief.

Means of selection: chosen by the Community Chief with approval of the congregation.

The Commissioner

The size of the scattered Jewish synagogues appeared to perhaps determine whether certain offices were necessary. Resources may have been large or tiny; programmes may have come or gone. Sometimes people would be called upon to perform certain duties which in other places or times may have been performed by an office holder. One such position appears to be that of *phrontistes* or commissioner/ administrator/ manager/ trustee. They had basic responsibility for physical plant, maintenance and even the management of finances. Sometimes the Community Chief would assume the title of Commissioner. They were not ministers/pastors/elders per se.

Perhaps this position was similar to those over-seeing hall setup, the sound system etc.

Means of selection: by the elders and notables.

The Interpreter of foreign languages (tongues)

This position was known as the *Meturgeman* (*Amora*) or translator or interpreter. Apparently he stood next to those that read the Torah in Hebrew and translated it into Aramaic and sometimes other languages. In the New Testament Church such a one would have translated from Greek (the *lingua franca* of the period) into other languages as needed.

Mosely explains:

"There was also the interpreter, known as the *meturganim*. This was a person skilled in languages who stood by the one reading the Law or teaching in a *Bet Midrash* (a house of study) to interpret into the *lingua franca* of that day the Hebrew that was being spoken. The use of an interpreter goes back to the time of Ezra, when the interpreter was said to have *added the meaning*. The *Talmud* gives many details of the interpreter's duties in the synagogue.¹⁶ It is from this concept that we understand Jesus' words, "*What you hear in the ear, preach upon the housetops*" (Matthew 10:27). This phrase was easily understood by those who were familiar with the system of study in the *Bet Midrash*, where the teacher would literally speak the message in the interpreter's ear, who would then shout it out to

⁴¹ Bruce 1972: 275

others, both inside the classroom and out."⁴²

Other Offices and Functions

Other offices and functions which were probably not carried over into the structure of the New Testament Church (though many of the principles pertaining to them continued) were:

- **The Notables:**

The Notables were a particular sort of elder that were few in number, but rather powerful. The literature of Judaism often makes references to them utilising generic, interchangeable terms such as *archon*, *archontes*, *protoi* and *proteuontes*. They functioned as an inner circle of leadership - an executive or board if you will.

It must be emphasised at this point that they are not merely influential persons in the Jewish community, with notable implying a generic title. Rather, they were a religious office within the synagogue.

Means of selection: It is difficult to ascertain, but they might have been selected or elected for a certain time-span.

- **The Scribe:**

The clerk or scribe (= *sopherim* or *grammateus*) was invaluable to the synagogue.

“Their skills in reading, writing and translating gave them monopolistic access to the entire civil service, a career they made sure to pass on to their own sons by enrolling them in the royal schools for scribes.”⁴³

It were these that edited, copied, studied and interpreted the Scriptures. They could have been multi-talented or serving in a capacity of, say, a copyist, or one who reads the Egyptian papyrus; or a legal interpreter; or a great sage such as Ezra. Some would draw up minutes of meetings, draft correspondence, serve in the archives, as clerk of the court and as counsel to members on certain legal matters.

Like the office of the Community Chief, this office was held by generations of family lines and was not elected. They were not ministers/pastors/elders per se.

- **The Priest:**

Both Philo (*Spec. Leg.* 4:190-192) and Josephus (*Ap.* 2:185-188; *Ant.* 11:111; 14:41,404) believe that Priests were granted special gifts. Josephus was indeed one himself. But their ‘political’ power was

⁴² Mosely 1996: ch “Evidence of the Jewish Background of the Early Church.”

NB: “Rabbi’s often employed the use of a Methurgeman (Amora). The rabbi or preacher might whisper to the Amora, who would then amplify the rabbi’s teaching. He would also, at the close of the sermon, answer questions or meet objections. The Amora, it is noted, was all too often guilty of attracting attention and applause to himself through caustic and deprecatory remarks, manners, tone, vanity, self-conceit and silliness. For this reason, some rabbis used only trusted interpreters of their own **over fifty years of age.**” (Drawbaugh 1995: 16, Quoting Edersheim, *Jesus the Messiah*, p. 308.) [emphasis mine]

⁴³ Burtchaell 1992: 251

gradually diminishing over the centuries since Ezra, the second Moses, passed from the scene. By the time of the first century their position was seriously weakened, although they still held various functions and they were somewhat still respected and fairly powerful in Jerusalem, but in the local communities were not counted for very much.

“It is striking how decisively the priesthood vanished from the scene of power after the fall of Jerusalem in 70 [AD].”⁴⁴

Could it be that God was intervening (Dan 2:20-21; 2Chron 25:8) in the workings of the community as a means to gradually de-emphasise the Levitical Priesthood and to rather raise in prominence the Melchizedek Priesthood during the time of the early Apostles in the first century? In other words, the Levitical priesthood’s role was not required during the training of the Melchizedek Priesthood and would be reactivated during the Millennium.

Means of selection: none – they were born into the Priesthood due to their Levitical heritage – “to the Temple born”!

Suggested reading:

- *Will the Temple, Sacrifices and Tribal Allotments be restored in the Millennium?* by C White

- **The Reader:**

All evidence points to the fact that sometimes the priest or elder undertook the reading and exposition of Scripture. But this may well have grown into a particular, separate role or office at a later date where no elder or priest were present. We have no real evidence one way or another at this time.

Means of selection: by the Commissioner, perhaps with the counsel of the elders and notables.

Female offices?

Some may feel that the synagogue was gender-exclusive or sexist. But what is presented herein is mere historical fact. Yet some will argue about women dignitaries or supposed female community chiefs. Nothing could be further from the truth. There were, indeed, noted females who were prominent and looked upon as *mothers* by others. But their role was feminine and not a rank of authority nor an office of any sort.

“... the record is silent about any public leadership exercised by women ... Females had a presence in many of the synagogue activities, but we can find no support for the supposition that they acted as officers. What these feminine titles seem to denote is that the women are married to men in those positions, and theirs is a consortial form of dignity.”⁴⁵

There were also *fathers* of the community in addition to *mothers*. Neither the *father* nor *mother* of the synagogue were offices of authority. Rather, they were titles of honour which were conferred upon certain prominent ones. They were, in a sense, patrons, honoured for their wisdom, hospitality and service.

⁴⁴ Burtchaell 1992: 253

⁴⁵ Burtchaell 1992: 245

However, overall, women were apparently not regarded as inferior:

“In the first century, women were the equals of men religiously and frequently visited the synagogue ... In the first century there was no special women’s section in the synagogue. Moreover, there was no divider, as there is today, that separated female from male members of the congregation ...”⁴⁶

Apostles and Prophets

The person at the bottom of the rung was the apostle. According to the *Interpreter’s Dictionary of the Bible*:

“The rabbin term for such agents was *shaliah*. Such persons might represent individuals or corporate bodies such as courts and synagogues, their duties depending upon the terms of their commission -- to serve legal documents, collect moneys, convey instructions, particularly with regard to the calendar or festivals. In the synagogues the *shaliah* might be the leader of the congregation in prayer. The rabbinical principle that ‘a man’s *shaliah* is like to himself’ (M. Ber. 5.5) states the obvious truth that the person who follows his instructions points the responsibilities for his actions to his authorizing agent. It does not define the status of the *shaliah* so much as his function.”⁴⁷

The *Shaliah* or *Shli’ach* or *sent one* or *announcer* also functioned as the emissary or messenger sent between synagogues to keep the lines of communication open and to relay whatever news was necessary.⁴⁸

Some researchers believe that this position (also known as *Sheliach Tzibbur*) is equivalent to *Angeloī tas Ekklesias* (LXX and New Testament Greek). Its role expanded to include announcing the Gospel to the world. Notice the angels mentioned in Rev 2:1,8, 12, 18; 3:1, 7, 14. Whether these relate in some way to the seven men appointed on the Sabbath to read the Torah is unknown.⁴⁹

In any event, as with so much Scripture, the seven angels of Rev 2 & 3 would have been spirits working behind these seven human *angels* or *messengers*.

Prophets were also still extant during the intertestamental period and into the first century as men with insights or whom saw problems within the synagogue and railed against them.

Synagogue Courts

Local congregations contained *Bet Din* (= house of judgment) (see Matt 10:17) which were neutral courts and in turn there was a high court known as the *Sanhedrin* – the highest level of judiciary. The same body that tried Jesus, Peter, John, Stephen and Paul (Acts 4:1-21; 5:17-42, 6:12-15; 22:30).

⁴⁶ Safrai “The Place of Women in First Century Synagogues”

⁴⁷ *Interpreter’s Dictionary of the Bible*, art. “Apostle”

⁴⁸ The word *shaliah* is used of “The prophet Ahijah [who] announces himself to the wife of Jereboam as “one sent” (*shaliah*) from God with a message (IKi 14:6). The Septuagint (LXX) translated the word “apostle” here. The word is also used to describe Moses, Elijah Elisha and Ezekiel (though not in the nominal form).” (Knowles 1996: 43)

⁴⁹ The word *aggelos* is used in several ways in the Bible and is quite similar to that of an *apostolos*: one sent, messenger, envoy, ambassador, diplomat representing a higher power. See Matt 11:10; Mark 1:2; Luke 7:24, 27; 9:52; II Cor 12:7; James 2:25

You can find reference to its influence extending beyond Palestine in Acts 9:1-2; 22:5.



Apparently, the Seat of Moses in Chorazin (Bibleplaces.com)

In the New Testament the *Sanhedrin* is referred to = *Gerousia* or body of the leaders = *presbyterion*, council/assembly = *synedrion* or *boule*. Note: “the chief priests and Pharisees” (Matt 21:45; John 7:32); “the chief priests and elders and scribes” (Mark 14:53); “the chief priests and scribes” (Luke 22:2); “the rulers and elders and scribes” (Acts 4:5); “the chief priests and elders” (Acts 4:23); and the “chief priests and all the council” (Acts 22:30).

“The “sons of the synagogue” were governed by a council called *bêth dîn*, “house of justice”; or *sunédrión* “council” (transliterated סנהדרין, Sanhedrin); or *boulé*, “council”. The members of this council were twenty-three in larger towns, seven in smaller; and were called *árchontes*, “rulers” (Matthew 9:18, 23); Luke 8:41), or *presbúteroi*, “ancients” (Luke 7:3). The “rulers of the synagogue” had it in their power to punish by excommunication, scourging and death. (a) Excommunication from the synagogal community was termed *herem*, חרם, *anáthema*, (see ANATHEMA). Both the Hebrew and Greek words mean that an object is “sacred” or “accursed” (cf. Arabic *hárím*, the harem, a precinct sacred to the women of a household or the mosque of a community). (b) Scourging (מכור), cf. Makkoth, III, 12; *mastigón*, cf. Matthew 10:17; 23:34; *déro*, cf. Mark 13:9; Acts 22:19) was thirty-nine stripes (Makkoth, III, 10; 2 Corinthians 11:24) laid on by the “servant of the synagogue”, *hazzan*, *úperétes*, for minor offences. Three elders made up a tribunal competent to inflict the penalty of scourging. It is likely by this lesser tribunal that Our Lord refers: “Whosoever is angry with his brother shall be in danger of the judgment”, *énochos éstai te krisei* (Matthew 5:22). (c) The death penalty was inflicted by the Sanhedrin in full session of twenty-three elders (cf. Sanhedrin I, 4). To this penalty or to that of excommunication should probably be referred Our Lord’s words: “And whosoever shall say to his brother, Raca, shall be in danger of the council”, *énochos éstai to sunedrío* (Matthew 5:22).”⁵⁰

The germination of the idea of a supreme court was probably Num 11:16-17 though from what can be gauged is that it did not develop until after the Babylonian captivity. It had 70 members selected from priests, elders and scribes.

⁵⁰ *The New Advent Encyclopedia*, art. “Synagogue” <https://www.newadvent.org/cathen/14379b.htm>

Like the local synagogue, the leader was the president and there was also a vice-president as well as a referee or sage. These were selected by the 70.

Suggested reading:

- *What is Justice?* by C White

Students of the Torah

A further attribute of the synagogue and the Jewish family was study. Dr John Garr throws some light on the educational function of the synagogue:

“When Christians think of worship, images of the Sunday morning worship service come to view, with singing, praying, giving, preaching, and sharing the sacrament. Study is perhaps something that is done in preparation for worship, but could Christians ever conceive of study, itself, as an act of worship, even the highest form of worship? When we analyze this concept, however, we begin to understand that intensive study of the Word of God is the most reliable way in which God can speak to us and cause us to understand his will and his ways. Even the most intense and profound subjective experiences must be judged by the written Word of God (II Peter 1:16-19). Study of the Word of God, then, with a view toward doing the Word, is an act of submission to the divine will, the essence of true worship. When we pray, we speak with God; when we study, God speaks to us.”

Dr Garr continues:

“For many centuries study has been at the very heart of the Jewish experience, so much so that much of Judaism has considered study as the highest form of worship. Humbly submitting oneself to the wisdom of God revealed in the *Tenach* (Hebrew Scriptures) was viewed as worship, which literally meant to "prostrate oneself" before the Eternal. The Hebrew word for worship, *dg's]* (*segad*), means to "bow down or do obeisance to," and it has the connotation of total submission to a superior (as the king). The Greek translation of this word, *proskunevw* (*proskuni*), is even more graphic, meaning to "kiss as a dog licking its master's hand." ...

