

Dr. Anthony J. Tomasino, Judaism Before Jesus,

Session 9, Temple, Synagogue, and Sanhedrin

© 2024 Tony Tomasino and Ted Hildebrandt

This is Dr. Anthony Tomasino and his teaching on Judaism before Jesus. This is session 9, Temple, Synagogue, and Sanhedrin.

So, this seems like a good time to pause and take a look at some of the institutions that were very prominent during this time of Jewish history, institutions that were affected and influenced in a number of ways by the coming of the Greeks, some of which may have been directly attributed to the Greeks. And some of these things have been sort of, again, controversial because of the different theories about the origins of some of these institutions. But we're going to start with the temple and the synagogue and the Sanhedrin and where these came from, how they came into prominence during this time, and the roles that they will continue to play in the future of Judaism in this era and the eras beyond that.

So, let's talk about the temple first. We know that the Bible tells us that the temple was made to essentially replace the tabernacle. The tabernacle was built on instructions given by God to Moses.

The Tabernacle was meant to be a place where you would house the Ark of the Covenant. The Ark of the Covenant was the symbol of God's presence among his people, and God would come down and meet his people at that Ark of the Covenant. It was a temporary structure.

It was designed so you got to roll it up and carry it with you. And so, for some time after the people of Israel had settled into the Promised Land, they continued to worship at the tabernacle, as well as a number of other local places. Solomon's Temple was built to take the place of the tabernacle as the home of the Ark of the Covenant and as the main place where God's presence would come to dwell.

This happens because after David becomes king, he lives in his fine house, and he looks out and sees the Tabernacle out there. And he complains to the prophet Nathan, he says, here I am living in this great big solid fine house, and the Ark of God is living in a tent. And so Nathan says, well, do whatever you want, man, because God is with you.

And so, David had made plans to build a temple, but God said, nope, not going to be you, David. Your son is going to build the temple after you. He will build a house for me.

And there's some wonderful little wordplay going on there about building a house because God says something to the effect of, you want to build a house for me, but I'm going to build a house for you. I'm going to give you a son, and after you, he can build this temple, and that is precisely what Solomon does. So it was built in 921 BC, give or take a few years.

Interestingly, the Tabernacle was built on designs given by God, but the temple of Solomon was built by Phoenician craftsmen and built very similar to the style of temples in Phoenicia, which is a little bit disconcerting when you think about it. It was established as the only proper place for sacrifice by King Josiah. Now, the book of Deuteronomy talks about how God would put his name in one place, the place that he would choose, and that that would be where his people were to worship him.

Well, of course, people had made high places all over the land, various local shrines where they worship the Lord, and yet when Josiah did his reforms, he tore down all those local shrines and said, from now on, you only sacrifice in Jerusalem at this temple. Part of the reason for doing that, of course, is because you didn't know what the people were doing out there on the hillside, so you didn't know who they were worshipping. By doing it in the temple, you brought all the people in together, and you put it all under the watchful eye of the high priest.

Now, there are downsides to this as well, because the fact is a lot of priests who had previously been serving cushy jobs in some of these local shrines now found themselves unemployed or employed only part of the time, and also the big question of, well, what happens if the temple is destroyed or something like that should happen? Why, of course, nothing like that could ever happen, right? But this idea that there was to be one temple and that one temple was to be located in Jerusalem was very strongly inculcated in the national consciousness, which makes it kind of ironic that we read about other temples in existence in this intertestamental period. We already talked about the one down there in Egypt, in Elephantine. It was situated in such a way that its door faced toward Jerusalem.

There was also one in the Transjordan region, and there was another temple there. That one, too, was situated in a way so that its door faced in toward Jerusalem. But in each of these temples, apparently animal sacrifices were banned.

It was regarded to be a practice that could not be permitted at those houses of worship. Only in Jerusalem were the Jews allowed to slaughter animals for sacrifice. So, this Temple of Solomon was destroyed in 587 BC and then was replaced with the Second Temple.

This is an artist's rendition of what they think the Second Temple might have looked like. Let's be honest here: Nobody knows what the Second Temple looked like.

We're guessing, all right? We do know that when it was first built, it was nothing special. It was built apparently along the same general pattern as Solomon's Temple. But there were a limited number of patterns that were used for temples in those days.

