

Dr. Anthony Tomasino, Judaism Before Jesus, Session 9, Temple, Synagogue, Sanhedrin

Abstract:

This lecture by Dr. Anthony Tomasino examines the **pivotal religious and civic institutions** of Judaism during the intertestamental period. He outlines the transition from the portable Tabernacle to the **Temple in Jerusalem**, which served as the exclusive site for animal sacrifices and a primary financial center. The text also explains the **emergence of the synagogue**, a community-focused institution likely influenced by Greek democratic structures, where the focus shifted toward **Scripture study and prayer** rather than ritual offerings. Additionally, Tomasino describes the roles of the **priesthood and the Sanhedrin**, noting how these governing bodies managed legal and religious disputes under various foreign overseers. Ultimately, the source highlights how these structures provided a **foundation for Jewish identity** and social order during an era of significant cultural change.

Briefing Document:

Jewish Institutional Evolution: Temple, Synagogue, and Sanhedrin

Executive Summary

The intertestamental period of Jewish history was characterized by the evolution and interplay of three primary institutions: the Temple, the Synagogue, and the Sanhedrin. These structures, while rooted in ancient tradition, were significantly shaped by Hellenistic influence and the shifting political landscape of the Mediterranean world.

The Temple remained the exclusive site for animal sacrifice and the symbolic residence of God's presence, yet its administration became increasingly politicized and linked to the Sadducean elite. Concurrently, the Synagogue emerged—likely influenced by Greek democratic models—as a decentralized hub for prayer,

scripture study, and community identity, particularly for the Jewish Diaspora. The Sanhedrin functioned as a judicial and administrative council of elders, balancing religious and civil authority. Together, these institutions provided the framework for Jewish life and religious practice in the centuries leading up to the common era, managing the tension between centralized ritual and localized instruction.

The Temple: Evolution and Significance

The Temple served as the theological and national heart of Judaism, transitioning from a temporary tabernacle to a series of monumental structures in Jerusalem.

Historical Progression

- **The Tabernacle:** A portable structure housing the Ark of the Covenant, designed for transit during the wilderness period.
- **Solomon's Temple (First Temple):** Built circa 921 BC by Phoenician craftsmen. It replaced the Tabernacle and was established by King Josiah as the only legitimate location for sacrifice to ensure centralized control over worship. It was destroyed in 587 BC.
- **The Second Temple:** Rebuilt following the Babylonian exile. While initially modest, it was expanded over centuries, notably by the Hasmoneans.
- **Herod's Temple:** Commenced in 19 BC, this was a massive reconstruction of the Second Temple. Herod the Great aimed to rival the architectural grandeur of Rome, leveling the Temple Mount to accommodate a structure that became one of the wonders of the ancient world.

Functional Roles

- **Religious Center:** The Temple was the site of the *Shekinah* (the manifest presence of God). It was the exclusive venue for animal sacrifices and the annual Yom Kippur ritual, which addressed the collective guilt of the nation.
- **Fortress:** With thick, reinforced walls, the Temple served as a military stronghold where priests and leaders took refuge during sieges.
- **Financial Hub:** The Temple functioned as a banking system, housing significant wealth deposited by wealthy patrons for safekeeping.

- **Political Seat:** The High Priest's power was intrinsically linked to control of the Temple grounds, where local magistrates often rendered judicial decisions.

Geographic and Sacrificial Restrictions

While other temples existed during the intertestamental period—such as those in Elephantine (Egypt) and the Transjordan—they were oriented toward Jerusalem. Crucially, animal sacrifice was strictly prohibited at these secondary sites; only the Jerusalem Temple was authorized for the slaughter of sacrificial animals.

The Priesthood and the High Priest

The priesthood was a hereditary institution, with modern genetic studies suggesting a high probability that those claiming priestly lineage (*Kohanim*) descend from a single individual.

Organization and Economy

- **The Courses:** The priesthood was organized into 12 groups or "courses" that served in Jerusalem on a rotating schedule.
- **Selection by Lot:** Specific duties, such as offering daily sacrifices, were assigned by lot. Winning the lot was significant, as priests were entitled to a portion of the sacrificial meat.
- **Economic Disparity:** While the system was designed to support the priesthood, corruption occasionally occurred, with some priests reportedly cheating others of their portions, leading to instances of starvation among lower-ranking priests by 70 AD.

The Office of the High Priest

The High Priest occupied a unique position bridging the religious and the political.

- **Religious Duties:** He was the sole individual authorized to perform the Day of Atonement rituals.