The continuing recognition of the synagogue as a house of study is seen in the fact that many Jews today prefer the Yiddish term *shul* over the term synagogue to identify their place of meeting. *Shul* literally means school and probably is related to the Latin *schola*, from which we get the words scholar and scholastic.”

You can read the entire article in the **Appendix: Study. The Highest form of Worship.**

For the Biblical principle is simply this:

“How long, ye simple ones, will ye love simplicity? and the scorners delight in their scorning, and fools hate knowledge?...
For that they hated knowledge, and did not choose the fear of the LORD” (Prov 1:22, 29)

“The simple inherit folly: but the prudent are **crowned with knowledge.**” (Prov 14:18)

Notice what the New Testament reveals about this approach:

“And the brethren immediately sent away Paul and Silas by night unto Berea: who coming *thither* went into the synagogue of the Jews.

These were more noble than those in Thessalonica, in that they received the word with all readiness of mind, and **searched the scriptures daily**, whether those things were so.

Therefore many of them believed; also of honourable women which were Greeks, and of men, not a few.” (Acts 17:10-12)

“Study to shew thyself approved unto God, a workman that needeth not to be ashamed, **rightly dividing the word of truth.**” (II Tim 2:14. Cp Eccl 9:10; 12:9)

“But grow in grace, and *in* the **knowledge** of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. To him *be* glory both now and for ever. Amen.” (II Pet 3:18)

And so, studying the Word was a crucial aspect of synagogue and Jewish home life – as it was in the early Church.

Observations

Much evidence is available for the existence of the offices of synagogue chief, elder and assistant. There is less evidence for the senior elder, scribe and commissioner. These may have developed later or may have been extant in only certain synagogues.

Instead of a governing priesthood, synagogues were served by a presiding pastor, a local council of elders,⁵¹ a council of deacons, teachers or rabbis (non-ordained), senior men and women. There was an overall basic structure common to all of them, though there was often also some local variance to this setup, as we have seen.

The local congregation’s council of elders sought senior men from the congregation to join their ranks. Older men by virtue of their age did not automatically qualify for the local council of elders. They did qualify for respect, advice, knowledge and to be honoured as senior men (and women). The youth did not rule the elder.

It is important to note that the Jewish means of selecting officers was not done by limited democracy or voting as with certain Greek traditions or per certain Roman traditions, but they were selected according to merit, faithfulness and test of experience. Cronyism and nepotism were denounced, but unfortunately, slipped in as corruption and jealousy grew.

No one was voted into office by the congregation – such a process would have allowed those with the largest families, biggest networks of friends and such like to garner enough votes to forge a ruling clique or oligarchy.

⁵¹ Dependent upon the size of the congregation, there was a plurality of elders in each city or congregation accordingly to Acts 14:23; 20:17, 28; 11:30; 15:2, 4; 21:18; Phil 1:2; Titus 1:5; I Tim 4:14; James 5:14

“There probably was very little direct influence [from other cultures] ... There were differences ... **The elders themselves, who in many societies were elected for terms,** were stable personages in the synagogues ... neither the assembly nor the elders nor the president nor the king was ultimately authoritative: their God was Lord over them all.”⁵² [emphasis mine]

Indeed. After all, they were not priests.

Similar traits (typical but not necessarily uniform) may be found among the Essene settlement at Qumran where they regarded themselves as the holy community, congregation of Israel, council, assembly of saints. They had a general assembly and elite assembly. The latter was presided over by those whose functions it was to teach the general assembly God’s ways, control recruitment, finances, hear grievances and so forth.

Suggested reading:

- *Youth and their Elders in the Church* by C White
- *The Synagogue. Its History and Function* by I Levy

In the following section, we shall explore the Church structure as outlined in the New Testament within the cultural context of the times, as well as the background of the synagogue’s administrative set-up.

Is there similarity with the early Church in all of this? What of certain of the offices aforementioned? Are they found in the New Testament as well?

⁵² Burtchaell 1992:265-66

What does the New Testament Reveal?

They who lack talent expect things to happen without effort. They ascribe failure to a lack of inspiration or ability, or to misfortune, rather than to insufficient application. At the core of every true talent there is an awareness of the difficulties inherent in any achievement, and the confidence that by persistence and patience something worthwhile will be realized. Thus talent is a species of vigor. - Eric Hoffer

The early Church or Church of God in those formative years was even known as "the sect of the Nazarenes"^{53 54} (Acts 24:5) – a term reminiscent of "sect of the Sadducees" (Acts 5:17) and "the sect of the Pharisees" (Acts 15:5) used for other sects or groupings within first century Judaism. In other words, the early Church of God was a distinct sect within the synagogue and its Hebraic teachings of that time period. It was not revolutionary or opposed to the Torah or Law in the slightest. Instead, it sought to clean up the falsities and errors within the teachings of the first century.

Its major difference to Judaism was cleansing out the corruption and false teachings in their midst; but also accepting the Divinity of Christ, regarded as heresy to most Jews in that day.

In the book of James, we find reference to the Church as a synagogue (James 2:2). The Greek *sunagoge* is the word used elsewhere as meaning the Jewish synagogue or meeting place. It may also be translated *assembly* as we have seen. In the first century it was known that assemblies of this sort were held every seventh-day sabbath and feast day.⁵⁵

Note also the following quote from Eric Myers' and James Strange's work *Archaeology, the Rabbis and Early Christianity*:

"Our discussion of Jewish tombs, burial practices [*they did not practice cremation*], and views of afterlife has reinforced our methodological assumption that a study of the earliest Christian remains in Palestine means studying Jewish remains. Given this fact that Christianity did not develop its own symbolic vocabulary of signs and symbols **until the fourth century, we must, so it seems, depend on Jewish remains in order to understand the context of early Christianity.**"⁵⁶ [emphasis mine]

When the first Christians left or were cast out of many of the synagogues (John 9:22; 12:42; 16:2), they

⁵³ "A small group remained probably in Transjordan, clinging to the successor of James, who at that time was probably Simeon (HE IV, 22:4), and these were to form the group of the Nazarenes. But the majority went elsewhere to Syria, Antioch then becoming the centre of Jewish Christianity." (Danielou 1977: 356). This means that the early Church observed the Sabbath, holy days and the Laws of God etc.

⁵⁴ See Ray Pritz 1988

⁵⁵ Thayer 1889: 600. "...the name (synagogue) is transferred to an assembly of Christians formally gathered for religious purposes, Jas. 2:2."

Rackham wrote: "The Christians indeed, as we see from James 2:2, continued to call their places of meeting in Jerusalem synagogues: but the body which met there was the ecclesia (church) (Jas. 5:14)" (*The Acts of the Apostles: an exposition*, 1919:79).

Bagster's *Analytical Greek Lexicon*, 1870: 385: "a collecting, gathering; a Christian assembly or congregation, Ja. 2:2; the congregation of a synagogue, Ac. 9:2, et al.; hence, the place itself, a synagogue, Lu. 7:5, et al."

⁵⁶ Meyers & Strange 1981: 169

had nowhere to meet at first, except in members' homes, and later in halls.⁵⁷

And so, the connection to the synagogue was close, for it was there that the Christians first met. They were tolerated at first due to the Jewish tradition to permit a wide range of doctrinal opinion. For amongst themselves, they had the Sadducees, Zealots, Therapeuta, Essenes, Pharisees and others. The Pharisees themselves were divided into several schools of thought.

Later, it became apparent that the Christian claim that Christ was the Messiah and that he had been raised from the dead, did not bode well for them. But to the Jews the Messiah would be an all-conquering human king, one that could not have been guilty of 'crimes' which Jesus Christ was accused of. And their Messiah would be a human representative of YHWH, not Divine. How could Christians be tolerated in the synagogues, observing the sabbath and holy days among fellows? For elevating Christ to Divine level was a major heresy among the Jews (though some believe in 'two powers in heaven'). To be put out of the synagogue or to quit was a terrible thing to happen to any Jew. One lost all public standing, welfare benefits, judiciary protection, access to marital arrangements, hospitality and so forth. It was an enormous blow to their physical, emotional, cultural and social well-being. The costs in political and social terms was simply enormous, providing some context to how the early Christians were treated.

After the Christians left or were excommunicated from the synagogues

"Clearly they would have begun to duplicate the traditional synagogue program as best they could ... evidence shows that the Christian development of titles follows the Jewish customs rather faithfully. The title community chiefs may serve as an illustration ..."⁵⁸ [emphasis mine]⁵⁹

What offices may be found in the early true Church? There is enough evidence that the office of community chief (known as *archisynagogo*), that is, the superintendent or shepherd, the elders as *presbyteros* and assistant as *diaconus* were carried into the new Christian community's structure. These terms are used throughout the New Testament.

So much has been written about Church governance in the New Testament over decades and centuries. However. the emphasis herein is on structure and shape, rather than nature. Although the latter will also be touched upon. I suppose one may spend a life-time on this issue, but it is better that I tackle mainly just one aspect of governance. Of prime importance is that we will ascertain

"whether the Christian communities telescoped out of that predecessor tradition, or went their way with innovative structures (or freedom from structure) of their own ... From their beginnings the communities of Christian believers had gathered into the shape already familiar from the Jewish synagogues."⁶⁰ [emphasis mine]

What we know is limited, but we must, nevertheless, lean on the documentation that we have: the knowledge of the synagogue, the records of the first and second century and the New Testament itself. We also have the record of God's nature; He is consistent and does not change like the wind.

⁵⁷ See Burtchaell 1992:287. Refer to ICor 16:9; Col 4:15; Philemon 1:2; Acts 20:20. Note also this clarification by Ascough 2015: 43 "Claußen's assumption that the majority of synagogue gatherings were household based is questionable, since there were a variety of institutional forms associated with terms such as *synagoge* and *proseuchē* at that time."

⁵⁸ Burtchaell 1992: 283

⁵⁹ The synagogues had roughly similar structures, but there were also some local differences. Ascough (2015)

⁶⁰ Burtchaell 1992: 271, 335

Studying the synagogue and Jewish history prior to the coming of the Christians it is relatively easier to determine their beliefs, community structure and the such like. But when we attempt to ascertain early Christian history, we hit the proverbial 'wall'. Note what Burtchaell has to say about this 'hidden century' of the early Christian Church:

"There are virtually no inscriptions referring to identifiable Christians before the third century. No papyrus collections have survived. The Christians of the first, say four generations had no Philo or Josephus to lay down a corpus of literature ... Not until well through the second century were dissident sects emerging that would leave us a polemical literature, nor can we gain access to very early alternative Christian communities ... The new religion elicited only a few brief notices from gentile writers ... Remarkably little comment is found in the documents of contemporary Jews."⁶¹

So much for those who deny that there was a 'lost century' in Christian history.

Indeed, dark and foreboding was the 'hidden century' before the curtain is lifted on Christian history. What happened in the meantime? Was a conspiracy responsible for the divergence of what theologians and historians term the Roman tradition which in effect negated God's Law and that of the Jerusalem Church of James (the Nazarenes)? Was infiltration the reason for the Church changing immensely from its earliest doctrines and obedience to God's Law?

Sometimes I wonder if the missing records of this period have been destroyed or will they be uncovered some day.

Does the New Testament radically alter the Old Testament?

We might search the Bible from one end to the other and we will find an amazing consistency in doctrine, practice and the true Way to live. In short, God's doctrines, terminologies, way of life and law remains the same. In this regard, I recommend the book *Commentary on the New Testament Use of the Old Testament* by G Beale & D Carson for example of hundreds Old Testament concepts, terms and quotes in the New.

In the New Testament, God's children are still regarded as holy ones. Note some of the names He gives His little ones:

- His body (Eph 1:22-23)
- Holy Temple (Eph 2:21)
- Habitation of God (Eph 2:22; Ex 25:8; Ps 22:3)
- God's building (1Cor 3:9)
- The House of God (Heb 3:6; 1Pet 2:6)
- Holy Nation (1Pet 2:9)
- People of God (1Pet 2:10)
- Israel of God (Gal 6:14-16)
- Mt of Zion (Heb 12:22)
- Heavenly Jerusalem (Heb 12:22)
- General Assembly (Heb 12:23)

⁶¹ ibid

- Church of the Firstborn (Heb 12:23)

Of course, God's people are called by various other names, but we should recognise that the Bible continues to call or name His people utilising similar terminology for them in both Testaments.

The Words of Christ

Jesus Christ instructed the disciples to teach the people "to observe all things whatsoever I have commanded you" (Matt 28:20). From this we can gauge that evangelising includes teaching the true doctrines and Law of God as the basis of His way of life that leads to salvation. The reason being that He wants His Church to be without wrinkle or blemish, but a beautiful bride. Just as the local synagogue was a place of leaning and instruction for the Jew, so the local congregation is to be a place of instruction in the Word of God by appropriate men of God.

It is not the place for silly jokes, wishy-washy sermons, attacking members out of jealousy and such like. It is there for holy communion with God and one-another.