So this is what we call the direct axis style of temple, where you've got an axis that goes straight down the middle. But at any rate, the Second Temple continued to serve as the only legitimate place for the performance of the animal sacrifices. No doubt, as years went by, this building was elaborated upon extensively.

And by the time we get to the Hasmoneans, no doubt, it was a much grander structure than it had been than it was in the days when it was first built. So, in addition to serving as a place of worship, the temple, and particularly the Second Temple, became a central meeting place for the Jews. But this is one we don't usually think of: the fact that this place was also a fortress.

You'll notice how we talk about the priests taking refuge within the walls of the temple. These walls were thick. They were reinforced and they were designed to make this place pretty much impregnable.

So, when the high priest or other people found themselves in dire circumstances, oftentimes they would take refuge within the temple itself. They'd close the gates, they'd bar the gates, and they could hold out there for quite a while the sieges would take place. It also served as a banking system, because there was a lot of money deposited by wealthy patrons in the temple.

So again, in the Second Temple period, this is the only place where you're allowed to perform animal sacrifices. Now think about this. Jews are spread all over the Mediterranean world now.

There are certain sacrifices that Jews pretty much have to do. And so, a lot of times for certain pilgrim sacrifices, the Jews would travel to Jerusalem. Sometimes, they'd bring their animals with them.

More likely, they would buy the animals when they came to Jerusalem, and those animals would be offered up for sacrifice. And this, of course, was a system that was open to all kinds of abuse. We see this illustrated in that little incident that happens in Jesus's ministry when he has to drive the money changers out of the temple who were changing coins of the local governments for a coin that could only be used in the temple and then selling animals that were considered to be the only proper animals that could be used for sacrifice.

Now one more temple, the Temple of Herod the Great. And we're going to talk about Herod the Great in a couple of lectures here. But the Temple of Herod the Great was a massive undertaking.

Herod was a fellow who believed that a really great king needed a really great temple. He knew that Augustus had built a lot of temples in Rome, so he wanted a really great temple. In fact, he was doing something in competition with Augustus.

He wanted to make an even grander temple than anything that Augustus had built. In order to make a building that would match his ambitions, he had to really literally level off the top of the temple mount and build it up with stone, crushed stone, in order to be able to accommodate this temple that he was going to be building. He proceeded to build his new temple around the old temple, disassemble it, and take it out through the doors.

But we'll be talking more about Herod's temple when we talk about his reign. But for now, recognize that it was one of the great wonders of the ancient world. 19 BC is when the work began, and it was built, as I say, around the existing temple.

So, let's talk about the religious significance of the temple, because, of course, it's very important. The temple is a site where God's presence would come down and dwell among his people. The Shekinah, the presence of the Lord and his spirit would manifest there in that site.

It, of course, is the place where they perform all their animal sacrifices. And for the Jews at that time, there was no other place they could perform animal sacrifices. It's kind of interesting that after the destruction of the temple, for a while, there were difficulties with the Jews trying to figure out how they were going to accommodate the sacrificial system.

Some Jews decided they didn't need sacrifices anymore. Other Jews decided that animal sacrifices could be done elsewhere. And so there is some disagreement about that.

When I was living in Chicago, there was a controversy because of the Jewish, ultra-Orthodox Jewish community that was making some sacrifices of chickens up on the north side of Chicago. And the animal rights people were very, very offended by the things that were going on up there. The Yom Kippur ritual, you know, this ritual once a year, which takes away the collective guilt of the Jewish people.

The only place it could be performed was at the temple. Jews would come from all over the world to go to the temple to offer their sacrifices, to offer their prayers, to present themselves before their God. Whoever controlled the temple largely could set the tone for Judaism.

This becomes a controversial aspect of Jewish worship at this era. Many of the high priests were members of the Sadducee sect, which we'll discuss in a little bit. Many Jews regarded the Sadducees' activities in the temple as illegitimate.

And so, we will hear later of Jewish sects which denied the legitimacy of the temple and its rituals. So, there was division among the Jews about how much authority they could place in the temple and its leadership. So the civil significance of the temple, you know, it is, of course, a financial center.

A lot of wealth was deposited there for safekeeping. It is also the place where the priests are concentrated. Priests often served as local magistrates.

