

# The Synagogue as Foe in Early Christian Literature

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## *Introduction*

One of the salient characteristics of late antique urbanism is that synagogues began dotting the urban landscape. This phenomenon was not limited to the land of Israel, where such a development might have been expected. In the Diaspora too—and particularly in the later Roman Empire’s eastern half—synagogues now began to stand out architecturally. Frequently located in prominent positions within the cities’ urban topography, the synagogues of Late Antiquity took on the shape of monumental buildings. And not just of any monumental building, but of monumental buildings that were clearly recognizable as Jewish houses of worship. Dedicatory inscriptions, distinctive iconographic programs, and specific architectural elements such as apses for the installment of Torah shrines were all instrumental in helping to ensure that no one would mistake these buildings for anything but Jewish.

In light of the history of modern research on the ancient synagogue, it should not surprise us that scholars have begun to come to grips with this phenomenon and its implications only recently. Even as little as 30 years ago, Lee Levine’s magnum opus on the ancient synagogue could not have been written for lack of consistent archaeological evidence.<sup>1</sup> It is only now that continued excavations and publications allow us to deal with the evidence in toto as we try to integrate exciting recent discoveries in such far-away places as Bova Marina, Plovdiv, and Saranda—let alone sites excavated in the land of Israel, including a fascinating synagogue discovered one and a half decades ago at Sepphoris, among several others.<sup>2</sup>

1. Lee I. Levine, *The Ancient Synagogue: The First Thousand Years* (2nd ed.; New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2005).

2. Liliana Costamagna, “La sinagoga di Bova Marina (secc. IV–VI),” in *I beni culturali ebraici in Italia* (ed. Mauro Perani; Ravenna: Longo, 2003), 93–118; David Noy, Alexander Panayotov,

But it is not just the geographical scope of this phenomenon—the architectural rise to prominence of the synagogue in Late Antiquity—that impresses. The chronology of the phenomenon is no less intriguing. It was precisely in the fourth century as Christianity became a major force in terms of popular support as well as imperial backing that synagogues were constructed on a massive scale. In the early fifth century, imperial law as enshrined in the *Theodosian Code* began to forbid Jews to build new synagogues.<sup>3</sup> Less than a generation later, Roman lawgivers then reformulated this law in even more aggressive terms, specifying that any newly erected synagogue would be transformed into a Christian church automatically.<sup>4</sup> This chain of events hints at a pattern documented more fully by the archaeological evidence itself: namely, that in spite of such legislation, Jews regularly continued to build and rebuild synagogues whenever they had the means to do so. Thus, there is nothing in the history of synagogue architecture toward the very end of Antiquity that forbids the late chronology of the Sardis and Hammath Tiberias synagogues as proposed by Jodi Magness in two recent, carefully documented essays.<sup>5</sup> Once built, late antique synagogues were used intensively, sometimes for decades and, at other times, for centuries on end. It is hard to imagine that the redactors of the *Theodosian Code* would have been able to fathom that some of the late antique synagogues they disliked so much would indeed continue in service long after the reality of Roman and Byzantine rule had vanished irrecoverably into the past.

While we cannot help but be impressed by the intensity, monumentality, nay, by the very scope of synagogue architecture in Late Antiquity, we should not forget that in itself the rise of monumental synagogue architecture in Late Antiquity is not surprising at all. In fact, it could only have occurred during this period and not earlier or later. After all, it was in the fourth century that the Jews got caught up in a maelstrom from which escape soon turned out to be impossible—one that intensified as the century progressed—namely, the Christianization of the later Roman world. Although the Christianization of Roman society during this period was evidently still far from complete, this process nonetheless affected society deeply in that it brought about an unprecedented structural change in the way different groups interacted with one another. Christianity was not just a monotheistic faith; it was also a faith that insisted on enforcing uniformity in belief (as defined by those who did the enforcing), using, not infrequently, violent means. The direct—and undoubtedly unintended—consequence of Christianity's insistence on orthodoxy was a substan-

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and Hanswulf Bloedhorn, *Inscriptiones Judaicae Orientis*, vol. 1: *Eastern Europe* (TSAJ 101; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2004), 38–48; Zeev Weiss, *The Sepphoris Synagogue: Deciphering an Ancient Message through Its Archaeological and Socio-Historical Contexts* (Jerusalem: Israel Exploration Society, 2005).