- **Civic Leadership:** He served as the primary representative of the Jewish people to foreign overlords (Persian, Greek, and Roman) and was responsible for tax collection.
- **Fluctuating Power:** Under the Hasmoneans, the office combined military heroism with religious authority. However, Herod the Great later "gutted" the office of its civil power. Under subsequent Roman rule, the High Priest regained administrative authority, provided he maintained the peace.

The Rise of the Scribes

A significant shift in teaching authority occurred around 200 BC. While earlier biblical texts (like Malachi) held priests responsible for instruction, this role eventually migrated to the scribes.

- **Origins:** Scribes likely emerged from the literate classes responsible for copying sacred texts. Through the act of copying, they became experts in the law.
- **The Book of Ben Sira:** This text (c. 200 BC) extols the liturgical glory of the High Priest but identifies the scribe as the primary source of wisdom and teaching.
- **Conflict:** By the New Testament era, scribes were established as a distinct class of legal experts, often appearing in opposition to new religious movements.

The Synagogue: Community and Study

Unlike the Temple, the synagogue is not found in the Old Testament. Its origins are debated, but evidence suggests it became prominent around 200 BC, particularly in the Diaspora.

Key Characteristics

Feature	Description
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Primary Purpose	Bible study, prayer, and community building; no animal sacrifices were performed.
Organization	Democratic in nature; leaders were elected from the congregation.
Clergy	No professional "ministers" or resident rabbis existed in this period; rabbis were itinerant teachers.
Participation	Any adult male could read or speak; services were characterized by debate and discussion.
Social Role	Served as a center for Jewish identity in foreign lands and a hub for distributing charity.

Architecture and Order

Synagogues often featured a niche for Torah scrolls and balconies for observers (Gentiles or women). Services were structured but varied by location. Notably, if a priest was present, the service would conclude with a benediction; otherwise, the benediction was omitted.

The Sanhedrin: Judicial and Local Governance

The Sanhedrin (*sun-edrion* or "sitting together") was the Jewish ruling body, functioning as a council of elders.

- **Structure:** Local Sanhedrins consisted of 23 adult males. The "Great Sanhedrin" in Jerusalem served as the supreme authority for major religious and civil disputes.
- **Membership:** Typically composed of elders and presided over by a priest. While later rabbinic texts suggest strict requirements (being married and over 40), the institution was likely more loosely organized during the intertestamental period.
- **Influence:** Although the name is Greek, the concept was a "homegrown" continuation of ancient elder councils, adapted to include the Greek spirit of debate. Its power fluctuated depending on the autonomy granted by the reigning political power (e.g., Herod vs. the Romans).

Study Guide:

Foundations of Jewish Institutional Life: Temple, Synagogue, and Sanhedrin

This study guide examines the pivotal institutions of Judaism during the intertestamental period as outlined by Dr. Anthony J. Tomasino. It explores the origins, functions, and transformations of the Temple, the priesthood, the synagogue, and the Sanhedrin, highlighting the influence of Greek culture and the shifting political landscape of Judea.

Part I: Short-Answer Quiz

Instructions: Answer the following ten questions in 2–3 sentences, based strictly on the provided text.

1. How did the design and construction of Solomon's Temple differ from the original Tabernacle?
2. What was the primary motivation behind King Josiah's reform to centralize sacrifice in Jerusalem?
3. How did Jewish temples located outside of Jerusalem, such as those in Elephantine and Transjordan, operate in relation to the main Temple?
4. In what ways did the Second Temple serve functions beyond religious worship?
5. What was the "course" system used to organize the priesthood during the intertestamental period?
6. How was the selection of priests for daily sacrifices, such as the one involving Zechariah, determined?
7. What were the primary civic responsibilities of the High Priest when dealing with foreign overlords?
8. According to the Book of Malachi and the later writings of Ben Sira, how did the teaching role of the priesthood evolve?