So many decisions were rendered in the temple grounds. It was linked, of course, to the power of the high priest. And as I mentioned already, a lot of these high priests were the Sadducean party, which meant that much of the power of the Sadducees was linked to their control of the temple.

Now let's talk about those priests a little bit here. According to the Bible, priesthood is a hereditary office. All priests are descendants of Aaron.

Now, this is an interesting little bit of modern science coming to the support of ancient tradition as well. And, you know, even today, most Jews can tell you if they are a descendant of Aaron and the priests or whether they're not. Whether they're Yisraeli or if they are Kohens.

Kohens of the Kohanim, of the high priestly or priestly families. Well, a large genealogical study was done on Jews claiming to be of the priestly lineage. Surprisingly enough, the genealogical data found that there is a very high probability that all the people who are Kohanim, descendants of the high priesthood, are descended from a single individual.

Remarkable. The priests, of course, were supported by the temple primarily. In the Old Testament times, it was almost exclusively.

But as time went on and you got more and more priests, it became more and more difficult for the priest to be supported strictly through the offerings made at the temple. And so many of the priests had side jobs. By the time we got to the intertestamental period, the priesthood was divided into 12 groups that we call the courses.

The courses were put on a schedule so that each course or three courses would come to Jerusalem to do their duties. And then, when their duties were done, the service of their course was finished, they would return home again. Oftentimes for

the daily sacrifices, for instance, they would choose by lot who would get to perform those daily sacrifices.

And we remember in the story of the birth of Jesus that Zechariah, the father of John the Baptist, had been chosen by lot to serve as the priest. It was there that it was announced to him while he was serving as a priest that he would become the father of John the Baptist. So winning that lot was a big thing because, of course, the people who got to serve as priests and make those sacrifices got to keep a portion of the sacrifices.

Typically, the meat from the sacrifices would be divided among all the priests who served and who were part of the course. But, at various times, there were controversies when different priests would cheating the other priests out of their appointed portions. This became a major issue up by the time of the Great Revolt in 70 AD against the Romans.

We find that some of the priests were actually starving to death and being denied their rightful portion as servants in the temple. So, the high priest. Now, this, of course, was a special role because he had religious responsibilities.

He supposedly was one of the eldest son of Aaron. But as the generations went on, the possibilities arose of controversies over who was going to be the high priest. But he has a religious responsibility of performing the ritual for the Day of Atonement.

Only the high priest could do that. He is the go-between between the people and God. You know, he represents the people before God.

You might say that the king represented God before the people. The priest represented the people before God. He had civic responsibilities as well.

And we've often seen how he served as the governor or representative of the Jews to their foreign overlords. At times, the other kings would, and the foreign kings would appoint governors. At most of the time, it seems the high priest served in that role.

He was responsible for the payment of the taxes to the foreign overlords, which you couldn't imagine would have made him real popular in some ways. But, you know, the people realized, you know, it goes with the job. What can you do, right? He also served as the head of the Sanhedrin, which I'm going to talk about in a couple of minutes here.

The responsibilities of the high priest kind of changed throughout the intertestamental period. He had been a major political figure, really, since the time of Aaron because of the fact that the high priest was the fellow oftentimes who was

involved with the anointing of kings. Now, prophets also did that, of course, but the priests were usually kind of like, sort of like the supporters of the kings as well.

So, there are a lot of political issues involved with being the high priest. By the time of the Persian Empire, we see that the role of the high priest has changed a little bit. Instead of simply being a religious leader, a guy who does ritual-type things, priests were expected to be teachers at that point.

Now, if you read earlier in the Old Testament, you never see these high priests or other priests teaching so much. But in the Book of Malachi, the problems that the Jews are experiencing are being laid at the feet of the priests. And essentially what Malachi says is, you guys are not teaching right here.

You are not leading the people properly. From the mouths of the priests, the people should be seeking wisdom, but they weren't finding it. And so, the Book of Malachi lays a lot of the grief that the people were experiencing at that time.

Apparently, it was some kind of famine that was going on in the land. And the people were wondering, why is God so mad at us? And Malachi the prophet says, it's because you people are not doing what God says. You're cheating God.

You're not offering the proper sacrifices. You're not treating one another correctly. And it's all the priest's fault because they're not teaching you the right things to do.

So, the teaching role by the later period of the intertestamental time has been assumed now by the scribes. And the scribes are a sort of a new facet of life. You don't read about scribes in the Old Testament.