3. CTh 16.8.25 of 423 C.E.

4. Novella 3 of 438 C.E.

5. Jodi Magness, “The Date of the Sardis Synagogue in Light of the Numismatic Evidence,” *AJA* 109 (2005): 443–76; eadem, “Heaven on Earth: Helios and the Zodiac Cycle in Ancient Palestinian Synagogues,” *DOP* 59 (2005): 1–52, esp. pp. 8–12.

tial intensification of the process of identity-formation and boundary maintenance among groups that were not orthodox Christians. As for the Jews, their identity now came under attack, on a variety of levels, yet always in ways that would have been inconceivable in the pagan Roman Empire. They reacted by making their own identity more manifest. The monumentalizing and iconographic Judaization of the synagogue in Late Antiquity is one example of this process of self-manifestation. The committing onto paper of the massive corpus of rabbinic learning is another. Although I thus believe that Christianity is likely to have strengthened this process among the Jewish communities of Late Antiquity, I do not generally think that Christianity shaped it internally in the way proposed by Seth Schwartz in a wide-ranging and important recent study.<sup>6</sup>

Whatever the correct interpretation of this phenomenon may be, it is well known that Judaism's need to manifest itself through its religious architecture did not sit well with those trying to enforce orthodox Christianity during this same period. From the late fourth century onward, whenever the occasion arose, Christians tried to destroy synagogues or to convert them into churches—violently so, of course. It is surely no coincidence that late Roman law trying to prevent this sort of behavior comes into being in the very same years that saw the illegal and much-advertised appropriation by Christians of a synagogue belonging to the Jewish community in Callinicum on the Euphrates.<sup>7</sup> What is particularly striking about the laws in question is not so much their repetitiveness but the fact that they were promulgated in relatively rapid succession and that they were addressed to officials in different parts of the Roman Empire.<sup>8</sup> In the late fourth and early fifth centuries, then, attacks on synagogues were not just a recurring phenomenon; they also occurred Empire-wide, in very different locations. Archaeological remains of churches on top of synagogues in such diverse places as Gerasa in Jordan, Apamea in Syria, and Stobi in former Yugoslavia provide us with further, tangible proof that the framers of the *Theodosian Code* were not just imagining things.<sup>9</sup> All of this justifies the conclusion that the

6. Seth Schwartz, *Imperialism and Jewish Society, 200 B.C.E. to 640 C.E.* (Jews, Christians, and Muslims from the Ancient to the Modern World; Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001).

7. Ambrose, *Ep.* 40 and 41. And see Neil B. McLynn, *Ambrose of Milan: Church and Court in a Christian Capital* (Transformation of the Classical Heritage 22; Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994), 291–313.

8. *CTh* 16.8.9 of 393 C.E. addressed to the *comes* and master of both services in the East; *CTh* 16.8.12 of 397 C.E. addressed to the *praefectus praetorio* of Illyricum; *CTh* 16.8.20 of 412 C.E. addressed to the *praefectus praetorio* of Italy; *CTh* 16.8.21 of 420 C.E. addressed to the *praefectus praetorio* of Illyricum (the same official but not the same person as in *CTh* 16.8.12); *CTh* 16.8.25, 16.8.26, and 16.8.27, all of 423 C.E. and all addressed to the *praefectus praetorio* of the East.

9. Beat Brenk, "Die Umwandlung der Synagoge von Apamea in eine Kirche: Eine mentalitätsgeschichtliche Studie," in *Tesserae: Festschrift für Josef Engemann* (ed. Ernst Dassmann; Münster: Aschendorff, 1991), 1–25. Estée Dvorjetski ("The Synagogue-Church at Gerasa in Jordan: A Contribution to the Study of Ancient Synagogues," *ZDPV* 121 [2005]: 140–67) fails to add anything substantial to the discussion concerning this monument.

fourth century not only saw the architectural rise to prominence of the synagogue; it saw—concurrently and in various locations—its physical demise.