In the book of Acts, the term *ekklesia* or *ecclesia* is used in the following ways:

- built by Jesus Christ Himself (Acts 2:57)
- a group disciplined by Christ Himself (5:5; compare Rev 2&3)
- believers in an assembly (5:14)
- a part of Christ Himself (5:14)
- it is a place that God joins people to, not man (5:13)
- it has a manifold ministry (13:1; 15:4)
- it is a fellowship with other congregations which together form a unified body (15:3-4)
- it is a place established in faith (16:5)
- it is a place from where the ministry are sent out to evangelise
- a place of teaching, nurturing and, if need be, disciple (11:26)
- a congregation or assembly of 'called together ones' from out of the world in a given locality which meets each week (8:1)
- a complete unity with corporate authority (15:22) and as such has a structure of ordained men in positions to exercise shepherding service and oversight (14:23; 20:17-28)

To themselves, the early Christians were known as the *holy ones* or the *assembly of God* (Gr *ekklesia*) – a holy community of believers. Today, in our modern language, we would say 'Church of God' or 'congregation of God's people' or 'assembly of Yahweh' etc, dependent upon the language one uses. We can look at Acts 20:28 and find that Paul replaced *synagoge* with *ekklesia* and Christians began to use this title to differentiate themselves from the Jews later on.⁶²

It is clear that no one may just 'join a church'. Rather, it is where God draws them to (cp John 6:44) and have a spiritual home.

Synagogue and Church

Burtchaell's scholastic dignity may be seen in his honest attempt to hypothesise the likelihood that the

⁶² A lengthy study of the world *ekklesia* and its ramifications is R B Ward, "Ekklesia: A Word Study". Details may be found in the bibliography. Another work worthy of a read is R J Korner's "Ekklēsia as a Jewish Synagogue Term: Some Implications for Paul's Socio-Religious Location"

first Christians, who were Jews, and being familiar with the structure of the synagogue, used it as a basic model for the early Church. Instead of looking at the structures of the second or even third century, and then projecting back to the first and thereby imposing certain structures on the Church, Burtchaell, is attempting to be as honest as possible. Note his following comment:

“ ... there is an antecedent likelihood that the first Christians, being Jews, organised themselves in the familiar and conventional ways of the synagogue.”⁶³

Indeed, they were organised that way by the Apostles as we have seen and they knew themselves that that is the correct way to be organised in the most effective and efficient way possible to undertake a Work to proclaim the True Gospel and to feed and nourish the flock.

We should also realise that there were many similarities between the social program and undertaking of the Christian assembly and the synagogue: to read and expound the Scriptures, share in meals, administer a welfare fund for the widows and orphans, announce community policy, provide shelter and hospitality for members of other communities on their journeys, inaugurate officers and arrange for burial of the dead.

Regarding these offices, Burtchaell explains the similarity between the Church's offices⁶⁴ apparent from history and the Bible with those of the synagogue. We are now ready to discuss these.

Apostle

This was one group of leaders which the synagogues did not have at the helm, but served at the bottom rung.

“They were not merely community appointees ... who, whether through a personal call or some prophetic summons, went forth as appointed by God. Hence a much higher sponsorship that their home churches might accept and accredit but not initiate.”⁶⁵

They were acknowledged by their fruits as having been sent by Christ Himself, with a prophetic and leadership role. All the churches answered to the Apostles who spoke with *kyriotes* = *ruling power*. Note the statement “It has been decided by the holy spirit and by ourselves” (Acts 15:28) as evidence for this.

In this way their function was enhanced compared to that of the synagogue's *apostoli* which were sent as messengers between the synagogues. In the literature we find that they were sent as travelling fund collectors. In effect, their role was converted from a messenger to the highest office of service in the Church.⁶⁶

Why else would Paul state:

⁶³ Burtchaell 1992: 274

⁶⁴ It seems that Herbert W Armstrong knew little about the synagogue, yet the broad structure of the Worldwide Church of God was more-or-less based upon it. It seems that there was Divine inspiration for this to happen and Mr Armstrong had enough savvy to understand the workings of these offices probably without this historical knowledge. For God works in mysterious ways.

⁶⁵ Burtchaell 1992: 307

⁶⁶ Dr H L Hoeh alluded to this in a sermon he gave sometime in the early 1980s and which has stuck in my mind ever since and which I have attempted to expand upon.

“And God hath set some in the church, **first** apostles, secondarily prophets, thirdly teachers, after that miracles, then gifts of healings, helps, governments, diversities of tongues.

Are all apostles? are all prophets? are all teachers? are all workers of miracles?”
(ICor 12:28-29)

Paul mentioned “first Apostles” here to emphasise a change in the Church’s adoption of the synagogue model.

“And he gave some, apostles; and some, prophets; and some, evangelists; and some, pastors and teachers;

For the perfecting of the saints, for the work of the ministry, for the edifying of the body of Christ.” (Eph 4:11-12)

Again, he lists Apostles as first, followed by prophets.

After all, why is there such a great deal of emphasis on the role of Apostles in the New Testament? Why did Paul have to mention his credentials if the rank of Apostle was already the highest? Perhaps some, familiar with the synagogue structure, needed convincing.

Note that despite the claims that one had to be directly trained by Christ to fill this office, Difley states:

“Some argue that to be an apostle for either the emperor or Christ, the one sent forth must have been instructed in the first person, but this is not intrinsic to the strict definition.”⁶⁷

Suggested reading:

- *Was Peter the Leading Apostle?* by C White

The Prophet

It is apparent that an office in the New Testament was that of Prophet (inspired preacher) or a senior minister with special insights. That is, someone who could discern the spirits of men (unlike so many today who have made terribly wrong decisions towards people) and who could also discern what God had in mind in human affairs and world events in the light of Bible prophecy.

Another sort of prophet was one whom had vision or special messages from God. There are no such prophets today.

In the New Testament period, in similitude to the Old Testament, we find prophets outside of the ecclesiastical structures. However, it seems plausible, that certain roles of the prophet were incorporated into the Church.

Some such as Agabus appear to have been outside of the organised Church (Acts 11:27; 21:10); another band of prophets apparently outside of the Church, but used of God, were those mentioned in Acts 13:1-3.

⁶⁷ Difley 1996: 4

Others prayed over Timothy when he was appointed (ITim 1:18; 4:14).

The Community Chief (pastor)

The early Christian assemblies did not normally use the title *archisynagogos* even though, like the word *synagoge*, it was part of the synagogue terminology. This was partly due to the Church separating out from the synagogue even though “the institutional protocols might be remarkably continuous with the realities of the past.”⁶⁸

James would have fulfilled such a function given that he was presiding over the Jerusalem community (Acts 15:22). His position as chairing the meeting together with his statement

“I rule, then ... and not forgetting Simeon’s key role, suggests that he was a chief in the Jerusalem Church ... From Acts 15 it is obvious that Peter and Paul who were Apostles and gifted with the spiritual understanding, set forth the policy and rationale that carried the day. James, the community chief surrounded by the elders, presided and pronounced the verdict.”⁶⁹

Given this, it is very likely that the early Church each had an assembly which had a community chief who, as shepherd, presided over two councils: the elders and deacons.⁷⁰ It seems that in the Church this office merged with that of the President or Senior Elder, which we have seen, was operative in the synagogue.

Of interest is that in the Book of Revelation, chapters 2 & 3, letters are sent to each of the angels of the seven churches ... which seems rather like a single person responsible for presiding over an assembly, like a community chief. Though a spirit angel cannot be ruled out, as angels are portrayed as spirit creatures late in the Book. Perhaps there are particular angels assigned to each human messenger for each of the Churches? This is a possibility too.

The Elders⁷¹

Easton’s Bible Dictionary explains the origin and role of elders:

“The Jewish eldership was transferred from the old dispensation to the new. The creation of the office of elder is nowhere recorded in the New Testament ... [this office] was transmitted from the earliest times.”⁷²

⁶⁸ Burtchaell 1992: 306

⁶⁹ Burtchaell 1992: 314

⁷⁰ Interestingly, we find in one of the branches of the Ebionites that they had *presbyteroi* (elders) and *archisynagogoi* (community chiefs) and they called their assembly a *synagoge*.

⁷¹ Detailed information about elders, their ordination, criteria etc are not covered to any great extent in this article. Instead, much has been written about them in works such as *Biblical Eldership* by A Strauch and *Qualifications for the Evaluation of Elders and Deacons* by J Keathley. Note also Strauch, *Biblical Eldership Study Guide’s* insights based upon historical research. “From all the evidence we have, the deacons—like the elders—formed a collective leadership council. The New Testament reveals that the pastoral oversight of many of the first churches was committed to a plurality of elders. This was true of the earliest, Jewish-Christian churches in Jerusalem, Judea, and neighboring 14 countries as well as many of the first Gentile churches.” (pp. 13-14)

⁷² Ferguson (1975) throws further light on this: “The above perspective brings the subject of an elder’s “authority” into sharper focus. An elder’s service or ministry is that of “pastoring” (a shepherd), of oversight (a bishop), of management (a steward), of judgment and example (**an elder on the pattern of Jewish elders**). The church, in order to be a community and in order to function smoothly, has need of such leadership ... If a man loses his qualifications, ceases to serve, or no

"The "elders" of the New Testament church were the "pastors" (Eph. 4:11), "bishops or overseers" (Acts 20:28), "leaders" and "rulers" (Heb. 13:7; 1 Thess. 5:12) of the flock. Everywhere in the New Testament bishop and presbyter are titles given to one and the same officer of the Christian church. He who is called presbyter or elder on account of his age or gravity is also called bishop or overseer with reference to the duty that lay upon him (Titus 1:5-7; Acts 20:17-28; Phil. 1:1)."⁷³ [emphasis mine]

And Thayer's Greek Lexicon:

"4245 presbuteros (pres-boo'-ter-os) comparative of presbus (elderly); TDNT - 6:651,931; AV - elder 64, old man 1, eldest 1, elder woman 1; 67
adj

- 1) elder, of age,
 - 1a) the elder of two people
 - 1b) advanced in life, an elder, a senior
 - 1b1) forefathers
- 2) a term of rank or office
 - 2a) among the Jews
 - 2a1) members of the great council or Sanhedrin (because in early times the rulers of the people, judges, etc., were selected from elderly men)
 - 2a2) of those who in separate cities managed public affairs and administered justice
 - 2b) among the Christians, those who presided over the assemblies (or churches)
The NT uses the term bishop, elders, and presbyters interchangeably
 - 2c) the twenty four members of the heavenly Sanhedrin or court seated on thrones around the throne of God"

Thayer clearly demonstrates that a parallel term that is used in the New Testament for elder is *presbyter* = *presbuterion* (see also *Strong's Concordance* #4244 and also #4850). The term is used interchangeably with elder in Acts 22:5; 1 Tim 4:14.

Among their many duties was to anoint the sick (James 5:14)⁷⁴ and be ordained in new congregations (Titus 1:5). They were also to be of a good reputation (Acts 6:3) – which infers that if they are of a bad reputation due to their lifestyles, abuse, unfairness, nepotism and so on, they should not be elders.

They did not rule the brethren and expect them to be obeyed as if the synagogue was the military; instead, they gently guided them. Men without that ability were simply not ordained or removed

longer has the support of the congregation, he can no longer be an elder. "**Once an elder, always an elder**" has no biblical support. It is proper to admit charges against an elder and rebuke him, provided appropriate procedures are followed (1 Tim. 5:19f.). As the approval is given by all, so the rebuke is "in the presence of all." That implies that the congregation which gave its approval may also withdraw that approval. Obviously this must be for a good cause." (pp 144, 148) [emphasis mine]

NB: many ancient synagogues practiced 1, 3 or 5 year term limits on office-holders.

⁷³ Easton 1897: art. "Elder"

⁷⁴ Praying for the sick was practiced in the synagogue community according to F. F. Bruce 1979: 1546. It is obvious that the ordained ministry continued this into early Church. Apparently, there was no system for medical education among the Jews at that time and given that many new converts were gentiles from pagan backgrounds, it was important for James to mention this. Otherwise, some may have reverted to their superstitions. Also, new converts were baptised.

from office. Re-training them was futile.

As an aside, some use Hebrews 13:17, 20 and 24 as proof that they can *rule* over people where the Greek word *hegeomai* is used. You can look up this word in *Strong's Concordance* (#2233) where one finds it has a meaning which includes "to go before" or "to lead" or "esteem" which would align it more with IICor 1:24 and Matt 20:25-26.

The same word is used in Phil 2:3; 3:8; IThess 5:13.

Similarly, the word for *obey* in Heb 13:17 is *peitho* (Strong's #3982) which should be translated in this context as *persuade* or *convince*. After all, ministers do not employ the members nor are they military rulers over the members.