We read about scribes a lot in the New Testament, of course, as enemies of Jesus for the most part. But the Book of Ben Sira is in the Apocrypha. This was written about 200 BC.

Ben Sira talks about the glory of the high priest. He talks about how he describes him being dressed in his regal robes and performing the rituals and so on. But he doesn't talk about the high priest as a teacher.

Rather, that seems to be the role of the scribes by his time. So, these were people clearly learned in the law, people who understood the religious traditions, and people who, well, you know, the scribes are kind of a strange lot. There's been a lot of speculation about where they came from.

And most people believe they came from the kind of the literate classes who were involved in copying the texts and so on. Eventually, from being people who copied texts, they became people who read the texts that they were copying and learned

about these laws and so on. So, by 200 BC, it seems that some of those teaching responsibilities have been lifted from the shoulders of the priests and rather have been shifted onto the shoulders of the scribes.

When the Hasmoneans became both the high priests and the civil leaders well, this boosted the prestige of the office a little bit. I mean, already they had been acting as kind of the leaders of the Jewish community, but not with the kind of acting with independence, not with the kind of authority that the Hasmoneans could operate with. The Hasmoneans, of course, had delivered the nation from the power of the Greeks.

And so now, these people are serving as their high priests, basically the war heroes, right? You have war heroes serving as your high priests. That boosts, in general, the status of the office. A little bit later on, however, that's all going to change.

When a fellow by the name of Herod becomes the king of the Jews, Herod, being a fiercely jealous man, guts the high priesthood of any authority and any civil power at all. So up and down, back and forth, the office of high priesthood is like a political hot potato in Judea from really the times of Aaron all the way up until, well, much later times. So, under the Roman governors after the days of Herod, the Romans oftentimes were willing to take a hands-off approach to the administration of Judea and Jerusalem, in particular.

And so, the high priests found themselves once again leading the people and basically just making sure that they kept the peace and making sure that the taxes were paid. Now, let's talk a little bit about the synagogue. Once again, you read through the Old Testament, you won't see anything about the synagogue because synagogues don't exist in Old Testament times.

There has been speculation about when they appeared. One of the popular theories has been that they first popped up during the Babylonian exile. When the people were living in Babylon, they began to gather together to study their traditions and to encourage one another in the faith of their fathers.

It makes sense. It seems reasonable. But there is no evidence that it happened.

We do not know how they managed to preserve their identity there. But apparently, it was not in assemblies like the synagogues. And the evidence, the first evidence we have the synagogues actually comes from quite a bit later after the Babylonian exile.

So, the synagogue is a place where the Jews gather for Bible study and prayer. They do not perform sacrifices at synagogue. They do not do many of the most important rituals.

Those things take place in the temple. So, the synagogue has a number of responsibilities for building community. As I've already mentioned, I do not believe that the idea of these originating during the Babylonian exile has much merit.

What we can see is that the early evidence of the existence of synagogues seems to show that there was a good deal of Greek influence in the formation. The earliest archaeological evidence we have of the existence of synagogues comes from approximately 200 BC. And it is this plaque right here that apparently is a plaque for which records the dedication of the building as what they called at that time a house of prayer in Egypt.

But the word synagogue is Greek. It means it can be led together or sometimes people call it I would just say sitting together or something that sort of. But the idea, well led together really would be the best way to translate this.

But the idea is these people are all gathering together and assembling. And they assemble in a way that seems very Greek-like. If you when you come right down to it, they've got a democratic organization.

They elect their leaders, you know, the leaders are men. Of course, it's always the men, right? And you can elect whichever men are going to be like the captain of the synagogue and the other officers who are going to serve various roles in the synagogue. You have no minister or rabbi officiating in this period.

You know, nowadays, it seems like synagogues are a lot like churches except Jewish, you know because you've got a rabbi who gets a nice salary, and that's how he supports himself. And everybody gets together on Sabbath, and they learn, worship, and do all that kind of stuff. But in these days, there was no minister.

There was no rabbi officiating. The rabbis at this time were simply itinerant teachers. And that title rabbi actually is first attested in the New Testament.

So anyway, any adult male is allowed to read or to speak in synagogue. So, there are no requirements here that you have gone to a rabbinical school. No requirements that you have a certain wealth or a certain level of social standing.

