

Ecclesia and Synagoga

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I. Christianity

The focus of this article is on the opposition of the terms “synagogue” and “church” in ancient and medieval Christian literature.

The Greek terms ἐκκλησία and συναγωγή are part of the same semantic field in that they may both designate “assemblies” or “congregations.” In classical Greek, however, ἐκκλησία denotes an assembly which is formally summoned and therefore exclusively refers to human beings, whereas συναγωγή is the wider term which may also refer to the gathering of things or animals. In the LXX, the terms are almost interchangeable; both lexemes are used to translate the Hebrew *qāhāl*, and the noun συναγωγή is sometimes linked with the verb ἐκκλησιάζειν (“to summon an assembly, to convene”; cf. Lev 8:3–4; Num 20:8, 10; Josh 18:1; Judg 20:1; 3 Kgdms 12:1). In Jewish and earliest Christian parlance both terms may also designate the communities/institutions of church and synagogue respectively. In addition, synagogue may refer to the Jewish house of worship.

Since both terms were foreign words in Latin, the need was felt to define their respective meanings. The earliest definition is found in Augustine, who translates *synagoga* as “congregation” (*congregatio*) and *ecclesia* as “convocation” (*convocatio*); he explains that that *ecclesia* is the narrower term because it presupposes the use of *ratio* by the people that are convoked, as a result of which it can only relate to human beings (*Enarrat. Ps.* 81.1). In *Enarrat. Ps.* 77.3, this is clearly given an anti-Jewish slant (cf. also *id.*, *Epistolae ad Romanos inchoata expositio* 2). This definition was later picked up by other authors, e.g., Cassiodorus, *Exp. Psalmorum* 81.1; Isidore of Seville, *Etymologiae* 8.1.8; Ildefonsus of Toledo, *De cognitione baptismi* 76; Bede, *In Cant.* 1.1; *id.*, *In Prov.* 1.5; *id.*, *In Luc. ev. exp.* 2.4; Amalarius of Metz, *De eccl. officiis* 1.12; Rabanus Maurus, *De universo* 4.3; *id.*, *In Prov.* 1.5; *id.*, *Exp. in ev. Matt.* 5 (on Matt 13:53–54); *id.*, *Enarrat. in epistolas Pauli* 21.1;

Walahfrid Strabo, *In Cant. praef.*; Haymo of Halberstadt, *Hom.* 117 (PL 118: 576C); Petrus Damiani, *Sermo* 72.1; Hervé de Bourg-Dieu, *In I Thess.* 1 (PL 181: 1357C); Zacharias Chrysopolitanus, *In unum ex quatuor* 1.18 (= Bede); Richard of Saint Victor, *De duodecim patriarchis* 84; Sicardo of Cremona, *Mitralis de officiis* 1.5; Thomas Aquinas, *Catena aurea in Luc.* 4.4 = Bede. A(p)ponius interprets *ecclesia* as a “congregation of people” (*congregatio populi*) and identifies it with *synagoga*, erroneously deriving the latter term from Hebrew (*In Cant. exp.* 1.7; same error in Angelomus of Luxeuil, *In Cant. praef.*).

In Tertullian, *Ux.* 1,2, *synagoga* and *ecclesia* seem to refer to the content of the Old (Jewish) and the New (Christian) Testaments, respectively. Occasionally, *synagoga* may also designate assemblies of the “devil” (cf. Rev 2:9; 3:9) or of “heretics” in opposition to the church, with no particular reference to Jews or Judaism. More frequently, however, *synagoga*, when used by Christians in opposition to church, refers to (1) Judaism as a religious system, (2) the people of Israel, (3) the Jews of the time of Jesus, and (4) the Jews contemporaneous to the individual author. In practical usage, these meanings are not always distinguished from each other. *Synagoga* thus becomes a collective term and as such can be contrasted with the church. In addition, both terms are increasingly personified as women. This opposition is not always polemical. Nonetheless, from the 2nd century onwards, the church is increasingly described as superior to the *synagoga* (for the earliest such reference, see Justin, *Dial.* 134.3–5). By the middle of the 3rd century, this usage is already widespread (Hippolytus of Rome, Origen, Cyprian); it is subsequently to be found throughout the ancient and medieval church (for examples from Syriac literature, cf., e.g., Schreckenberg 1999: 289–91, 394, 404–5).