As we have seen, this office had ancient roots according to numerous sources. *Smith's Bible Dictionary* succinctly outlines the roots of this office:

"The term elder, or old man as the Hebrew literally imports, was one of extensive use, as an official title, among the Hebrews and the surrounding nations, because the heads of tribes and the leading people who had acquired influence were naturally the older people of the nation. It had reference to various offices. #Ge 24:2; 50:7; 2Sa 12:17; Eze 27:9| As betokening a political office, it applied not only to the Hebrews, but also to the Egyptians, #Ge 50:7| the Moabites and the Midianites. #Nu 22:7| The earliest notice of the elders acting in concert as a political body is at the time of the Exodus. They were the representatives of the people, so much so that elders and people are occasionally used as equivalent terms; comp. #Jos 24:1| with #Jos 24:2,19,21| and #1Sa 8:4| with #1Sa 8:7,10,19| Their authority was undefined, and extended to all matters concerning the public weal. Their number and influence may be inferred from #1Sa 30:26|ff. They retained their position under all the political changes which the Jews underwent. The seventy elders mentioned in Exodus and Numbers were a sort of governing body, a parliament, and the origin of the tribunal of seventy elders called the Sanhedrin or Council. In the New Testament Church the elders or presbyters were the same as the bishops. It was an office derived from the Jewish usage of elders or rulers of the synagogues." (article "Elder")⁷⁵

Burtchaell also explains:

"The evidence before us says that during the organization of a new community the elders were appointed by the apostle or founder ... The pastoral epistles seem to imply that the selection of elders was a prerogative of Paul's major deputies after the time of founding. There is a hint that prophets may have played a part in validating candidates for community office ..."⁷⁶

However, later, in the embryonic Great False Church, the local churches chose their own elders as the selection became a matter for local choice.⁷⁷

⁷⁵ *Smith's Bible Dictionary online*, article "Elder"

⁷⁶ Burtchaell 1992: 293-94

⁷⁷ *ibid*

Another synonym for elder is *poimen* which means shepherd (Acts 20:28-30) practising pastoral gentleness (IPet 5:2-4). And in similitude to the synagogue, they are sometimes called *archontes* or notables.⁷⁸

Burtchaell lists some of the duties of the elders which they have ultimate responsibility and authority for in the congregations or assemblies:

- preaching and teaching
- community finances
- admonition and rebuke when unity was at risk
- appointment of officers and, in the opinion of Burtchaell, some way of endorsing the Apostles
- caring for the sick and the community's dependents
- their office deserved honour

They are often described as an organised group which gives the clear impression that there are at least three in each congregation of a reasonable size.

*"They are a presbyterion, like a synedrion or an entourage. They are visualized as a council in session with the community chief, and thus a ruling council for the full assembly."*⁷⁹

The traditional synagogue title for elders was *presbyteros* or alternatively *episkopos* which means overseer; this latter word still has overtones of the synagogue wherein they formed a college or council. In other words, each local congregation had a group of elders to assist the senior elder (pastor). This was not a 'democratic' system, but one of consensus in local administration, brotherhood and joint assistance to nurture their brothers and sisters in the Church.

It would also appear that the council or college of local elders worked with similar colleges of other assemblies to form a synodal unit which was not answerable to a single assembly but to the corporate authority.⁸⁰

*"The main point is this: no form of Church government created by Christians should violate the spirit of Jesus' own teaching about "lording it over" the people of God. The apostle Paul wrote to the Corinthian congregation, "Not that we have dominion over your faith, but are fellow workers for your joy; for by faith you stand" (II Cor. 1:24). The word translated "dominion" in this verse could also be translated "rule." In short, Christian leaders are not to be "rulers" or policemen over their congregation's faith. They are not to be tyrants, dictators and authoritarian banty roosters reveling in their sense of pre-eminence over God's heritage."*⁸¹

Prospective elders were very carefully selected by the local elders⁸² from the congregation, as was Timothy:

"Until I come, devote yourself to the public reading of Scripture, to exhortation, to

⁷⁸ Burtchaell 1992: 299

⁷⁹ Burtchaell 1992: 298

⁸⁰ Burtchaell 1992: 332

⁸¹ Knowles 2010: 21

⁸² Refer to Conner's *The Church in the New Testament*, pp. 199-200 which discussed plurality of local elders.

teaching.

Do not neglect the gift you have, which was given you by prophecy **when the council of elders laid their hands on you.**

Practice these things, immerse yourself in them, so that all may see your progress.

Keep a close watch on yourself and on the teaching. Persist in this, for by so doing you will save both yourself and your hearers.” (ITim 4:13-16)

There was to be no nepotism and cronyism. No one grooming their incompetent friend as a successor and slipping them into a position under the radar. No permanency or sort of priesthood status so that it is next to impossible to remove the imposter and deceiver. No “we are so inspired” as if God speaks through them as if they are prophets or patriarchs or local level apostles. And no “because we have had hands laid upon them, ‘hey presto!’ we are filled with the holy spirit and inspired by God and as such, do not have to follow due process, can appoint our friends and sycophants into positions and do whatever we want without being questioned”. Those that see the deception are expelled or pushed out by them or their friends.

Yet this is how apostasies commence as the wrong people begin to fill positions until they gain control.

Most of us have seen such behaviours in business, bureaucracy, clubs, non-Church of God groups, let alone within our own ranks. It is appalling and an affront to God.

As one non-Church of God booklet, *The Elder. Character and Duties*, states appropriately:

“... the problems dealt with are common to the office-bearers of every Church ... the difficulty of finding the right individuals to take up positions of responsibility...

They have not been changed by Christ...

All down the centuries, from the days of Christ to our own, these are the people who cause most trouble in the Church. To try to live the Christian life without Christ is impossible. To attempt any work for Christ and his Church before Christ has changed us is simply heading for disaster...

After the resurrection of Jesus, when the Church came into being, the office of the elder was recognized in the early Church. It was adopted with any other features of the synagogue. Elders were appointed in all the churches.”⁸³

Suggested reading:

- *Are Ministers Priests or Elders?* by C White
- *A Genuine Minister with the Heart of a Shepherd? Or Fudging it?* by C White
- *Polity and the Elder Issue* by R Decker
- *Biblical Eldership* by A Strauch

Teachers

Teachers, like the apostles and prophets, were not selected by the membership⁸⁴ as their gift came from God. It was thus unnecessary to fit them into an office.

⁸³ MacDonald 1958: 1, 4. Strauch agrees: “The eldership of government, there-fore, was very familiar to the Jewish Christians.” (1986: 123)

⁸⁴ Burtchell 1992: 303

Their duty was to explain the Scriptures, an influential gift and which deserved "high honour."⁸⁵

There is some slight evidence from early Christian history that a minor teaching office was operative but details are unknown. It is probably in the area of sermonettes, holding Bible discussions and teaching children in Sabbath classes or similar.

The early Christians, being mainly Jewish and observers of the Law, attended synagogue each Sabbath. Christ Himself was a rabbi or teacher but did not hold any synagogue office such as pastor, elder or deacon (though He spiritually occupies those roles). Note Luke 4:16-30; Mark 1:21-28, 39; Matt 4:23; 7:28-29.

The Servant or Deacon

In the synagogue they were titled the *hazan* = *assistant* in the temple and synagogue but appears under the Greek equivalent word *diakonos* = servant.⁸⁶

By New Testament times this role was taken over by non-Levites where they assisted the Pastor by collecting offerings, helping those in need and the under-privileged, administering food and funds. They also made announcements such as the time for the Holy Days etc.

This office was recognised from the outset of the formation of the early Church:

"Now in these days when the disciples were increasing in number, a complaint by the Hellenists arose against the Hebrews because their widows were being neglected in the daily distribution.

And the twelve summoned the full number of the disciples and said, "It is not right that we should give up preaching the word of God to serve tables.

Therefore, brothers, pick out from among you seven men of good repute, full of the Spirit and of wisdom, whom we will appoint to this duty.

But we will devote ourselves to prayer and to the ministry of the word." (Acts 6:1-4)⁸⁷

Hundreds of churches have set up the office of Deacon. The Presbyterian Church has sought to

⁸⁵ *ibid*

⁸⁶ Torrance 1984: "When the Church in Jerusalem became too large for the Twelve Disciples themselves to look after as pastors of the flock, they decided to appoint others to carry out the duties of local ministry, and to devote themselves as Apostles to the Word, for which they had been specially trained and commissioned by the Lord. They felt themselves uniquely called to provide the Church with the authoritative understanding of Christ and his Gospel which the Lord meant the Church to have and which he mediated to it through the Apostles -- that is what we now have in the Scriptures of the New Testament in which we receive from the Apostolic Foundation of the Church and through the Apostolic Tradition the 'deposit' of the Faith once delivered to the Saints.

John Lightfoot, the learned Westminster Divine, once drew attention to a very significant reference in Acts 1.15, where we are told that the company of persons in the first assembly of disciples numbered about a hundred and twenty. It would appear that the Primitive Church took care to act within the provisions of Jewish law later recorded in the Mishnah tractate Sanhedrin, a Rabbinic codification of earlier material (mishnayot) not infrequently reflected in the New Testament. There we find it laid down that if a community is one hundred and twenty strong it is entitled to have its own little 'sanhedrin' of 'seven', appointed through 'the laying on of the elders' hands', to exercise oversight over its affairs. That was the legal ruling which the Apostles seem to have followed when they laid their hands on seven chosen men, giving them authority to have charge of the local congregation of converted Hellenistic Jews (traditionally separated from Palestinian Jews even in their synagogues)."

⁸⁷ Debate surrounds whether all 7 were deacons; or whether the group included the president, community chief, an elder and 2, 3 or 4 deacons.

adopt the Biblical model of deaconship:

“Rev. James M. Wilson, D. D., in a pamphlet on “The Deacon” (p. 23), says: “In the language of Dr. McLeod, “There were several officers in the Jewish synagogue, and these were authorized to conduct the public worship, preserve order and manage the finances of the congregation” (*Ecclesiastical Catechism*, Q. 51). This latter officer was the Chazan or Deacon of the synagogue (“Prideaux’s Connections, “part i., book vi.), and in the words of Prideaux, the Chazanim—that is, Overseers—who were also fixed Ministers and under the Rulers of the synagogue, had charge and oversight of all things in it, kept the sacred books of the law and the prophets and other Holy Scriptures, as also the books of their public liturgies, and all other utensils belonging to the synagogue.” The order of the synagogue was, as all Presbyterians hold, the model of that of the Church under the New-Testament dispensation. In the synagogue was an officer that attended to the poor, had oversight of the place of worship and managed the finances.” We have in Acts 6 : 1-6 the history of the introduction of this office into the Christian Church, the occasion, necessity of the office, the qualifications and duties of Deacons, their election and ordination...

What are the duties of Deacons ?

“To take care of the poor, and to distribute among them the collections which may be raised for their use. To them also may be properly committed the management of the temporal affairs of the church.” This includes visitation of those in need, inquiring into their real wants, helping them to obtain work and comforting them. Being church officers, they should always unite with temporal relief spiritual consolation, instruction and prayer. In many churches it is the duty of the Deacons to take charge of the communion set, and to bring it, with clean table-linen, to the church on the communion Sabbath, and from the poor fund, or some other designated fund, to provide the bread and wine for the Lord's table.”⁸⁸ [emphasis mine]

Note: the job of Deacons and Deaconesses is not hall set-up, cleaning or the kitchen. These duties were best left to the average member. Or perhaps the teens.

This was, of course, an actual office. Yet all true believers are servant or assistants in some way also:

- Moses (Rev 15:3)
- Hebrew prophets (IPet 1:12)
- Jesus Christ (Rom 15:8; Phil 2:7)
- Paul (Acts 26:16; Rom 1:1; 11:13; ICor 3:5; 9:19; IICor 4:1,5; 6:3-4; IICor 4:1; 8:19; 11:23; Col 1:7, 23-25; Eph 3:7; 4:11; ITim 1:12)
- Preachers in general (ICor 3:5; IICor 8:19; Eph 6:21; Col 1:7; 4:7, 12, 17; Titus 4:5; IThess 3:2; ITim 2:24; 4:5; IPet 4:10-11)

Suggested reading:

- *So, What does a Deacon do?* by C White
- *40 Questions about Elders and Deacons* by B Merkle

⁸⁸ Hodge 1882: 60-61

Interpreters of Foreign Languages (tongues)

The language of angels that Paul refers to in ICor 13:1 may refer to the messengers who spoke in Hebrew at synagogues and whose messages were translated into that of the listeners (the languages of the men or gentiles). This would have been similar to the role translators in the synagogue.

Various Scriptures on “tongues” include: ICor 12:10; 14:2, 5, 13, 23-28.

Women elders?

Paul is clear as Burtchaell demonstrates:

“church offices were not open to women ... As for female elders or overseers: there are none, not even any female titularies that are officers.”⁸⁹

A possible exception was that of Deaconess.⁹⁰ Note that Phoebe is called a *diakonos* and possibly the courier of a document which is what one would expect a deacon to do. She would no doubt then have been a protector and helper of the saints. But a deaconesses’ role did not include public preaching to men or other women (ICor 11:2-16; ITitus 2:11). Given this principle, this would also preclude them presenting at seminars on the Sabbath, giving opening or closing prayers, Bible readings on the Sabbath or song-leading. For them to be involved in such is ‘the thin edge of the wedge.’

One can search the Scriptures and synagogue history and one cannot find a title of “elder” conferred on a woman.

However, they are called “holy women” (IPet 3:5) such as Miriam who was gifted in music and dancing (Ex 15:20-21). Others were Deborah (Judges 4 & 5), Huldah (IIKings 22:14; IIChron 34:22), Noadiah (Neh 6:14) and another referred to in Isaiah 8:3. In the New Testament Anna is described as a prophetess (Luke 26-38). But none were preachers. Nor were there priestesses in the time of ancient Israel.