9. What evidence suggests that the synagogue was influenced by Greek culture and democratic ideals?
 10. What was the difference between a local Sanhedrin and the Great Sanhedrin?
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Part II: Answer Key

1. While the Tabernacle was a temporary, portable tent built according to designs given by God to Moses, Solomon's Temple was a permanent structure. It was built by Phoenician craftsmen using styles similar to Phoenician temples, serving as a solid "house" for the Ark of the Covenant.
2. Josiah aimed to eliminate local shrines and "high places" where the nature of the people's worship could not be monitored. By centralizing sacrifice in Jerusalem, he brought the population under the "watchful eye" of the high priest to ensure religious orthodoxy.
3. These temples were situated with their doors facing toward Jerusalem as a sign of respect or orientation. Crucially, animal sacrifices were banned at these locations, as Jerusalem remained the only legitimate site for slaughtering animals for sacrifice.
4. The Second Temple functioned as a formidable fortress with thick, reinforced walls where priests and leaders could take refuge during sieges. Additionally, it served as a banking system where wealthy patrons deposited money for safekeeping.
5. The priesthood was divided into twelve groups known as "courses" that served on a rotating schedule. Each course would travel to Jerusalem to perform its duties for a set time before returning home to their secondary jobs.
6. Specific duties, including the daily sacrifices, were assigned by drawing lots among the priests currently serving their course. Winning the lot was significant because it allowed the priest to perform sacred rituals and keep a portion of the sacrificial meat.
7. The High Priest often served as a governor or representative of the Jewish people to foreign powers, such as the Persians or Romans. His most critical

and often unpopular civic task was ensuring the collection and payment of taxes to these foreign overlords.

8. Originally expected to be sources of wisdom and law, priests were criticized in Malachi for failing to teach the people properly. By the time of Ben Sira (200 BC), the role of teaching had largely shifted from the priesthood to the scribes.
9. The synagogue's Greek name and democratic organization reflect Hellenistic influence, as it functioned without a presiding minister or rabbi. Any adult male was permitted to read or speak, fostering a spirit of debate similar to that found in Greek philosophical academies.
10. A local Sanhedrin was a ruling body of 23 adults that decided religious or civil disputes within a specific city. The Great Sanhedrin, located in Jerusalem, served as the supreme council that made major rules and decisions for the entire nation.

Part III: Essay Questions

Instructions: Use the source context to develop comprehensive responses to the following prompts.

1. **The Evolution of the High Priesthood:** Trace the shifting authority of the High Priest from the time of Aaron through the Hasmonean dynasty and the reign of Herod the Great. How did political shifts affect the prestige and power of the office?
2. **The Temple as a Central Institution:** Discuss the religious, economic, and military significance of the Jerusalem Temple. Why was control of the Temple considered synonymous with setting the "tone" for Judaism?
3. **Synagogue vs. Temple:** Compare and contrast the Synagogue and the Temple in terms of their origins, the types of activities performed in each, and their roles in maintaining Jewish identity in the Diaspora.
4. **Greek Influence on Jewish Institutions:** Analyze the evidence provided for Greek influence on the Synagogue and the Sanhedrin. To what extent were these institutions "innovations" versus "evolutions" of older Jewish practices?

5. **The Sacrifice System and its Abuses:** Describe the logistical and religious importance of animal sacrifice in the Second Temple period. How did the centralization of sacrifice lead to potential financial exploitation and internal Jewish division?

Part IV: Glossary of Key Terms

Term	Definition
Ark of the Covenant	The symbol of God's presence among His people, originally housed in the Tabernacle and later moved to Solomon's Temple.
Ben Sira	The author of a book in the Apocrypha (c. 200 BC) who described the glory of the High Priest but noted the shift of teaching roles to scribes.
Courses	The twelve divisions of the priesthood that rotated service in the Jerusalem Temple on a scheduled basis.
Diaspora	The communities of Jews living outside of Judea throughout the Mediterranean world and Babylonia.
Hasmoneans	Jewish leaders who served as both high priests and civil rulers after delivering the nation from Greek power, boosting the prestige of the priesthood.
Herod the Great	A king of the Jews who undertook a massive expansion of the Temple Mount but stripped the high priesthood of its civil authority.
Kohanim	Jews who are descendants of the priestly family of Aaron; modern genealogical studies suggest they share a common ancestor.
Sanhedrin	From the Greek <i>sun-edrion</i> ("sitting together"), a council of elders that served as a local or national ruling body for legal and religious disputes.

Scribes	A class of literate individuals who moved from copying texts to becoming the primary teachers of the law by the late intertestamental period.
Shekinah	The manifest presence of the Lord and His Spirit believed to dwell within the Temple.
Synagogue	A place of assembly (Greek for "led together") focused on Bible study, prayer, and community building rather than animal sacrifice.
Tabernacle	The portable, tent-like structure used for worship by the Israelites prior to the construction of Solomon's Temple.
Yom Kippur	The Day of Atonement, an annual ritual performed exclusively by the High Priest at the Temple to remove the collective guilt of the Jewish people.
