The Place of Women in First-century Synagogues

They were much more active in religious life than they are today.

Shmuel Safrai

Today, public worship can take place in a synagogue only if at least ten adult Jewish males are present. Women do not qualify as part of this quorum. Furthermore, women are separated from men within the synagogue: women worship in an ezrat nashim, a balcony or section with a divider located beside or behind the men’s section. Things were considerably different in Jesus’ day.

In the time of Jesus there was no separation of the sexes in the synagogue and women could be counted as part of the ten individuals needed for a religious quorum. This allowed women to be much more active in the religious life of the community than they are today.

The “Ten”

According to halachah, in order to have a congregation or Edah, a minimum of ten persons must be present. Boaz gathered ten elders of Bethlehem to witness the legal transaction that gave him possession of the land that belonged to Naomi, and Ruth the Moabitess as his wife. By the first century C.E. it was established that every public or official religious gathering must have ten persons. Therefore, public or congregational prayer could not be conducted without that minimum presence.

The Mishnah preserves the ruling concerning this required minimum number:

1. If there are less than ten present, the congregation may not recite the Shema with its benedictions, nor may one go before the ark [to lead the prescribed congregational prayers], nor may priests lift up their hands [in pronouncing the blessing], nor may one read the portion of the Torah or the Prophets, nor may one observe the stations [when burying the dead] or say the mourning benediction or the mourners’ consolation, or the benediction over newlyweds, nor may one mention the name of God in the invitation to recite the blessing after the meal. Also [the redemption value of dedicated] immovable property [is assessed] by nine and a priest, and similarly, [the valuation vow] of a person. (Megillah 4:3)

The importance of this religious quorum cannot be overestimated. Rabbi Eliezer, a member of the generation that witnessed the destruction of the Temple, freed one of his slaves so that there would be a quorum of ten for the “Eighteen Benedictions,” the central prayer of the synagogue service.

Modern Jews call the congregational quorum a minyan (min-YAN, numbering, count). In the Second Temple period, however, when Jews wished to refer to the required quorum they used the term חמשת אורות (a sa RAH, ten). Used in this sense, the word minyan does not appear in Jewish literature until the fifteenth-sixteenth centuries C.E. When minyan occurs in sources from the Second Temple period, it refers to a vote taken by members of the Sanhedrin.

What is more important, the idea that ten males are required for this quorum is not found in ancient sources until at least 500 C.E. Before then, women could be counted as part of the “ten.” Even as late as the twelfth century C.E., authorities such as the Jewish scholar Rabban Tam acknowledged that women could be counted as part of the congregational quorum.

Good attendance

In the first century, women were the equals of men religiously and frequently visited the synagogue. This can easily be documented from literary sources. Here are just a few examples:

1. Judges 5:24 records Deborah’s blessing of Jael—“most blessed of women in tents.” The Targum’s translation is: “Like one of the women who attend the houses of study she will be blessed,” translating “tents” as “houses of study.” “House of study” (in Hebrew, bet midrash) is an equivalent expression for “synagogue,” since the “house of study” was usually connected with a synagogue, and studies took place in the synagogue’s assembly hall or in a room adjoining it.

2. In the Jerusalem Talmud the question is raised: “In a town in which all the residents are priests, when they spread their hands [in the synagogue] and give the priestly blessing, who responds ‘Amen?’” (The priests themselves are not permitted to give the response to their own blessing.) The answer is: “The women and children.” Although not the point of the discussion, this rabbinic ruling indicates that women were in attendance at the synagogue.

3. There is the following tannaic halachah: “A [Jewish] woman may set a pot on the stove and let a Gentile woman do her cooking while the Jewish woman ran to the bathhouse or synagogue, without concern [that the food will not be kosher because of the prohibition against food cooked by a Gentile].”

Women usually cooked in their courtyards to avoid smoking up their houses. Occasionally, a Jewish woman and a Gentile woman shared a courtyard in which they both did their cooking. Halachah did not permit the Jewish woman’s family to eat food cooked by the Gentile neighbor; however, if the Gentile woman stirred the Jewish woman’s cooking while the Jewish woman ran to the public baths or the synagogue for a few minutes, the Gentile woman was not considered to have cooked the food.

This story demonstrates that the synagogue, like the
public baths, was one of the ordinary places to which Jewish women went. In this respect, women were no different from men.