However, notice how important women were to the Jewish community:

“The basis of Jewish social life is the family, and the Talmud is ever watchful to conserve its purity and stability. Recognizing the all-important place which a woman occupies in the life of the family, **it accords her a most dignified position ... In no way is she looked upon as a being inferior to man.** Here sphere of activity is different from man’s, but of no less significance to the welfare of the community.”⁹¹
[emphasis mine]

Inferior? No! Having different roles and responsibilities? Yes.

Notice further proofs of the absolute importance of the mother in the synagogue and thus in the early

⁸⁹ Burtchaell 1992: 328-29

⁹⁰ Mathew 2010: 116 explains that “The title is translated as “servant” (NIV), “deaconess” (RSV, NAB, NJB, JB, Philips), “who serves” (GNB), “who holds office in the congregation” (NEB), “active in the service of the congregation” (William Barclay), “a deacon in the church of Cenchreae” (NRSV). Some of the translations may be based on the general sense of the term denoting “one who serves at the table”. It should be noted here that despite attempt to attribute “ordination” to “leadership” of women in the ancient synagogue and church, the search to find evidence and to re-write history remains outside of the realms of historical accuracy. See for example Suddard (2018).

⁹¹ Cohen 1975: 159

Church:

"The mother sets the spiritual tone in family life; she is most responsible for the character development of her children; and she holds the family together in the face of adversity ... she assumes full responsibility for the atmosphere of piety and reverence in the home and for the inculcation of Jewish ideals. She gathers her children around her on the eve of the Sabbath to hear her pronounce the blessing over the lights. She prepares the home for each festival and creates a mood of joyous expectancy in the household ... But more important was her traditional role of counselor to the entire family. The *Talmud* says: 'No matter how short your wife is, lean down and take her advice.'"⁹²

So much for the non-importance of women in Hebrew society and the synagogue. They are HIGHLY regarded and their talents utilized in a feminine way. Their participation and service within the community of God should be nurtured and treasured.

Suggested reading:

- *Biblical Ministries for Woman* by F Lee
- *Women and Church Eldership* by F Lee
- *Women in Ministry: An Exegetical Study of I Timothy 2:11-15* by A Bowman
- *Does Kefalh ("Head") Mean "Source" Or "Authority Over" in Greek Literature? A Survey of 2,336 Examples* by W Grudem
- *So, What does a Deacon do?* by C White

New Testament Church Councils and Courts

Refer to Acts 15 which appears to be a type of Christian *Sanhedrin* (or supreme court) whose members were Elders, but led by the Apostles⁹³ for the purpose of final judicial decisions. Once again, the early Church broadly modelled itself upon the structure it inherited from 1st century Judaic governance structure. Although the synagogues were more-or-less independent, nevertheless the *Sanhedrin* had powers the *Bet Din* did not have and also the final authority for questions of law.

The early Church inherited the local *Bet Din* court function from the synagogue. Paul himself may have been inferring that a court system was needed in the Corinthian Church (I Cor 5:1-8) because of the major sins the church harboured (I Cor 5:9-6:11). Notice that in verse 4 and II Cor 2:6 it is clear that the church community was involved in the decision. The congregation acted as a sort of witness and jury in these serious decisions. There would have been local and a supreme court of sorts with elders officiating and guiding the process to a just and correct outcome.

While having a court system is Biblical, the way they carried out penalties in the synagogues for many problems was extreme like the gentiles which Christ warned against (Matt 20:25-26). In that system, the *Hazan* or disciplinarian, metered out lashings and terrible physical abuse.

For major crimes and sins, the process of Matthew 18:15-17 was followed in the Church as it was in the synagogue.⁹⁴ Refer to the **Appendix. Chart Cross-referencing Select Scriptures with Matthew 18.**

⁹² Kertzner 1996: 74

⁹³ It is believed that the Sanhedrin was based on the concept of 70 introduced in Exodus 18.

⁹⁴ It is well-known that Matt 18:15-20 (and Matt 16:19) refers to judiciary process in the first century synagogue for serious sins (not minor issues). Apparently, the final stage was done before those of the congregation as witnesses (a sort

Suggested reading:

- *Do Ministers sit on Moses Seat?* by C White
- *What is Justice?* by C White
- *The Biblical Truth About Mt 16:18-19. The Rock, The Gates, The Keys, and Binding And Loosing* by M Casale (1996)
- *The Truth about Matthew 18. Are we violating Christ's Command?* By The Eternal Church of God (2015)
- *What's next when the formula in Matthew 18 doesn't work?* By D Cartwright
- *Biblical Church Discipline* by D Wray

Priests and Levites in the Church?

But were there priests in the Church who enjoyed rank or office?

We find no record of a priestly rank or office in the early Church. Why is this so? For the New Testament Church, although continuing the Laws and so forth of the Old Testament congregation, was now governed by the Melchizedek Priesthood (Christ) in lieu of the Levitical Priesthood (Heb 8). In this Priesthood all baptised persons possessed the holy spirit dwelling within them leading them into righteousness. They have direct access to God and perform good works on His behalf, evangelising as needed.

It is quite plausible of course, that the Church contained Levites functioning as elders given that quite a number, it would seem, were joined to the Church of God (Acts 6:7), perhaps even to this day. But they did not fulfil the role of priests or Levites.

Because one of the roles of the Levites was to teach the people, it seems self-evident that this role found its way into the structure of the Church of God via the elders and teachers.

“The Levites were to be high-level educators, not just basic teachers, or exhortational preachers. This is established, by the simple premise that the parents were the first educators, and that this education was to be most rigorous, going so far as the memorisation of the Torah before adolescence. Theirs was not a remedial or a basic task, they were to teach a people thoroughly conversant with the scripture text.”⁹⁵

But who are the spiritual Priests today? As spiritual Israelites, all true Christians are - and we find many New Testament analogies to this effect and in particular the spiritual sacrifices Christians perform. See also the *Priests and Levites* section of in *The Study of the Types* by Ada Habershon (one of the best books I have read on Biblical typology.) Though it is likely that this Christian ‘Priesthood’ is more aligned

of jury) to the trial and final decision by senior elders (this is based on Old Testament law): “There is only one passage more which will be adduced in support of the class of Elders before us. This is found in Matthew xviii. 15, 16, 17. Here it is believed that the 17th verse, which enjoins—Tell it to the Church—has evidently a reference to the plan of discipline known to have been pursued in the Jewish Synagogue; and that the meaning is, ‘Tell it to that Consistory or Judicatory,’ which is the Church acting by its representatives.... We must always interpret language agreeably to the well known understanding and habit of the time and the country in which it is delivered. Now, it is perfectly certain that the phrase—‘Tell it to the Church’—was constantly in use among the Jews to express the carrying a complaint to the Eldership or representatives of the Church. And it is quite as certain, that actual cases occur in the Old Testament in which the term Church (ekklesia) is applied to the body of Elders. See as an example of this Deuteronomy xxxi. 28, 30 ...” (Miller 1832: 65-66). This indicates that these verses are a synecdoche figure of speech (part for the whole or whole for the part).

⁹⁵ Nathan 2011: 2

with the Melchizedek Priesthood.

Not surprisingly one cannot find the title *hiereus* = Levitical priest anywhere applied to offices in the early Church.

“Nowhere, however, despite the range of freedom early Christians felt to draw on the traditions of the temple, priesthood and sacrifice by way of illustration, precedent and analogy, is there a willingness to accord Jewish priests any community prerogative ... It is not that there are no longer any priests: there are no longer any who are not priests. Priesthood is no longer the identity of a clan or a tribe, but the name of an entire people.”⁹⁶

It is obvious: what priests there were in the New Testament Church may have functioned as elders or shepherds/pastors. Their priestly rank was gone, although their Levitical racial/blood line obviously continued. As such many from this line may still be found today both in the churches or outside.

⁹⁶ Burtchaell 1992: 322-23

Concluding Remarks

**"In a world of universal deceit, telling the truth is a revolutionary act."
-- George Orwell**

Based on what we have discovered, I cite key examples which demonstrate synagogue practice mirrored in the New Testament:

- Offices of pastor, elder, deacon; also, teachers and senior men and women (Eph 4:11-12; ICor 12:28).⁹⁷ Refer to the **Appendix. Chart comparing offices in the Synagogue with those in the Church**
- Local, neutral courts (*Bet Din*) for congregational issues (justice was paramount)
- A sort of over-arching Council or Sanhedrin was established (Acts 15)
- Excommunication only after due process
- Did not ordain hastily (ie without due consideration and gauging the community's knowledge of the proposed ordainee) (ITim 5:22)
- A council or group of elders performed ordinations (ITim 4:14)⁹⁸ after carefully choosing candidates from the congregation (elders were not voted into office)
- Elders anointing the sick with oil (James 5:14)⁹⁹
- Steps to take for resolution of major inter-personal and major sins (Matt 18:15-20)
- Older people were treated respectfully. Snappiness and cockiness was not tolerated in the synagogue: "Do not rebuke an older man but encourage him as you would a father, younger men as brothers" (ITim 5:1). Encouragement was via opportunities to serve – not being blocked out of jealousy
- Older women were to teach younger women (Titus 2:4-6)

Notice what one scholar wrote: "The first Churches were synagogues."¹⁰⁰ How true, for early, primitive Christianity was considered a sect of Judaism.

From the above it can be seen that the structure of the old Worldwide Church of God roughly approximated much of what we find in the synagogue of around 2,000 years ago!

Also, as we have seen, the offices of Apostle, evangelist, pastor etc do not portray members' functions at all. However, members do have vital roles and should be encouraged and nurtured to use their gifts and talents in service to all.

⁹⁷ However, elders are not Levites or Priests (*A Problem With The Pastor Being the Levitical Priest*, <https://www.visionofthechurch.com/X0627.html>)

Gleeson 2006: 2 "It is significant that **nowhere in the NT are Christian leaders or ministers called 'priests.'** Nowhere too are such persons compared with Jewish priests. When Hebrews Ch.5 speaks of Jesus as 'high priest,' it does so to assert that Christians have no need of the sort of mediation exercised by Jewish priests. For Jesus has done it all, has put an end to Jewish priesthood by the offering of himself as a totally sufficient sacrifice. In the second place, the words 'holy orders,' 'ordain,' and 'ordination' are not found in the original languages of the NT. Moreover, there is much disagreement among scholars about the extent to which the later liturgical practice of ordination corresponds to NT practice and its terminology." [emphasis mine]

⁹⁸ Ojewole's article "Ordination in the Old Testament", *Research on Humanities and Social Sciences* contains interesting background information on ordination and laying on of hands

⁹⁹ Refer to Ajibade 2008, *Anointing the Sick with Oil: A Theological Analysis of James 5:14-15*

¹⁰⁰ Pizner 1990: 23. And "The synagogue became the cradle of the Church, without it ... the conversion of the gentiles (would) have required a succession of millennial miracles" (Edersheim 1993: 299). "The eldership structure of government, therefore, was very familiar to the Jewish Christians." (Strauch 1995: 123)

Further, there is no sense of the ministry acting like dictators; or the church functioning like a cult; or nepotism and cronyism in the New Testament – instead, there are warnings against such behaviours. Rather, these offices were of a collegial or of a community spirit, not self-serving.

Dictatorial behaviours are based on the way of “get” or selfishness, getting joy out of hounding others and pursuing them like wolves. These shocking behaviours are accompanied by lying, deceitfulness and thus deception, “pulling the wool over the eyes” of other elders and many members.

Thankfully, Christ is the Head of the Church today (Eph 1:22; 4:15-16; 5:23; Col 1:17-18; Rom 12:4-5; ICor 12:12-27) and we are all answerable to Him ultimately. But, we also responsible to and answerable to one-another and we cannot get away from that.

NB: I have a substantial amount of information to either add to this article or to form a sequel in due course.

**History teaches us that he who beats his swords
into plowshares usually ends up plowing for
those who kept their swords.**

- Anon

Moral of the story? This is not the Millennium yet. Sometimes we must face challenges head-on and fight for the Truth as if our lives depended upon it. We must be warriors for Christ!