Any adult male Jew can speak at synagogue. You have a great spirit of debate that kind of takes place here. Just like in the Greek, among the Greek philosophers, they would read the text and then they would sit down and talk about the text.

They would fight about the text. They would argue about the texts. And very similar again to the Greek style of things you'd see happening in, say, the academies in Athens or something of that sort.

Architecture-wise, this is kind of a reconstruction of a very elaborate synagogue. Most of them were not nearly so elaborate. But often, there would be a niche where the scrolls were kept if they had scrolls.

The balconies oftentimes would be used for observers. Those observers might be women or they might be Gentiles, the God-fearers as they come to be known a little later on. But in the main floor, of course, that's where your Jewish men were located.

Some synagogues, even fairly early on in this whole period, would admit women into their number, particularly in some of the more egalitarian societies. But for the most part, you're talking men here. The synagogues were a social center.

They preserved Jewish identity, particularly outside of Judea. So, you don't have all these artifacts that I've talked about before, all surrounding you, telling you you're Jewish. You don't have the temple sitting there in the middle of your city.

You don't have all these things that remind you of your Jewish identity. But you've got this place where all your people can come together and gather around the laws of Moses and reaffirm their commitment to who they are and their identity as Jewish people. Religious learning place, of course.

Training in the laws. And the synagogues were clearly places where the scriptures were read. There was really kind of a relatively set order for how the synagogue service would be conducted.

And the order varied from one place to another. But one of the qualifications was that if there were a priest present in the number, then the synagogue service would end with a benediction. If there was no priest present, then they couldn't do the benediction.

Interesting little point here. But primarily, it's about the learning here. You know, they occasionally sang songs.

Not a lot of praise choruses or anything like that. But for the most part, it's all about the debate, the reading, and the attention to scripture. There are also centers for collecting and distributing charity.

Each of the synagogues had their boxes at the doors where the people would come in and make their deposits to charity. Then, it would be distributed from the synagogue to those in need. The last thing I want to talk about here is the Sanhedrin.

The Sanhedrin is another institution in Judaism. Some people have pointed fingers at it and say, ah, here's another Greek innovation. Well, the name is Greek, once again, Sanhedrin. And this time we're talking about sun-edrion sitting together.

So, a lot of scholars, as I say, have assumed that this means that this is something that came into existence during the Greek period. More likely, it seems to me, this is a continuation of the very ancient practice of having a council of elders in each city. The Sanhedrin was a local ruling body.

They could consist of 23 adults in smaller cities. Every city of a certain size, according to rabbinic rules, would have a Sanhedrin. And then the Sanhedrin in Jerusalem was known as the Great Sanhedrin.

And that was the one that made the big rules and the big decisions. Either religious or civil disputes could be decided by the Sanhedrin. As I said before, a priest would typically serve as the presider over the Sanhedrins in the towns as well.

But Sanhedrins often involved a variety of people, typically the people's elders. It's not really clear what qualifications were required for membership in the Sanhedrin. We know from later rabbinic texts that they said that you had to be married and over the age of 40, etc.

But we don't really know how far back that whole thing goes. It seems that in the intertestamental period, and even probably into the time of Jesus, the Sanhedrin was much more loosely organized than that. It was more of a kind of a voluntary association of the elders and the adult men of the town who would come together and make decisions regarding important events in the life of the community.

So Sanhedrin probably was influenced as well by that Greek spirit of democracy and debate, though not to the same extent that we see in the synagogues. For a long time, it seems the synagogues were, of course, primarily a diaspora phenomenon. They existed in the communities outside of Judea and then kind of spread towards Judea later.

And so they really kind of imbibed that spirit of Hellenism, which was so present in those diaspora communities. The Sanhedrin, on the other hand, seems homegrown. And we can see that this organization is going to play a very important role in the events to come.

Again, like the high priesthood, we see the power of the Sanhedrin rise and fall depending on who is in command, who is calling the shots and pulling the strings, so to speak. But during most of the Second Temple period, during most of the intertestamental period, the Sanhedrin seems to have been a secondary institution to the institution of high priesthood, but nonetheless significant, nonetheless important, of course, to Jewish culture.

This is Dr. Anthony Tomasino and his teaching on Judaism before Jesus. This is session 9, Temple, Synagogue, and Sanhedrin.