In a passage dealing with the destruction of the synagogues in Late Antiquity, Lee Levine has tried to explain this phenomenon by pointing at the evidence provided by this same *Theodosian Code*—evidence that indicates that this took place in a climate generally characterized by a change in attitude toward Jews and Judaism.<sup>10</sup> On a general level, this is surely correct. However, contemporary evidence such as this does not fully explain either the viciousness or the scale of the destruction, let alone the change in mentality that led to it in the first place. As I will argue at some length below, I believe that the changed climate was the result of a new, typically Christian mentality that had been in the making for some time. Careful analysis of the writings of the church fathers reveals that in the centuries leading up to the era of synagogue destruction there was an interesting semantic shift in the ways these theologians talked about “the synagogue.” It is this shift that, in my view, stands at the basis of synagogue destruction in Late Antiquity. Without it, this activity would have been inconceivable.

### **Semantic Shifts**

A well-known mid-first-century Jewish inscription in Greek from Berenice in Roman North Africa provides us with all the evidence we need to show that from early Roman times onward the Greek term συναγωγή had a double meaning. In this inscription, συναγωγή is used to describe a specific Jewish community, yet in the very same sentence it is also employed to refer to the actual communal center used by this community.<sup>11</sup> Contemporary textual and inscriptional evidence originating from all parts of the Roman Empire indicates that this double meaning of the term συναγωγή was widespread. Not only in Greek but also in Latin the term *synagoga* was borrowed and commonly used by Jews and non-Jews alike either to describe a particular Jewish community or to refer to a particular, architecturally distinct Jewish communal center.<sup>12</sup> As time went on, and especially in the later Roman Empire, the term συναγωγή came to replace the earlier term προσευχή almost completely. Even though there is

10. Levine, *Ancient Synagogue*, 298–99.

11. Gert Lüderitz, *Corpus jüdischer Zeugnisse aus der Cyrenaika* (BTAVO B 53; Wiesbaden: Reichert, 1983), no. 72.

12. In his classic essay “Proseuche und Synagoge: Jüdische Gemeinde, Gotteshaus und Gottesdienst in der Diaspora und in Palästina” (in *Tradition und Glaube: Das frühe Christentum in seiner Umwelt—Festgabe für Karl Georg Kuhn zum 65. Geburtstag* [ed. G. Jeremias et al.; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck and Ruprecht, 1971], 157–84, esp. pp. 181–83), Martin Hengel argued that the use of the term *synagogue* as a building occurred only after the term *proseucha* had been pushed into the background. Note that these two meanings are, in any case, closely related: it is not difficult to see how a building can be considered *pars pro toto* for the community using it or, alternatively, how a community can be seen through the prism of the building in which it congregates.

isolated evidence to suggest that users of Latin likewise borrowed this latter term from the Greek, thus ensuring its survival into Late Antiquity, the actual documentation for such a survival beyond the second century is lacunose to the extreme.<sup>13</sup> To judge from the writings of the church fathers, especially those writing in Latin, in Late Antiquity hardly anyone still knew what was meant by *προσευχή/proseucha*. The meaning of the term *συναγωγή/synagoga*, by contrast, was known to all.

When one peruses patristic literature that refers to “the synagogue,” there is much evidence for continuity in that the church fathers understood the term in the same way as their non-Christian predecessors, their contemporaries such as the redactors of the *Theodosian Code*, and indeed the writers of the NT—namely, as reference to either a building or to a Jewish community. Thus, Justin in the second century, Hippolytus in the third, and John Chrysostom and Ambrose in the fourth all have actual buildings in mind when they use the term “synagogue” in their writings.<sup>14</sup> In the first half of the fifth century, Socrates Scholasticus obliges his readers by observing that that “synagogue” is the term used to refer to “houses of prayer.”<sup>15</sup> Even so, toward the very end of the sixth century, Gregory the Great can be found using the term regularly and as a matter of course to refer to synagogue buildings in the possession of Jewish communities in Terracina, Palermo, and Cagliari.<sup>16</sup>

Careful study of these patristic texts also reveals that in due course the authors of these texts began moving beyond the two meanings observed above. In fact, a subtle yet consequential semantic shift began to manifest itself in these writings—a shift that took its departure from the idea that “synagogue” was used frequently to denote a given Jewish community. The best way to illustrate this semantic shift is by citing a passage from Augustine’s massive commentary on the book of Psalms. In his commentary on Psalm 82, Augustine observes:

By the synagogue we understand the people of Israel, because synagogue is the word properly used of them, although they were also called the church. Our congregation, on the contrary, the apostles never called synagogue but always *ecclesia*; whether for the sake of distinction, or because there is some difference between a congregation whence the synagogue has its name and a convocation whence the church is called *ecclesia*: for the word congregation (or flocking together) is used of cattle and

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The intimate linkage of these two meanings explains why it is sometimes difficult to determine which of these two meanings was intended by the ancients.