Appendix: Chart comparing offices in the Synagogue with those in the Early Church

Offices in the Synagogue	Historical evidence for offices in the NT Church	Ephesians 4:11-12	ICor 12:28-29	Old WCG Structure	Priest & Levitical Structure and Offices (probable)
	Apostle (<i>apostolos</i>) ¹⁰¹	Apostle (<i>apostolos</i>)	Apostle (<i>apostolos</i>)	Apostle	
	Prophet (<i>prophetes</i>)	Prophet (<i>prophetes</i>)	Prophet (<i>prophetes</i>)	N/A, unless some senior men who brought truths to HWA may have functioned in this capacity in some way at various times	(prophets often outside of the priesthood)
		Evangelist (<i>euaggelistes</i>)	(the sort of teachers mentioned here may be the evangelist rabbis?)	Evangelist (many were Regional Directors)	
Senior or Chief Elder (<i>nasi = president</i>)		Pastor			
Community Chief/Pastor & Elders in Council (including Notables) (<i>chazen or zaken</i>)	Community Chief (<i>archisynagogi</i>) & Elders (in Council) (<i>poimen</i>)	Pastor & Elders in Council		Pastor Assistant Pastors (sometimes) (pastor presided over regular meetings with Elders and Deacons (DELS))	Enforcement of the law (IChron 23:4)
Teacher (<i>rabbi</i>) Two types: travelling evangelist and local rabbi	Teacher	Teachers are also mentioned elsewhere in the NT	Teachers are also mentioned elsewhere in the NT	Sermonette presenters. Youth class leaders	Teachers (Deuteronomy 24:8; 33:10; IIChron 35:3; Neh 8:7)
Elders	Elders	(Elders are mentioned elsewhere in the NT)	(Elders are mentioned elsewhere in the NT)	Local Elders Local Local Elders (in some congregations)	(tribal elders outside of the priesthood)
Assistants (Deacons) (<i>almoners or parnasin</i>)	Deacons (in Council)	(Deacons are mentioned elsewhere in the NT)	(Deacons are mentioned elsewhere in the NT)	Deacons & Deaconesses	Ushers and Gatekeepers (IChron 9:17-24)

¹⁰¹ This office is probably also known as the *Angeloi tas Ekklesias* (cp Rev 2:1,8,12,18, 3:1,7,14)

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Offices in the Synagogue	Historical evidence for offices in the NT Church	Ephesians 4:11-12	ICor 12:28-29	Old WCG Structure	Priest & Levitical Structure and Offices (probable)
Apostoli (<i>shaliach</i> or <i>announcer</i>)		(moved to top rung in NT)	(moved to top rung in NT)		
Prophets (outside the jurisdiction of the synagogue) (<i>esha'elohim, nabyi'</i>)		(moved to 2 nd top rung in NT)	(moved to 2 nd top rung in NT)		(outside of the priesthood)
various gifts were noted and utilised, but were not ministerial rank: scribe, commissioner, priest, reader, apostle, prophet. One such was the <i>preceptor</i> or song-leader. Another was the <i>meturganim</i> who translated into the local language (tongue) the teaching of the Law in Hebrew. He stood next to the teacher as he undertook the translation. ¹⁰²			(various gifts such as miracles, healings, helps, governments, languages) See ICor 13:1, 8; 14:1-28	Members in general Foreign language translators (verbal and text)	Num 18:6 Hygiene services (Lev 13:2, 14:2; Luke 17:14). Musicians, song-leaders (I Chron 25:1–31; IIChron 5:12; 34:12; IChron. 6:31-33, 39; 25:1- 7 Librarians and authors (IIChron 34:13). Builders and architects (IIChron 34:8–13). Trustees (IChron .9: 26- 31) Treasurers (IChron 9: 26; IChron 26: 20- 28)

NB: further detail on the structure of the synagogue could be added here, however the above suffices. The striking feature is the similarity between the synagogue and that postulated by Paul. Also the non-rank role of apostle and prophet. These were evidently raised by Paul to highest office in the early Church of God.

¹⁰² See the *Talmud: Meg. 4; Maimon. Tephillah, 12; Mas-secheth Soph. 103*

Appendix: Chart Cross-referencing Select Scriptures with Matthew 18

In this chart I am attempting to demonstrate that there are some parallels to Matthew 18 in various Scriptures. It seems that these shed light on the meaning and application of Matthew 18.

Mathew 18	ITim 5	Deut 17 & Lev 19	Deut 13 & Deut 16 & Ex 23	Comment/Other Scriptures
<p>13 And if so be that he find it, verily I say unto you, he rejoiceth more of that <i>sheep</i>, than of the ninety and nine which went not astray.</p> <p>14 Even so it is not the will of your Father which is in heaven, that one of these little ones should perish.</p>	<p>22 Lay hands suddenly on no man, neither be partaker of other men's sins: keep thyself pure.</p>			<p>Reconciliation and salvation – aided by mature men who must seek out the 'lost' sheep</p> <p>Gal 6:1-3 Dan 12:2</p>
<p>15 Moreover if thy brother shall trespass against thee, go and tell him his fault between thee and him alone: if he shall hear thee, thou hast gained thy brother.</p>		<p>Deut 17:1 Thou shalt not sacrifice unto the LORD thy God <i>any</i> bullock, or sheep, wherein is blemish, <i>or</i> any evilfavouredness: for that <i>is</i> an abomination unto the LORD thy God. {sheep: or, goat}</p> <p>2 If there be found among you, within any of thy gates which the LORD thy God giveth thee, man or woman, that hath wrought wickedness in the sight of the LORD thy God, in transgressing his covenant,</p> <p>3 And hath gone and served other gods, and worshipped them, either the sun, or moon, or any of the host of heaven, which I have not commanded;</p>		

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Mathew 18	ITim 5	Deut 17 & Lev 19	Deut 13 & Deut 16 & Ex 23	Comment/Other Scriptures
<p>16 But if he will not hear <i>thee</i>, <i>then</i> take with thee one or two more, that in the mouth of two or three witnesses every word may be established.</p>	<p>17 Let the elders that rule well be counted worthy of double honour, especially they who labour in the word and doctrine. 18 For the scripture saith, Thou shalt not muzzle the ox that treadeth out the corn. And, The labourer <i>is</i> worthy of his reward. 19 Against an elder receive not an accusation, but before two or three witnesses. {before: or, under}</p>	<p>6 At the mouth of two witnesses, or three witnesses, shall he that is worthy of death be put to death; <i>but</i> at the mouth of one witness he shall not be put to death.</p>	<p>Deuteronomy 13:1 If there arise among you a prophet, or a dreamer of dreams, and giveth thee a sign or a wonder, 2 And the sign or the wonder come to pass, whereof he spake unto thee, saying, Let us go after other gods, which thou hast not known, and let us serve them; 3 Thou shalt not hearken unto the words of that prophet, or that dreamer of dreams: for the LORD your God proveth you, to know whether ye love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul. 4 Ye shall walk after the LORD your God, and fear him, and keep his commandments, and obey his voice, and ye shall serve him, and cleave unto him.</p>	<p>John 8:17 Examples of those who labored in doctrine were Hoeh, McNair, Neff etc</p>
<p>17 And if he shall neglect to hear them, tell <i>it</i> unto the church: but if he neglect to hear the church, let him be unto thee as an heathen man and a publican.</p>	<p>20 Them that sin rebuke before all, that others also may fear. 24 Some men's sins are open beforehand, going before to judgment; and some <i>men</i></p>	<p>Deut 17:4 And it be told thee, and thou hast heard <i>of it</i>, and enquired diligently, and, behold, <i>it be</i> true, <i>and</i> the thing certain, <i>that</i> such abomination is wrought in Israel: 5 Then shalt thou bring forth that man or that woman, which have</p>	<p>Deut 13:5-6 And that prophet, or that dreamer of dreams, shall be put to death; because he hath spoken to turn <i>you</i> away from the LORD your God, which brought you out of the land of Egypt, and</p>	<p>le public rebuke for massive sins and heresies</p>

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Mathew 18	ITim 5	Deut 17 & Lev 19	Deut 13 & Deut 16 & Ex 23	Comment/Other Scriptures
	<p>they follow after. 25 Likewise also the good works <i>of some</i> are manifest beforehand; and they that are otherwise cannot be hid.</p>	<p>committed that wicked thing, unto thy gates, <i>even</i> that man or that woman, and shalt stone them with stones, till they die. 6 At the mouth of two witnesses, or three witnesses, shall he that is worthy of death be put to death; <i>but</i> at the mouth of one witness he shall not be put to death. 7 The hands of the witnesses shall be first upon him to put him to death, and afterward the hands of all the people. So thou shalt put the evil away from among you.</p>	<p>redeemed you out of the house of bondage, to thrust thee out of the way which the LORD thy God commanded thee to walk in. So shalt thou put the evil away from the midst of thee. {to turn...: Heb. revolt against the LORD} 6 If thy brother, the son of thy mother, or thy son, or thy daughter, or the wife of thy bosom, or thy friend, which <i>is</i> as thine own soul, entice thee secretly, saying, Let us go and serve other gods, which thou hast not known, thou, nor thy fathers; 7 <i>Namely</i>, of the gods of the people which <i>are</i> round about you, nigh unto thee, or far off from thee, from the <i>one</i> end of the earth even unto the <i>other</i> end of the earth; 8 Thou shalt not consent unto him, nor hearken unto him; neither shall thine eye pity him, neither shalt thou spare, neither shalt thou conceal him: 9 But thou shalt surely kill him; thine hand shall be first upon him to put him to death, and afterwards the hand of all the people.</p>	

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Mathew 18	ITim 5	Deut 17 & Lev 19	Deut 13 & Deut 16 & Ex 23	Comment/Other Scriptures
			<p>10 And thou shalt stone him with stones, that he die; because he hath sought to thrust thee away from the LORD thy God, which brought thee out of the land of Egypt, from the house of bondage. {bondage: Heb. bondmen}</p> <p>11 And all Israel shall hear, and fear, and shall do no more any such wickedness as this is among you.</p> <p>12 If thou shalt hear <i>say</i> in one of thy cities, which the LORD thy God hath given thee to dwell there, saying,</p> <p>13 <i>Certain</i> men, the children of Belial, are gone out from among you, and have withdrawn the inhabitants of their city, saying, Let us go and serve other gods, which ye have not known; {the children...: or, naughty men}</p> <p>14 Then shalt thou enquire, and make search, and ask diligently; and, behold, <i>if it be</i> truth, <i>and</i> the thing certain, <i>that</i> such abomination is wrought among you;</p> <p>15 Thou shalt surely smite the inhabitants of that city with the edge of the sword, destroying it utterly, and all</p>	

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Mathew 18	ITim 5	Deut 17 & Lev 19	Deut 13 & Deut 16 & Ex 23	Comment/Other Scriptures
			that <i>is</i> therein, and the cattle thereof, with the edge of the sword.	
	21 I charge <i>thee</i> before God, and the Lord Jesus Christ, and the elect angels, that thou observe these things without preferring one before another, doing nothing by partiality. {preferring...: or, prejudice}	Lev 19:15 Ye shall do no unrighteousness in judgment: thou shalt not respect the person of the poor, nor honour the person of the mighty: <i>but</i> in righteousness shalt thou judge thy neighbour.	Deut 16:18 Judges and officers shalt thou make thee in all thy gates, which the LORD thy God giveth thee, throughout thy tribes: and they shall judge the people with just judgment. 19 Thou shalt not wrest judgment; thou shalt not respect persons, neither take a gift: for a gift doth blind the eyes of the wise, and pervert the words of the righteous. {words: or, matters} 20 That which is altogether just shalt thou follow, that thou mayest live, and inherit the land which the LORD thy God giveth thee. {That which...: Heb. Justice, justice} Exodus 23:1 Thou shalt not raise a false report: put not thine hand with the wicked to be an unrighteous witness. {raise: or, receive} 2 Thou shalt not follow a multitude to <i>do</i> evil; neither shalt thou speak in a cause to decline after many to wrest <i>judgment</i> : {speak: Heb.	Acts 10:34 Col 3:25 IPet 1:17 Rom 2:11 Eph 6:9 James 2:1-13 John 7:24 Is 11:3-4 Prov 24:23-25 NB: “not respect persons” = no nepotism, no cronyism, no favouritism and providing opportunities and positions to friends Eg cliques, gangs

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Mathew 18	ITim 5	Deut 17 & Lev 19	Deut 13 & Deut 16 & Ex 23	Comment/Other Scriptures
			answer} 3 Neither shalt thou countenance a poor man in his cause. 6 Thou shalt not wrest the judgment of thy poor in his cause. 7 Keep thee far from a false matter; and the innocent and righteous slay thou not: for I will not justify the wicked. 8 And thou shalt take no gift: for the gift blindeth the wise, and perverteth the words of the righteous. {the wise: Heb. the seeing}	Eg hospitality and preferential treatment
18 Verily I say unto you, Whatsoever ye shall bind on earth shall be bound in heaven: and whatsoever ye shall loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven.		Deut 17:8 If there arise a matter too hard for thee in judgment, between blood and blood, between plea and plea, and between stroke and stroke, <i>being</i> matters of controversy within thy gates: then shalt thou arise, and get thee up into the place which the LORD thy God shall choose; 9 And thou shalt come unto the priests the Levites, and unto the judge that shall be in those days, and enquire; and they shall shew thee the sentence of judgment:		Ex 18:13-26 Deut 34:9 ICor 5:5-9,12; 6:1-9 IICor 13:1-2 Eph 4:32 Heb 10:28 IIThess 3:14 Titus 3:9-11 Num 30:1-2
19 Again I say unto you, That if two of you shall agree on earth		10 And thou shalt do according to the sentence, which they of that		Final judgement or decision on a major offence. This

