



Catto, Stephen K.

Reconstructing the First-Century Synagogue: A Critical Analysis of Current Research

Library of New Testament Studies 363

London: T&T Clark, 2007. Pp. xxii + 226. Hardcover.
\$130.00. ISBN 0567045617.

Birger Olsson
Lund University
Lund, Sweden

Twenty years ago, at the SNTS conference in Cambridge, H. C. Kee read his paper on "The Transformation of the Synagogue after 70 CE: Its Import for Early Christianity," published in *New Testament Studies* (1990). It started a new and intensive debate about the use of sources in synagogue research and the need for clear definitions. In her summary and evaluation of synagogue research ten years later H. A. McKay describes a traditional, or "optimistic," or "maximalist" position, which one can find in handbooks and dictionary articles, and an opposing, or "skeptical," or "minimalist" position, which holds that the synagogue did not get its form as we know it today until the third and fourth centuries C.E. There were no buildings especially for religious gatherings during the first and second centuries C.E. Scholars such as H. C. Kee, L. M. White, H. A. McKay, and R. A. Horsley belong to this "minimalist" group.

The last decade has seen many new and important contributions about the first-century synagogue. Among these we find the standard handbook by L. I. Levine from 2000 (rev. ed. 2005), *The Ancient Synagogue: The First Thousand Years*, and the dissertations by D. D. Binder (*Into the Temple Courts: The Place of the Synagogues in the Second Temple Period*, 1999), A. Runesson (*The Origins of the Synagogue: A Socio-historical Study*, 2001), and C. Claussen (*Versammlung, Gemeinde, Synagoge: Das hellenistisch-jüdische Umfeld*

der frühchristlichen Gemeinden, 2002). The synagogue project at Lund University produced a special volume on the synagogue in Ostia (*The Synagogue of Ancient Ostia and the Jews of Rome: Interdisciplinary Studies*, 2001) and a conference volume (*The Ancient Synagogue from Its Origins until 200 C.E.*, 2003). Stephen Catto also mentions *The Ancient Synagogue from its Origins to 200 C.E.: A Source Book*, by A. Runesson, D. D. Binder, and B. Olsson, published the same year as the book under review here.

It is this recent surge of synagogue scholarship the last two decades that constitute the material for Stephen Catto's doctoral thesis, accepted by the University of Aberdeen in 2005, with Dr. Simon Gathercole as supervisor and Dr. Andrew Clarke and Prof. Sean Freyne as examiners. As indicated by the subtitle, the book is a critical analysis of current research. The purpose of the study is twofold: (1) to assess the relevant primary and secondary source material and evaluate the form and function of the synagogue in the first century C.E.; and (2) to compare the results of that investigation with the presentation of the synagogue in Luke-Acts (2, 199). The book has a particular focus on the available archaeological evidence. It aims at highlighting areas where current research will inform New Testament scholarship on Luke-Acts. At the same time, it will be "holistic, gathering all the material relevant for first-century 'synagogues.'"

After a short introduction on theme and purpose (1–5), terminology (5–7), use and misuse of sources (7–9) and an overview of research (10–13) the analysis covers four main areas: (1) a reexamination of the relevant literary sources available to us about synagogue buildings and gatherings (ch. 2); (2) a corresponding evaluation of the archaeological material (ch. 3); (3) an analysis of the evidence related to the worship of the synagogue, maybe the most problematic area within synagogue research today (ch. 4); and (4) a presentation of what Luke-Acts says about synagogues and a comparison of this material with the results in the previous chapters (ch. 5). In general, Catto tries to find a middle position in the ongoing debate. "We will steer a middle course between the maximalists and minimalists" (3). The shortcomings in the argumentation on both sides are highlighted throughout the analysis. "In our critique of the debate between the minimalists and maximalists, it is argued that too often those involved fail to recognize the strengths of the others' arguments" (199).

Chapter 2 examines the literary evidence, mostly Philo and Josephus, but also a few other texts from non-Jewish authors, the Septuagint, rabbinic authors, and the New Testament (14–48). The different texts are presented according to geographical locations referred to in the texts. Geographical location is important in Catto's argumentation. There is an anachronistic misuse of literary and archaeological sources (as emphasized by D. D. Binder) but also an "anatotistic" misuse. Evidence from one place, perhaps in Palestine, is often seen as comparable to another, even in the Diaspora (8). Catto concludes that

synagogue buildings existed in many of the towns and villages within the land of Israel. Jews in the Diaspora came together on the Sabbath in different places, even in buildings set aside specifically for this purpose. The different terms used for “synagogue” may suggest slightly different functions of the institution in different locations. Non-Jews could perceive these institutions as similar to pagan temples. Philo had reason to see them as equivalent to Hellenistic philosophical schools.