4. One of the minor tractates of the Talmud transmits the rabbinc regulation that, although on Sabbaths the people came early to synagogue, “On festivals they come late because they have to prepare the food for the day.”

The second “they” in the quotation refers to the female members of congregations. It was the women who needed the early morning hours of holidays for preparation of food. Much of the preparation of the main holiday meal, eaten at midday after the family returned from the synagogue, was done early on the morning of the holiday before the family went to the synagogue. Lighting a fire to cook food, while not permitted on Sabbaths, was permitted on festivals. Therefore, to accommodate the women, the synagogue service was started later on festival days than on Sabbaths. If the women’s participation in synagogue worship had been felt to be less vital than the men’s, as is the case today, there would have been no reason to delay the holiday service: the men could have conducted the service while the women were preparing the meal.

**Religious obligation?**

Modern Jewish commentators often explain women’s noninclusion in the minyan as being the result of women’s exemption from positive commandments that need to be done at a set time. Since public worship is a commandment that is done at a set time, these commentators say, women are exempt from participation in public worship. A woman nursing a child, for instance, cannot be expected to attend a scheduled synagogue service.

It is not true, however, that there is a set time for synagogue services. There may be an agreed time in a particular synagogue for the beginning of a service, but such arrangements vary from synagogue to synagogue. In addition, it is not true that public worship is a religious obligation. A Jew is not obligated to pray as part of a congregation.

The “Eighteen Benedictions” was the central prayer of the synagogue liturgy. Every Jew was obligated to pray this prayer daily. Rabban Gamaliel said: “One must say the ‘Eighteen’ every day.”

There was no difference between men and women regarding this commandment. The Mishnah specifically states: “Women . . . are not exempt from saying the Prayer [i.e., the Eighteen Benedictions].”

Because the “Eighteen Benedictions” is such an important part of the synagogue liturgy, and because this prayer is obligatory, it is often assumed today that synagogue attendance is obligatory. However, in the first century it was permissible to pray the “Eighteen Benedictions” privately. One was not required to recite this prayer together with others. In emergencies, one could fulfill the obligation to say this prayer daily by saying even a two- or three-sentence abbreviation of it.

The rabbis viewed prayer as an “obligation of the heart.” One could pray anywhere at any time of the day. Even a short prayer of thanksgiving fulfilled the commandment to say the “Eighteen” every day.

**Women’s section**

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.

It is true that second-story galleries are attested in fourth- to sixth-century C.E. synagogues in the land of Israel. Architectural evidence for these galleries is the remains of stairs found in some synagogue ruins. However, the galleries were not necessarily for women. This is shown by the fact that the bottom of the stairway is often located inside the synagogue’s assembly hall, for instance in the fourth-century synagogue at Khirbet Shema and the fifth- to sixth-century synagogue at Beth Alpha. Therefore, any woman who attempted to reach such a gallery would have had to mix with the male congregants, a contradiction to the assumption that in the synagogue men and women were separated.

Outside the land of Israel, archaeologists discovered an amazingly well-preserved synagogue at Dura-Europos. This mid-third-century C.E. synagogue also provides evidence that there was no separation of men and women in the ancient synagogue. In the Dura-Europos synagogue, congregants sat on two rows of plastered, tiered benches that surrounded the rectangular assembly hall on all four sides. There were no dividers along the benches or anywhere within the hall (and no gallery). This lack of dividers indicates that women were not segregated within the synagogue. Tiered benches lacking dividers were also part of the architecture of the first-century synagogue at Masada. In addition, the Masada synagogue had only one entrance. A single entrance meant that women mixed with men when entering and leaving the synagogue.

**No segregation**

It should be emphasized that there was also no separation of men and women in the Temple. Women were allowed in every area of the Temple precincts in which men were allowed. The Women’s Court, the outer court of the Temple, was not reserved for women; in this court men and women mingled. Men had to pass through the Women’s Court to reach the Israelsites’ Court (Men’s Court). Located in the Women’s Court were various chambers, such as the Nazirites’ Chamber, to which both men and women had access. Public assemblies took place in the Women’s Court: it was there on the Day of Atonement that the High Priest read the Torah before the people, and in this court the Hakkel assembly was held.