13. Second century: Juvenal, *Sat.* 3.296; *CIL* 6.9821 (normally assumed to refer to a Jewish house of prayer); Noy, Panayotov, and Bloedhorn, *Eastern Europe*, Pan 5 (conjectural, and possibly not Jewish); *CPJ* no. 432.57 (113 C.E.). Fourth century: David Noy, *Jewish Inscriptions of Western Europe*, vol. 1: *Italy (excluding the City of Rome), Spain and Gaul* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), no. 180 (in Greek, and likely to be Jewish); Noy, Panayotov, and Bloedhorn, *Eastern Europe*, BS 4 (survival of earlier local usage).

14. Justin, *Dial.* 16, 17, 72, and 96; Hippolytus, *Haer.* 9.7; John Chrysostom, *Adv. Jud.*, *passim*; Ambrose, *Ep.* 40 and 41.

15. Socrates, *Hist. eccl.* 7.13.

16. Gregory, *Ep.* 1.34; 2.6; 8.25; 9.38; 9.195.

particularly of that kind called “flocks,” whereas convocation (or calling together) is more of reasonable creatures, such as men. I think then that it is clear in what synagogue of gods God stood. (Augustine, *Enarrat. Ps.* 82.1)

In this passage, at least three things happen that merit our attention. First of all, Augustine equates “synagogue” with “the people of Israel.” This is a clear and definite departure from earlier practice. Traditionally, whenever the term “synagogue” was used in its meaning of “community,” it was always understood as referring to a specific community. That this is so follows, for example, from a famous passage in the book of Acts or from the rich collection of third- and fourth-century funerary inscriptions from the Jewish catacombs of Rome that contain references to no less than a dozen specific Jewish communities.<sup>17</sup> In our passage, however, Augustine moves away from such an understanding by expanding the original meaning: rather than considering the term “synagogue” as merely referring to a specific community, he now defines it as referring to all the Jews or, as he phrases it, the entire “people of Israel.” By expanding its original meaning, Augustine thus substitutes a concrete notion for one that is unspecified, potentially stereotypical and, in any event, completely atemporal. In Augustine, then, “the synagogue” and “the Jews” are not just coterminous. They have become interchangeable and synonymous.

To substantiate this declarative expansion of the original meaning of the term “synagogue” further, Augustine then moves on by contrasting the *synagoga* with an institution he presents as wholly different from it: the *ecclesia*. This sort of strategy is interesting, not only in terms of substance, but also in terms of terminology. As is well known, the term *ecclesia* was used from an early time period onward by Christian communities to refer to individual communities.<sup>18</sup> However, it could also be used to refer to the sum or totality of these early Christian communities. In these cases, *ecclesia* simply meant ‘the church’.<sup>19</sup> It is evident that in this particular respect the term *ecclesia* differed fundamentally from the term *synagoga*. After all, as we have seen, *synagoga* when used to refer to a Jewish community was always used in Roman times in reference to a specific Jewish community. Even though many of these communities saw themselves as constituent part of a larger, overarching whole—the Jewish people and its history—there never was such thing as “the synagogue.” This state of affairs—a fundamental difference between *synagoga* and *ecclesia* in organizational characteristics—does not seem either to have impressed or to have bothered Augustine. Instead, he freely superimposed the generalized notion of “the church” onto the individual Jewish “synagogues” so as to create two institutions that henceforth could be contrasted fully and unreservedly with one another. In Augustine, “the church”

17. Acts 6:9; David Noy, *Jewish Inscriptions of Western Europe*, vol. 2: *The City of Rome* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 539–40 with references to the inscriptions in question.

18. In the NT, the early Christian community is always called *ecclesia*, never “synagogue,” with one exception, Jas 2:2.