Chapter 3 aims at gathering the available archaeological material relevant to the first-century synagogue, including the remains of buildings, inscriptions, and papyri. The geographical location of each reference is highlighted. Catto starts with the Diaspora, going from Rome to Berenice. The synagogue at ancient Ostia is important for him, and he gives a detailed survey of the arguments from the long discussions between A. Runesson and L. M. White. The result of his analysis is clear: “Contrary to White’s assertions, the evidence at present shows that the Ostian complex was originally constructed as a synagogue building rather than having been altered from a building which initially had another function.”

As with the literary material, various terms are used in the Diaspora for “synagogues.” The earliest unambiguous use of *synagoge* for a building is an inscription from 55 C.E. Archeological material from Ostia and Delos gives us clear examples of synagogue buildings, with dining facilities, at least in Ostia. Additional buildings were also attached to the synagogues/temples in Egypt, which are described as sacred and were used as places of refuge. Manumission of slaves took place in the synagogues of the Bosphorus, just as was the custom in pagan temples. In Palestine, too, additional rooms were attached to the main room. The focus of the assembly hall was on the space at the center of the room, where the reading and the teaching of the Torah probably took place. Most of the finds are clearly public buildings. They could be used purely for public assemblies but also for some ritual practices.

Chapter 4 focuses on four aspects of worship in the synagogue: sanctity; reading and teaching of Scripture; prayer; and sacred meals (106–51). Catto concludes that Jews saw ritual purity and synagogue practice as connected. It is highly probable that both Jew and Gentile associated sanctity with the building. *Miqwaoth* are found only in Palestine. Scripture reading was the central component of the Sabbath gathering in the synagogue. The emphasis on teaching is clear. The study of the Torah was likely perceived as an act of worship. Prayer was carried out communally. Certain communities appear to have had a more structured liturgy than others. Communal meals were part of Jewish community life, and it is likely that these took place within synagogues. The influence of the symposium may have been strongly felt in the Hellenistic synagogues.

Chapter 5 studies the portrayal of the synagogue in Luke-Acts and compares it with the results of the previous chapters (152–98). Luke’s almost exclusive use of *synagoge* may be seen as inaccurate, but his use of the term to designate a building is not anachronistic. Sometimes it carries both the meaning of building and a gathering. *Proseuche* in Acts 16 means a place of prayer. The architectural style of the synagogues at Antioch and Nazareth would have been different; the focus on the center of the meeting hall was clearer in Nazareth than it would have been in Antioch. Taking first-century archaeological and literary material seriously means that we have to reckon with synagogues referred to in Luke-Acts to have been very variegated.

Catto’s investigation is well-structured with many good summaries. The emphasis on the geographical location of every piece of evidence from the first century is excellent and gives a healthy reminder of the fact that every synagogue is to some degree an expression of local conditions (cultural, religious, social, economic, architectural, and so on). I also appreciate that Catto attempts to find out what can be said about the worship of the synagogue at this time. His presentation of synagogue sources from the first-century period is, however, not new. We have already good ones in Binder’s dissertation and also in Claussen’s work. There are no new philological insights in Catto’s work, as far as I can see, or any conclusive analysis of the genre or literary and situational context of different passages that would advance the current state of research. More interest must be directed to the problem of definitions. Like A. Runesson, Catto uses “synagogue” within quotation marks to draw attention to the fact that the word may refer to different things (a gathering or a building), but he does not present or discuss the important distinction in Runesson’s doctoral thesis between different kinds of institutions (public synagogues and association synagogues). Nothing is said about the use of various interpretative models and theories from other disciplines in synagogue research of today. Such models and theories are of decisive importance when we want to reconstruct the very complex phenomenon we call the ancient synagogue.

Catto’s presentation of different arguments in the current synagogue research is of more interest than his analyses of the sources. It could be useful for everyone who works with synagogue material from the first century. I miss some literature, such as Dieter Mitternacht’s critical survey about the exploration of the Ostia synagogue in the conference volume mentioned above or the very important study by Monika Trümper on Delos. I also miss a broader discussion on current research in Catto’s presentation; good analyses of research should deal with the entire scope of a scholar’s work as well as his or her location in scholarly, cultural, and religious (confessional) traditions.