The juxtaposition of *synagoga* and church appears in the following literary genres:

1) In biblical exegesis, *synagoga* and church are then frequently used in the typological interpretation of biblical pairs of the OT and are, in particular, identified with Cain (*synagoga*) and Abel (church) in Gen 4; Sarah and Hagar in Gen 16 (cf. Gal 4:21–31) where *synagoga* and church may be identified interchangeably; Jacob (church) and Esau (*synagoga*) in Gen 25:23; Leah (*synagoga*) and Rachel (church) in Gen 29–30 (an early collection of such typological pairs is found in the sermon by Caesarius of Arles mentioned below). Later, they form part of handbooks of allegorical exegesis such as the *Allegoriae quadam scripturae sacrae* by Isidore of Seville, the *Glossa ordinaria*, or the *Allegoriae in universam sacram scripturam* by Pseudo-Rabanus. In the exposition of Ps 45(44) and the Song of Songs, the church is seen to replace the *synagoga* as the bride of Christ. The erotic imagery may be supplemented by the idea that Christ has disinherited the *syna-*

goga and has instead appointed the church as heiress.

2) In polemical literature, *synagoga* and church often appear as the female protagonists of anti-Jewish dialogues which invariably end with the “victory” of the church. Such dialogues appear to be more frequent in the Latin church (see below). Apart from this particular genre, however, the opposition may also be used in other anti-Jewish treatises. In these cases the *synagoga* is usually described with negative epithets, associating “Israel” or “the Jews” with deceit and sin (e.g., “brood of vipers”; cf. Matt 3:7 par. Luke 3:7; Matt 12:34). She is portrayed as confined to the literal understanding of the Holy Scriptures, thus being unable to comprehend its spiritual meaning. In particular she is charged with sexual misbehavior (fornication) and hence associated with the devil or hell, a slander which in Latin literature was often based on Rev 2:9 (*synagoga Satanae*). Her infidelity is contrasted with the faith of the church.

3) The opposition of *synagoga* and church was taken over from the dialogue into religious drama, such as the Ludus de Antichristo (12th cent.) and vernacular passion plays (cf. Pflaum; Wolf).

4) *Synagoga* and church are often mentioned in medieval hymns (such as those cited by Pflaum: 23–25).

5) Finally, in mysticism, *synagoga* and church appear prominently in the work of Hildegard of Bingen (*Scivias* 1.5; cf. Schreckenberg 1997: 228–30).

Occasionally, the hope is expressed that church and *synagoga* will form an (eschatological) “concord” or will be reunited in the world to come (cf., e.g., the exegesis of Song 6:12 Vg., where the *synagoga* is identified with Sunamit/Sulamit by western authors).

In the West, the opposition of *synagoga* and *ecclesia* even appears in the titles of anti-Jewish treatises and dialogues such as the Sermon 104 by Caesarius of Arles, entitled *De comparatione ecclesiae vel synagogae* (cf. Blumenkranz 1963: 49–50; Schreckenberg 1999: 402; Krauss: 41) and the *Altercatio ecclesiae et synagogae* attributed to Augustine (CPL 577, 5th cent.; ed. CChr.SL 69A; cf. Blumenkranz 1963: 39–42; Krauss: 40, 49–50), the latter taking the form of a lawsuit. (To what extent this dialogue subsequently influenced medieval imagery of church and *synagoga* is a matter of scholarly debate; cf. esp. Weber 1894; further lit. in Schreckenberg 1997: 470–80; Krauss/Horbury 1995: 51 n. 23.) Later the title *Altercatio* was taken over by other anonymous authors; cf. the *Altercatio aeclesie contra synagogam et synagogae contra ecclesiam* (10th cent.; ed. Blumenkranz 1954; cf. Blumenkranz 1963: 222–25; Schreckenberg 1999: 532–33, 651, 781) and the *Altercatio synagogae et ecclesiae, in qua bona omnium fere utriusque instrumenti librorum pars explicatur* (ed. Cologne 1537;

²1540), which may belong to the late 12th century (Blumenkranz 1963: 207–8; cf. Schreckenber 1997: 322–23; Krauss: 78 n. 35). Another dialogue entitled *Disputatio Synagogae et Ecclesiae* was probably written by Guibert de Tournai (d. 1284–88) and may be partly based on the *Altercatio ecclesiae et synagogae* (cf. Schreckenber 1994: 318–21; Cardelle de Hartmann 2007: 116–17, 386–88). The French poem *La desputaison de Sinagogue et de sainte Église* (ed. Serper) was composed in the same period. The dialogue between church and synagogue entitled *Pharetra Fidei* (14th cent.) stems perhaps from the pen of Nikolaus of Strasbourg (Cardelle de Hartmann 2007: 388–92).

Although each individual author should be examined separately, it may safely be said that the development of the synagogue/church opposition helped in many ways to promote a supersessionist Christian theology vis-à-vis Judaism. It became a deeply entrenched conviction that the church had replaced the synagogue in one way or another in the course of salvation history, that the synagogue was now rejected by God because she had stubbornly refused to recognize Jesus as the Messiah. This concept found its expression in western medieval art in the numerous representations of the synagogue as blind-folded and set opposite the church triumphant.

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