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Mathew 18	ITim 5	Deut 17 & Lev 19	Deut 13 & Deut 16 & Ex 23	Comment/Other Scriptures
<p>as touching any thing that they shall ask, it shall be done for them of my Father which is in heaven.</p> <p>20 For where two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I in the midst of them.</p>		<p>place which the LORD shall choose shall shew thee; and thou shalt observe to do according to all that they inform thee:</p> <p>11 According to the sentence of the law which they shall teach thee, and according to the judgment which they shall tell thee, thou shalt do: thou shalt not decline from the sentence which they shall shew thee, <i>to the right hand, nor to the left.</i></p> <p>12 And the man that will do presumptuously, and will not hearken unto the priest that standeth to minister there before the LORD thy God, or unto the judge, even that man shall die: and thou shalt put away the evil from Israel. {and will...: Heb. not to hearken}</p> <p>13 And all the people shall hear, and fear, and do no more presumptuously.</p>		<p>seems to suggest that there are 2 or 3 sitting to make a judicial decision.</p>
<p>21 Then came Peter to him, and said, Lord, how oft shall my brother sin against me, and I forgive him? till seven times?</p> <p>22 Jesus saith unto him, I say not unto thee, Until seven times: but, Until seventy times seven.</p>			<p>Ex 23:4 If thou meet thine enemy's ox or his ass going astray, thou shalt surely bring it back to him again.</p> <p>5 If thou see the ass of him that hateth thee lying under his burden, and wouldest forbear to help him, thou shalt surely help with him. {and...: or, wilt thou cease to help him? or, and wouldest</p>	<p>Luke 17:3-4 Matt 5:22-25 Rom 12:17-19 Gal 6:7-10</p>

Synagogue and Church: Comparative Structures

Mathew 18	ITim 5	Deut 17 & Lev 19	Deut 13 & Deut 16 & Ex 23	Comment/Other Scriptures
			cease to leave thy business for him: thou shalt surely leave it to join with him}	

Appendix: Study the Highest Form of Worship

by Dr. John D. Garr

(*Restore!* magazine, vol 3, no. 2, c1995)

When Christians think of worship, images of the Sunday morning worship service come to view, with singing, praying, giving, preaching, and sharing the sacrament. Study is perhaps something that is done in preparation for worship, but could Christians ever conceive of study, itself, as an act of worship, even the highest form of worship? When we analyze this concept, however, we begin to understand that intensive study of the Word of God is the most reliable way in which God can speak to us and cause us to understand his will and his ways. Even the most intense and profound subjective experiences must be judged by the written Word of God (II Peter 1:16-19). Study of the Word of God, then, with a view toward doing the Word, is an act of submission to the divine will, the essence of true worship. When we pray, we speak with God; when we study, God speaks to us.

For many centuries study has been at the very heart of the Jewish experience, so much so that much of Judaism has considered study as the highest form of worship. Humbly submitting oneself to the wisdom of God revealed in the Tenach (Hebrew Scriptures) was viewed as worship, which literally meant to "prostrate oneself" before the Eternal. The Hebrew word for worship, *dg's]* (*segad*), means to "bow down or do obeisance to," and it has the connotation of total submission to a superior (as the king). The Greek translation of this word, *proskunevw* (*proskun*), is even more graphic, meaning to "kiss as a dog licking its master's hand."

The decision to study God's Word in order to do His Word is a meaningful act of submission and reverence—in short, it is worship. Study carried out with this motive is the very essence of Jewish learning. This is not study in order to understand; it is study in order to do. Abraham Joshua Heschel encapsulated this Jewish approach to study by saying that the Greeks study in order to understand while the Hebrews study in order to revere. God's Word and ways are ineffable: only by doing them does one understand them.

Study of God's Word in order to mold one's lifestyle to that Word is also worship in the truest sense of the English word worship, which means to "ascribe worth to." When we fully submit our lives to God's Word, when we study what he has said with complete devotion and intensity, we do, indeed, ascribe worth to him: we worship him.

Synagogal Life Reveals the Model

The importance which the Jewish community attaches to study is reflected in the life of the synagogue, the focal point of the Jewish experience since the time of the Babylonian captivity. The word synagogue is from the Greek word *sunagoghv* (*sunagoge*), which was used by the Septuagint scholars to translate the Hebrew *hd;[e* (*Eda*), the word which referred to the meeting of the congregation of Israel. The word synagogue was also used to translate *d[e/m* (*moed*), which meant "an appointed place of meeting" (Psalm 74:8). In ancient times the synagogue was probably the assembly of the people in homes for social interaction, for prayer, and for study. Later, these meetings were housed in buildings designed specifically for such use, which took on the name of the meetings, themselves, and were called synagogues.

The synagogue has had three traditional functions which were manifest in the names given to it: Beit Knesset (House of Assembly or Meeting Place), Beit Tefillah, (House of Prayer), and Beit Midrash (House of Study or Learning). The synagogue was a place where the Jewish people assembled for the interaction of

their collective lives. It was probably first a simple meeting (knesset) place of the people or their gathering for the dispensing of justice (din) through the rabbinical court. Then it became a place for corporate prayer (*tefillah*), which requires a *minyan* (*quorum*) of ten men, underscoring the Jewish mindset that salvation and interaction with the Divine is a collective, not individualistic exercise. Over time, however, the emphasis came more and more to be on the assembly of the people to study, learn, or investigate (*midrash*) the Torah. A Beit Midrash was most often attached to the synagogue, and the functions of both tended to overlap. Eventually, the Beit Midrash came to be viewed as more sacred than the rest of the synagogue.

The continuing recognition of the synagogue as a house of study is seen in the fact that many Jews today prefer the Yiddish term *shul* over the term *synagogue* to identify their place of meeting. *Shul* literally means school and probably is related to the Latin *schola*, from which we get the words *scholar* and *scholastic*.

A Holistic World View

The traditional importance that the Jewish people have placed upon education is based in Judaism's holistic view of life. Jews have long viewed all of life as a continuum in which each part of the human experience shares equal importance with every other aspect of life. Jews do not embrace the bifurcated dualism that much of the Gentile world has espoused. There is no such thing as a dichotomy between the spiritual and the material aspects of life, as in neo-Platonism or Eastern Monism. All of life is spiritual and good. Yahweh is the Creator of all things, and he declared all the things that he had created to be "good" and "very good" (Genesis 1:31). This Jewish holistic view of life is encapsulated in Paul's declaration: "I know, and am persuaded by the Lord Jesus, that there is nothing unclean of itself . . ." (Romans 14:14).

Satan never has and never will create anything! He has and always will, however, attempt to pollute everything that God has created for the good of man. God created everything good and set parameters for man's enjoyment of the good that he had created. Satan, however, has successfully enticed men to go beyond God's set limits and to commit sin with virtually everything that God has created, including the grace and the Word of God (Jude 4).

Because of their holistic view of life, Jews do not make a vast distinction between "spiritual" and "secular" knowledge, for all knowledge is from God and is designed for the human good. Elihu of ancient times encapsulated the truth about the origin of knowledge: "There is a spirit in man: and the inspiration of the Almighty giveth them understanding" (Job 32:8). All knowledge is the product of divine inspiration, often received by men as a "flash of insight." Most of the great inventions and discoveries of history have not been merely the product of accumulated empirical evidence. They have come as a flash of inspiration. Both spiritual understanding and secular knowledge come from the "inspiration" or breath of the Almighty.

If all of life is sacred, then both traditional "spiritual" and "secular" knowledge have relative importance to man. For the Jewish people, there can be no withdrawal from society into monasticism or asceticism that denies the "secular" or material through constant self-abnegation in order to elevate the "spiritual." Gentiles, on the other hand, have thought that nearness to God was measured by withdrawal from the world.

The neo-Platonists who Hellenized the earliest church took their cue from Greek philosophy, which declared that the spiritual good had become entrapped in the material evil. Official Christendom, seeking escape from the material world, concentrated its erudition on the spiritual to the neglect of the natural and cloistered what knowledge it had among a sterile elite, denying it to the "secular" world. This philosophy of education plunged the Western world into the Dark Ages of human ignorance, superstition, disease, and

depravity.

The religions that spring from Eastern Monism sought escape into nothingness as the ultimate experience that could be produced by meditation and separation from the material. There was, therefore, no thought of improvement of the human scene. The only hope was escape from the endless cycle of reincarnation. Is it any wonder, then, that the nations which feature this philosophy suffer a profound toll in human suffering and environmental, social, and economic disaster.

For the Jews, on the other hand, the way to be close to God is not withdrawal from the world but involvement in the "nitty-gritty" now and now, taking the knowledge and wisdom that one has acquired and using it to improve the human situation. Man is not on some mindless treadmill of fatalism, a "good" spirit trapped in an "evil" body and in an "evil" world. All of life is to be celebrated to its fullest and is to be dedicated to God and his service.

The Spirit of Improvement

Continual improvement in the earth is the goal of Judaism, as man works in partnership with God for the improvement of his environment—physically, socially, economically, and spiritually. This is, no doubt, the reason that so many Jews have chosen professions which deal with health and welfare. When one understands this holistic approach to life, he cannot have one set of ethics for the "spiritual realm" and another for the "secular realm." He cannot abuse his environment, his society, his government, or his religion.

Jewish emphasis on education, then, is based on the philosophy of continuing self-improvement and the improvement of the world around us. And, that emphasis has produced some of the greatest accomplishments in virtually all fields of learning, as Jews have led the way in the betterment of the human race.

This dedication to improvement of the human lot is in context of God's command to Adam and Eve to "subdue the earth." This is an ongoing work that is generational and universal. Working in concert with God is such a massive job that no one person or no one generation can ever accomplish his plan. Working continually to improve is the essence of the spirit of perfection which is enjoined upon believers. "Be ye perfect, as your Father in heaven is perfect," is the command of Jesus. This perfection is not the achievement of some plateau or apex; it is the continual walking with God to make improvement, which requires continual study.

The spirit of improvement is the factor that has contributed to the value which Judaism has traditionally placed on education. It is reflected in the Jewish view that the role of man in the earth is to be the same as it was in the beginning of creation: the keeper of the garden. Jews believe that God has called man into a partnership with himself to work at improvement of the planet to which man has been assigned. If continual improvement is to be made by each succeeding generation, then the knowledge acquired in each generation must be passed on to the next. This was one of the primary reasons for which Yahweh had chosen Abraham, the first Hebrew, in the beginning: "For I know [Abraham], that he will command his children and his household after him, and they shall keep the way of the Lord, to do justice and judgment" (Genesis 18:19). Jewish perspectives on learning, then, involve both the acquisition and transmission of knowledge.

Being Led Out

The word education comes to us from the Latin *ex ducere*, which means to be led out. It is a simple fact that learning leads us out of ignorance, out of darkness, out of superstition, out of misery, out of suffering. While all of Europe was being decimated by the Black Plague, Jews were spared because they had the knowledge to "be clean, and change your garments" (Genesis 35:2) and to keep their homes free of rodents and the attendant fleas that spread the plague. While Gentile women have been afflicted with high instances of uterine cancer, Jewish women have largely been spared because of the circumcision of Jewish men and abstinence from sexual intercourse during the woman's time of niddah (forbidden), beginning with the onset of menses and continuing for seven days after its conclusion. While the Gentile world has been dominated by superstitions founded in false religions that produced a pantheon of gods or worshipped an impersonal force, the Jews have enjoyed the freedom and fulfillment of worshipping the God who is one and who can be approached as Avenu, Malkenu (our Father, our King). While the world and the church knew that the earth was flat, Christopher Columbus, with the support of the Jewish community, set out toward the east by sailing westward because he knew that "the Lord sitteth upon the circle of the earth" (Isaiah 40:22). And, the list goes on and on. Learning the wisdom of God leads us out of darkness and into his marvelous light.

Training Up Children

The importance of educating children is also seen in Solomon's dictum in Proverbs 22:6: "Train up a child in the way he should go: and when he is old, he will not depart from it." This text has often been misinterpreted to mean that if one trains his child in the knowledge of God, the child will never depart from that understanding in his adult life. The true meaning, however, is that parents are responsible for training their children in the discipline to which the child is inclined. How many parents have forced their children to be educated according to their own preferences and have consequently enslaved their children to professions that they despise? It is the responsibility of parents to discern the interests of their children at as early an age as possible and then to see that the child is educated to the greatest degree possible to facilitate his performance in that field of endeavor in which he is interested.

This truth is seen in the responsibility incumbent upon every Jewish father to teach his children both Torah and a means of livelihood. The home is the center for spiritual growth and the primary source of life training. The acquisition of secular knowledge, then, when subordinated to learning the Word of God, is also an act of worship. It is a response to the commandment of God that man should "work six days a week." In this context, work is also worship, another concept that is foreign to the Christian mind because of the influence of neo-Platonic thought. Indeed, the Hebrew word *abodah* means both "work" and "worship." There is no such thing as a menial job. All work that is done in obedience to the commandments of God is an act of worship and, therefore, of import.

Study For Approval Before God

The importance of studying the Word of God is seen in Paul's instructions to Timothy: "Study to show thyself approved unto God, a workman that needeth not to be ashamed, rightly dividing the word of truth. . . from a child thou hast known the holy scriptures, which are able to make thee wise unto salvation through faith which is in Christ Jesus. All scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness: that the man of God may be perfect, thoroughly furnished unto all good works" (II Timothy 2:15; 3:15-17). Intense study is necessary to avoid the shame of inaccurately interpreting God's Word. This is in keeping with David's description of the righteous

man: "His delight is in the law of the Lord; and in his law doth he meditate day and night" (Psalm 1:2) The meditation to which David refers is not Eastern Monism's meditation that seeks to focus the energy of the mind on the third eye in the center of the forehead (where the pituitary gland is located) so as to achieve the understanding of one's inherent deity. It is the repeating over and over again (like the rumination of a cow) the words of God until one so ingests the Word that it becomes a part of the very fiber of his being.