19. Wayne A. Meeks, *The First Urban Christians: The Social World of the Apostle Paul* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1983), 74–110.

and “the synagogue” are not just on a par. They have become each other’s significant other.

The result of depriving the term *synagoga* of its specificity and of imposing a more generalist notion on it is that from then on the term became a hollow vessel, as it were, that could begin to be filled at will with new meaning. It should hardly come as a surprise to note that the new meaning that was now being imputed was decidedly negative. In our passage, Augustine observes that the difference in terminology between the *ecclesia* and the *synagoga* is not merely fuelled by a desire for the one to be distinct from the other. While trying to find Latin equivalents for these terms, Augustine also argues that there is a substantial difference between the two institutions in that the one is but a *congregatio* or gathering of cattle, whereas the other is a true *convocatio* or gathering of people. Being the only church father who links the *synagoga* to the term *congregatio* in its meaning ‘gathering of animals’, Augustine does not merely deny the Jews reasonability as human beings.<sup>20</sup> He is effectively saying that the synagogue is an animal’s den and implying that the Jews congregating in it are beasts. In Augustine, then, “the synagogue” is so much more than just the church’s significant other: it also is an evil twin that must be abused verbally whenever the occasion arises.<sup>21</sup> To characterize the ensemble of Augustine’s thoughts on the synagogue as *relativement modéré* is to speak utter nonsense.<sup>22</sup>

In conclusion, it is evident that, despite its brevity, our passage reflects a fundamental change in the way the term *synagoga* was defined in late antique Christian circles: being turned into the church’s quintessential other, the term “synagogue”

20. The term *congregatio* as such derives from the *Vetus Latina*, where it is used to translate the term συναγωγή of the LXX, pace Israel Peri, “*Ecclesia und synagoga in der lateinischen Übersetzung des Alten Testaments*,” *BZ* 33 (1989): 245–51, esp. p. 249. *Congregatio* in the sense of animal’s den is one of the several standard meanings of this term; see *TLL* 6:288–89 and *Mittel-lateinisches Wörterbuch* 2:1410–12. The application of this particular meaning to “the synagogue,” however, is Augustine’s doing. The only other Father to use this explanation is Cassiodorus, *Exp. Ps.* 81.41. Inasmuch as Cassiodorus was greatly impressed by Augustine’s commentary on the Psalms and used it for his own work on the Psalms, we may assume that Cassiodorus borrowed this idea directly from Augustine. Cf. also Eusebius Gallicanus, *Coll. Hom.* 49.31: *Synagoga est nationis unius congregatio, ecclesia est universarum gentium multitudo*.

21. Note that the same kind of reasoning also appears in Augustine’s commentary on Ps 74:1 and in *Exp. Quaest. Rom.* 2. There (and in *Enarrat. Ps.* 73 and 86.1) Augustine adds the interesting observation that *Asaph* is yet another term for congregation or synagogue. It is not clear to me whence Augustine—who was not a *vir trilinguis*—derived this notion. Even though the Hebrew Bible understands *Asaph* as a name and therefore as a reference to an actual person or set of persons (see Harry P. Nasuti, *Tradition History and the Psalms of Asaph* [SBLDS 88; Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1988], 161–91), Augustine’s explanation reflects the original Hebrew meaning of this name; cf. Martin Noth, *Die israelitischen Personennamen im Rahmen der gemeinsemitischen Namengebung* (Hildesheim: Olms, 1980 [1928]), 181–82. In light of what was observed in n. 20 above, it is not surprising that Cassiodorus frequently refers to *Asaph* in precisely the same fashion, in *Exp. Ps.* 49.6, 72.27, 75.8, 77.6, 78.3, 78.6, 80.34, and 81.41.