The outer court of the Temple was called the Women’s Court because normally women did not go beyond it into the more interior courts of the Temple. Similarly, the Israelsites’ Court was so named because normally nonpriestly men did not go beyond it into the Priests’ Court. However, like men, women offered their sacrifices at the Altar.
in the Priests’ Court, passing through the Israelites’ Court in order to do so. If, for instance, a woman offered a wave offering such as first fruits, she approached the Altar, waved the offering, and placed it beside the Altar.

Women were segregated in the Temple only during the Water Drawing Ceremony held on the Feast of Tabernacles, when dancing went on all night. At this celebration, men watched from the Women’s Court and women watched from specially erected galleries surrounding the Women’s Court as “men of piety and good deeds” danced before them while holding torches in their hands.

An inequality

In Jesus’ time, women participated fully in the religious life of the community. This included participation in synagogue services and in the regular study sessions that were conducted in the synagogue’s bet midrash (house of study). There was no separation of the sexes in synagogues, and women could be counted as part of the required congregational quorum of ten adults. There was, however, one inequality. For social reasons, women were not allowed to read the Scriptures publicly. In the Babylonian Talmud and the Tosefta, we find an early rabbinic (tannaic) ruling: “All are qualified to be among the seven [who read from the Torah in the synagogue on the Sabbath], even a minor or a woman; however, the sages ruled that a woman should not read from the Torah out of respect for the congregation.” This is apparently a reference to the same social custom or decorum that we find mentioned in Paul’s letter to the Corinthians: “Women should keep silent in the churches. They are not permitted to speak, but should be in submission, as the Torah states. If they want to learn anything, they should ask their husbands at home, for it is a disgrace for a woman to speak in the congregation.”

Paul felt it necessary to issue his corrective because in early Christian congregations, following Jewish practice, it was permissible and customary to interrupt the preacher to ask questions. In first-century synagogues, a sermon followed the reading of Scripture. This exposition of Scripture was more a lesson than a sermon, and congregants were encouraged to ask questions. In fact, the asking of questions was so central to the rabbinic teaching method that often the preacher-teacher began his sermon by just seating himself and waiting until someone from the audience asked a question. There is a whole category of Jewish literature called ye lam DE nu ra BE nu, May our teacher instruct us. It is similar to what we now call “Questions and Answers.” Today public speakers often employ a Question-and-Answer period, especially as a means of clarification at the end of a lecture. In first-century Jewish society this approach was usually the main method of instruction.

From Paul’s injunction we learn that at public religious gatherings of early Christians, women sat with men in the same hall, perhaps even next to their husbands or fathers. Paul’s command itself implies a mixed audience: there would have been nothing indecorous about a woman asking a question in a group composed entirely of women. If there had been separation of men and women in first-century synagogues, it is likely that the early church would have continued the custom. However, the New Testament gives no indication that the early church had such a custom.

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Plan of the Second Temple.

A - Salt Chamber
B - Rinsing Chamber
C - Parvah Chamber
D - Offering Gate
E - Gate of the Flame
F - Chamber of the Hearth
G - Chamber of Phinehas, Keeper of Vestments
H - Chamber of Makers of Baked Cakes
I - Chamber of Hewn Stone
J - House of Avtinas
K - Golah Chamber
L - Wood Chamber
M - Holy of Holies

(From The Jewish People in the First Century, ed. Shmuel Safrai and Menahem Stern (Amsterdam: Van Gorcum, 1976, p. 868.)

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Notes
1. The modern custom of separating men and women in the synagogue is perhaps due to the influence of Islam, from approximately the seventh century C.E. onward.
2. Ruth 4:2.
4. Literally, “standing and sitting.” As the mourners returned from the burial, they stopped seven times to lament the deceased.
5. A vow to dedicate to the Temple an amount equal to one’s value (if sold into slavery) or equal to the value of someone else.
7. Jerusalem Talmud, Berachot 9d.
10. Mishnah, Berachot 4:3.
15. Mishnah, Yoma 7:1; Babylonian Talmud, Yoma 69b.
16. The assembly of “men, women, children and aliens.” For the public reading of Torah, held every seven years during the Feast of Tabernacles (Deut. 31:10–13). Cf. Mishnah, Sofah 7:8; Babylonian Talmud, Sofah 41b.
22. 1 Corinthians 14:34–35.

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