This is the vision that keeps God's people from casting off restraint: "He that keepeth the law, happy is he" (Proverbs 29:18). Without the prophetic vision of the Word of God, people perish. With the understanding of rightly-divided Holy Scripture, one can be taught, corrected, and instructed in righteousness, thereby becoming mature (perfect) and be completely equipped unto all good works. It is then that the light of God's Word can shine through him so that men may see his good works and glorify the Father in heaven (Matthew 5:16).

Study is indeed the highest form of worship, for it is our subjection of our human reason to a conscious act of our human will to believe what God has said that manifests the faith that is credited to us for righteousness. When we believe God and act on our faith, we receive the imputed righteousness of Jesus Christ. When we study God's Word with a view toward obeying it, we become wholly submissive to God and can then walk in the Spirit, not in the flesh. In such a state, there is no condemnation to us, for the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus has freed us from the law of sin and death (Romans 8:1, 2).

O that men everywhere would seek the Lord and worship before him in the beauty of his holiness, studying his Word and his ways!

Appendix: Role of the Priests and Levites

Old Testament Priests & Priesthood

- Definition: A priest is one authorized to perform the sacred rites of a religion, especially a mediator between man and God." (Webster)
- The origin of dedicated priests is uncertain.
- Melchizecek, King of Salem was a priest of God (Gen. 14:18)
- Moses' father-in-law, Jethro, was priest of Midian. (Exodus 4:1)
- There were priests among the Israelites when they came out of Egypt. (Exodus 19:22, 24)
- There were false priests who served false gods:
 - Priest of Midian (Exodus 18:1)
 - Priests of On (Genesis 41:45)
 - Priests of Dagon (1 Samuel 5:5)
 - Priests of the high places (1 Kings 12:32)
 - Priests "of them that are no gods." (2 Chronicles 13:9)
- At Mount Sinai, God designated Aaron and his descendants to serve as priests. (Exodus 28:1, 44; 30:30; 40:13-15; Numbers 3:3)
- All priests were Levites, but not all Levites were priests.
- Only those designated could perform priestly duties.
 - Not other Levites (Numbers 16:1-3; 1-10; 10:1-3)
 - Not even Moses or his descendants (1 Chronicles 23:13)
 - Not anyone other than Aaron and his descendants (Numbers 16:40)
- QUALIFICATIONS FOR PRIESTLY SERVICE:
 - Must be a male (Exodus 28:1)
 - Must be a descendant of Aaron (Exodus 28:1) with a documented lineage.
 - Must be between 30 and 50 years old. (Numbers 4:3)
 - Must be unblemished (not lame or blond). (Lev. 21:16-23)
 - Must have a proper marriage. (Leviticus 21:9, 14)
 - Not married to a harlot.
 - Not married to a divorced woman.
 - Not married to a widow other than a priest's widow. (Ezekiel 44:22)
 - The high priest must marry a virgin of his own people.
 - Must have no uncleanness (leprosy, etc.). (Lev. 22:3-9)



- Must have an untrimmed beard with well trimmed (but unshaved) hair. (Ezekiel 4:20; Leviticus 21:5)
- Must be properly dressed. (Exo. 28:1-4; Ezekiel 44:17-19)

■ DUTIES OF THE PRIEST

- Teach the people. (Leviticus 10:8-11)
- Serve as judges to resolve controversy. (Deut. 21:5)
- Offer sacrifices. (Exodus 29:38-42)
- Assess impurity. (Leviticus 13-15)
- Burn incense. (Exodus 30:7-8)
- Bless the people. (Numbers 6:22-27)
- Bless God (Deuteronomy 10:8)
- Keep the tabernacle. (Numbers 3:38; 4:16)
- Take care of the altar (Leviticus 6:8-13), the lamps, and the showbread (Leviticus 24:1-9)
- Prepare the holy things for each days journey. (Num. 4:5-15)
- Continue the sacred fire. (Leviticus 6:12-13)
- Blow the trumpets. (Numbers 10:1-10)

■ THE HIGH PRIESTS

- Also called the chief priest. (2 Chronicles 19:11)
- God's leader over the priests.
- Aaron served as the first High Priest. (Exodus 40:12-13)
- Aaron's son, Eleazer, replaced him as High Priest when he died. (Numbers 20:26-28)
- The position of high priests continued through the time of Christ (Matthew 26:3 and apparently to the time of the destruction of the temple by the Romans in 70 A.D.)

■ DUTIES OF THE HIGH PRIEST

- Direct the work of the priests & Levites. (Numbers 3:4)
- Inquire of the Lord. (Judges 20:28)
- Consecration of the priests. (Exodus 29:1-37)
- Maintain the golden candlestand with its fire. (Lev. 24:1-4)
- Burning incense daily (Exodus 30:7-8), and in a special way on the Day of Atonement. (Leviticus 16:2, 12-13)
- Offering sacrifices on the Day of Atonement. (Hebrews 5:1; Leviticus 23:6, 11, 15, 20)

Barnes' Bible Charts

Source: <http://www.biblecharts.org/oldtestament/oldtestamentpriestsandpriesthood.pdf>

The following lengthy quote from Nathan's *The Levitical Teaching Model & Contemporary Theological Education* should be of interest to the reader concerning the scholarly aspect of the role of the Levites:

“Six Reasons the Levites Had to be Scholars

The Levites, as the teachers of Israel, were to be scholars, this is seen in several regards.

- Firstly, they were to be the higher-level teachers, implying a greater level of knowledge than that of the parental teacher, or of the average Israelite. Those who taught the Levitical teachers would, in turn, need yet greater wisdom and knowledge and would require more schooling and experience than their pupils. Specialised academies would, potentially, be required for this purpose.
- Secondly, as above, the Levites were teachers of *the nation* and they would, therefore, address potentially more problematic questions, requiring expert consideration and time to address and.
- Thirdly, the various non-educational tasks given to the Levites implied a scholarly bent in the Levitical tribe. They were, for example, temple singers and were responsible for vocal and instrumental praise,^{xviii} even contributing to the

Psalter^{xxiii}. It is difficult to imagine being commissioned to praise God and *not* being formed as instrument-makers, singers, instrumentalists and musical arrangers to the highest standards by masters in the musical arts. Specialised musicians and dedicated centres of formation for those involved in sacred music would, therefore, have been needed.

- Fourthly, the very nature of the law which they had to teach required a high standard of academic formation. For example, a mastery of astronomy was needed to calculate the times of the festivals, and of the Sabbaths^{xxix} and, due to the nature of communications, this mastery would have to be replicated many times, at each local centre. Again, the collection and allotment of the substantial moneys received in tithes, required considerable ability in applied economics.
- Fifthly, their trusteeship of the text^{xx} of the scriptures implied a scholarly disposition. The guardians of the text needed to be the masters of the language, its philology, linguistics and grammar. The custodians of the text would have been its copyists^{xxi}, the Levites, would, necessarily therefore, have had at their disposition the infrastructure for writing, copying and distributing written matter for the whole people of God, all vital elements in the scholarly task.
- Sixthly, they were given both the money and the space to learn and to teach themselves and to teach Israel. They had the space necessary to devote themselves to the scholarly task.

Four Attractive Features of the Levitical Training Model

From their commission to teach Israel the law it is clear that they were, amongst their other duties, the higher theological educators of all Israel. It is evident, moreover, that to fulfil their duties, educational and otherwise, that they would have to be scholars, and it is also clear that they were given the time and the funds to devote themselves to the scholarly task. There is more, however, in the divine institution of the Levites that is relevant to our consideration of this ancient clerisy^{xxii} as a *model* for theological educators.

- Firstly, their funding. They were funded generously from the tithe, receiving nine tenths of the total receipts of the major tithe^{xxiii} and, in addition, received the fruits of the lands^{xxiv} which they possessed. In addition they had a constant supply of foodstuffs from the offerings which they administered^{xxv}.
- Secondly, they received nine times as much as those who were exclusively dedicated to the maintenance of the cult and yet, they were God's gift to the priests^{xxvi}. Their relationship with the "Church" was to be one of equality and mutual dependency, rather than slavish subjugation or subordinate status.
- Thirdly, as heirs to a guaranteed stream of income who occupied inalienable lands they would, naturally tend towards aloof self-sufficiency. Extensive provisions were, therefore, put in place to prevent this scenario. They were to meet yearly with the poor and with their more substantial benefactors for a fellowship meal^{xxvii}. The Levite and the people were to be tied together by vital, *personal* connections since it was the *people* who were given the responsibility to remember the Levite and not the Levites the people.
- Fourthly, the civil government could in no way fund or regulate the Levite's educational pursuits^{xxviii}. Nor could they punish those who failed to pay the Levite-supporting tithe^{xxix}. The relationship between people and Levite was to be

based upon the faith and mediated, not by the state but, rather, by a common faith in the covenant-Lord.

The Practical Outworking of the Levitical Commission and its Relevance for Theological Education Today

The Levites were constituted as scholarly higher educators by the law of God, but what of the historical outworking of the Levitical task *in practice* and how does this practice shape their relevance as model theological educators?

- Firstly, the Levites were soldiers who were given their special status because of decisive martial action^{xxx}. In addition, the Levites, though exempted from ordinary military service^{xxxi}, were numbered in military fashion, for military service^{xxxii}. Their educational rôle is set in the context of warfare, *for* their suzerain and *against* his enemies. Though amply supplied and having special privileges, they dared not chase intellectual butterflies. Their strategic deployment surrounding the tabernacle of God further underscores their soldierly character^{xxxiii}. As soldier-pedagogues then, they were to guard the worship of God and the word of God and the covenant people who were less able to “defend” themselves from new and dangerous opponents to God’s order.
- Secondly, the Levites were, within their proscribed boundaries, given great flexibility. They exercised their educative calling as judges^{xxxiv} and ministers of state^{xxxv} and were involved in commerce, ensuring just weights and measures^{xxxvi}.
- Thirdly, the Levites, without explicit direction from holy writ, created the institution of the Synagogue^{xxxvii}. The centre for the teaching of Torah would endure until the time of our Lord and became the institutional template for the Church.
- Fourthly, it is important to underline their longevity, enduring, in various forms from the Hebrew republic^{xxxviii}, through the Monarchy^{xxxix}, to the exile, to the resettlement^{xl} and then to the time of Christ^{xli} and into the apostolic era^{xlii}. Their very persistence makes them a body to be reckoned with. Their absolute and relative numbers make them difficult to bypass. Since only a small number could be engaged directly in temple-service at any one time there would, therefore, have been a substantial percentage of their number engaged in various teaching tasks throughout the history of the Old Covenant people after the giving of the law.”¹⁰³

¹⁰³ Nathan 2011: 2-4

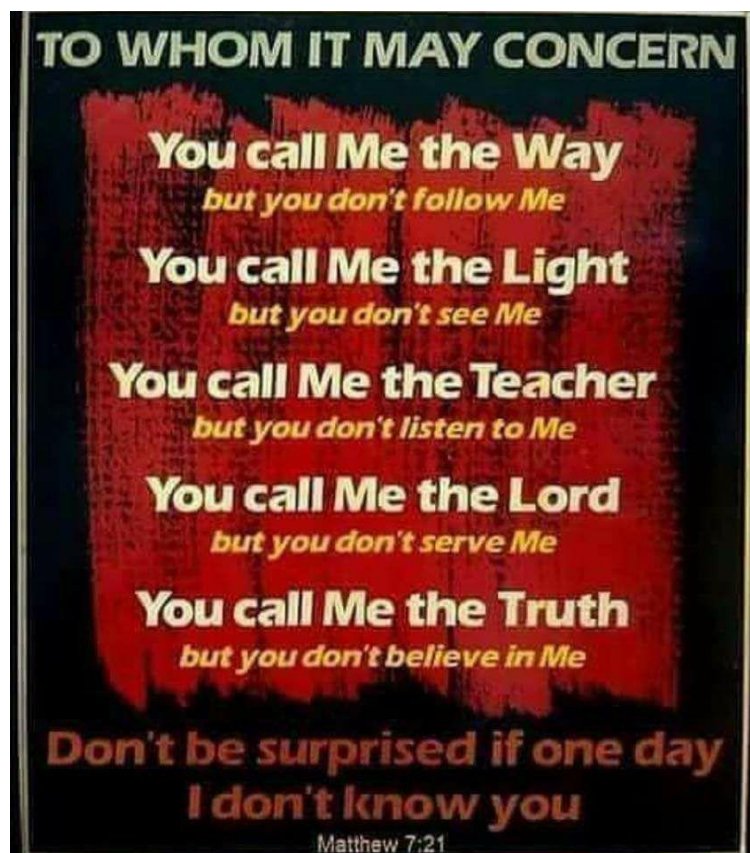
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History Research Projects
GPO Box 864, Sydney, Australia 2001
www.originofnations.org
www.friendsofsabbath.org
hrp11@iprimus.com.au

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