22. As does Émilien Lamirande in his descriptive essay “*Reliquit et matrem synagogam: La synagogue et l’église selon Saint-Augustin*,” *Augustiniana* 41 (1991): 677–88, esp. p. 688.

now became synonymous not just with the entire Jewish people but with everything that was bad and despicable. Although the passage in Augustine provides us with a prime example of a semantic shift that came about among Christian theologians writing about the synagogue, it should be stressed that Augustine was neither the first nor the only church father to conceive of “the synagogue” in this way. As early as the second century, this shift (one by which the term “synagogue” was abstracted into a construct that existed only in the minds of early Christian theologians but that lacked a counterpart in real life) was already well underway. Early church fathers such as Justin Martyr and Origen in the East and Tertullian in the West can already be observed to speak of “the synagogue” in abstract rather than in concrete terms as they sought to highlight the contrast between the church and the synagogue as dogmatically uniform yet mutually exclusive and diametrically opposed categories.<sup>23</sup> It also figures that we should encounter, in the works of these same early Fathers, the term “synagogue of the Jews” or “synagogue of Israel.”<sup>24</sup> Terminology of this sort reflects the desire to equate, in a generalizing fashion, a particular religious institution with an entire yet otherwise consciously undefined group within the later Roman Empire. By the fourth century, everyone was using the term *synagoga Iudaeorum*—this in spite of the fact that, by this time, the addition “of the Jews” had very much become a pleonasm.<sup>25</sup> In the later fourth century, the term “synagogue” no longer needed any additions for it to be used synonymously with “the Jews.” As Augustine stated rather plainly, “the synagogue has come to be held for a kind of proper name for the Jewish people,” and “wherever we may have heard synagogue, we are no longer wont to understand any but the people of the Jews.”<sup>26</sup>

No special pleading is needed to argue that these developments did little to strengthen the societal position of the Jewish communities of Late Antiquity. In the perception of some of the major figures of the early Christian movement, the term “synagogue” conjured up a whole range of interrelated and alarmingly negative meanings: from the innocuous individual building to the entire community of unbelievers assumed to be associated with it, and from an isolated locus of sin and evil to the church’s quintessential opponent. However, the emergence of such views—important and pervasive though they were—still does not explain fully the ferociousness of the attacks on synagogues that began to materialize in the later fourth century, or even the fact that they occurred at all. Rather, it was the constant negative rhetoric that accompanied this new, typically early Christian notion of “the synagogue” that must be blamed for transforming early Christian communities from passive listeners into active rabble-rousers vis-à-vis the Jews.

23. Justin, *Dial.* 53; *Apos. Con.* 2.56; Origen, *Comm. Matt.* 14.17; Tertullian, *Marc.* 5.

24. Pseudo-Justin, *Coh. Gr.* 13; Tertullian, *Marc.* 5; idem, *Adv. Jud.* 5.

25. Hilary, *Comm. Ps.* 54.8; Chromatius, *Sermo* 30.1; Augustine, *Doctr. chr.* 4.14. Cf. also *CTh* 16.8.2.

26. Augustine, *Enarrat. Ps.* 83.1 and 74.1. For similar usage of the term, see Jerome, *Epist.* 32.



### Early Christian Rhetoric against “the Synagogue”

We have just seen that in the writings of the church fathers there is strong tendency no longer to understand the term “synagogue” as a reference to a concrete institution located in place and time. Depriving the term of its historicity and denying the community it referred to all of its individual features, the Fathers opted for an abstracted, more generic understanding instead. The generalization of this term then allowed the Fathers their next move, which was to begin infusing it with new layers of meaning. Inasmuch as “the synagogue” had become coterminous with “the Jews,” it is only to be expected that the whole repertoire of prejudices against the Jews now began to be transferred onto the “the synagogue” as well. In fact, from this point on, the synagogue becomes a *pars pro toto*: in patristic literature, the mere mentioning of the term “synagogue” induced the Fathers to tap into a larger, preexisting reservoir of generic and often hermeneutically constructed anti-Jewish sentiments. In sermons in particular, the Fathers can be seen to develop some sort of a “free style”—that is, a type of exegetical exposition in which all kinds of (frequently outlandish) associations are proposed and presented as proper theological exercise.

Among the most characteristic features of early Christian rhetoric regarding the synagogue is, on the one hand, its variety and, on the other, the consistent recurrence of certain standard motifs. While the categorizing of all this evidence is a rather daunting task, early Christian writing on the synagogue may nonetheless be classified into the following three categories.

On the most basic level, there is name-calling. As is well known, the irascible John “Goldmouth” Chrysostom holds the dubious honor of being early Christianity’s undisputed champion in the area of anti-Jewish vituperation. He compares the synagogue to a theater or gathering place of “effeminates and a great rubbish heap of harlots,” calling it “a dwelling of demons and place of idolatry,” a “shrine of men who have been rejected, dishonored, and condemned,” “a lodging place for robbers and cheats,” a place containing an “invisible altar of deceit on which they sacrifice not sheep and calves but the souls of men,” and, finally, a “fortress of the devil . . . the precipice and pit of destruction.”<sup>27</sup> Yet, in the later fourth century, Chrysostom was not alone in this kind of anti-Jewish verbal abuse. In these very same years, he was joined in the West by Latin Fathers such as Zeno of Verona, who called the synagogue a *spelunca latronum*; by Chromatius of Aquileia, who compared the synagogue to an inn that harbored every kind of infidelity and error; and, naturally, by the bellicose Ambrose of Milan, who not only defined the synagogue as blind and as a place of shadow, but who agreed with Chrysostom on the point of reverting to the image of the “shameless harlot.”<sup>28</sup> In the early fifth century they, in turn, were joined by an equally uncongenial Maximus of Turin. In his sermons, he variably called the

27. John Chrysostom, *Adv. Jud.* 1.2; 1.3; 1.4; 1.6; 4.7; 5.12; 6.7.

28. Zeno, *Tract* 25 (11.68); Chromatius, *Sermo* 32.3 lines 83–89; Ambrose, *Job* 2.9; idem, *Jacob* 2.5.

synagogue “polluted,” a site filled with “vile and brackish water . . . that does not wash away sins by its baptism,” “sacrilegious,” and “a place of irreligion . . . where Christ is always denied.”<sup>29</sup> Other proponents of Latin Christianity could not have agreed more. Thus, while allowing himself a bit of theological wishful thinking in the process, we find Caesarius of Arles preaching to his community, rather wryly, that the synagogue was simply “dead.”<sup>30</sup> Incidentally, this was to be expected, inasmuch as the same Caesarius noted in another sermon that the synagogue had been *leprosa* from the beginning.<sup>31</sup>

On a second level, we encounter remarks on the synagogue that seem to reflect or report on real events taking place in and around actual synagogues. A series of well-known and frequently studied passages to the effect that the Jews were cursing Christians during services as well as Tertullian’s familiar indicting declaration that synagogues were “fountains of persecution” all fall into this second category.<sup>32</sup> As for the anti-Christian prayers, modern scholarly consensus holds that the Fathers confused Gentile Christians with Jewish Christians.<sup>33</sup> More pertinent still, the observations of the Fathers are not indicative of intimate familiarity with the substance of contemporary Jewish liturgical practice or, on a more general level, with the workings of the synagogue as a complex, multifaceted institution.

With regard to Tertullian, there can be no doubt that his accusation is historically incorrect. Not only are there a variety of reasons why systematic persecutions of Christians are unlikely to have originated in the synagogues of the Roman Empire, we also lack independent external evidence to confirm or even suggest that this was ever the case. However, we do have quite a bit of evidence that church fathers picked up this idea as a scriptural motif as they were reading their Matthew—a Gospel that relates that no one but Jesus himself had predicted that, while he was sending them “into the midst of wolves,” the apostles would be delivered “up to councils” where “in their synagogues they will scourge you.”<sup>34</sup> Thus we encounter references to this particular passage in the writings of Cyril of Alexandria in the East and of Augustine in the West.<sup>35</sup> Their work is characteristic of a larger trend in patristic literature that uniformly understands the synagogue as a locus of persecution because it was considered specifically through the prism of the NT. By the mid-sixth century, the

29. Maximus, *Sermo* 20.5; 28.3; 57.3; and 87.1.

30. Caesarius, *Sermo* 85.5.

31. *Ibid.*, 95.6.

32. For these passages, see the evidence collected by Kimelman, cited in n. 33; Tertullian, *Scorp.* 10.

33. See the classic essay by Reuven Kimelman, “*Birkat ha-Minim* and the Lack of Evidence for an Anti-Christian Jewish Prayer in Late Antiquity,” in *Jewish and Christian Self-Definition*, vol. 2: *Aspects of Judaism in the Greco-Roman Period* (ed. Ed P. Sanders, Albert I. Baumgarten, and Alan Mendelson; London: SCM, 1981), 226–44. Most recently, Yaakov Y. Tepler, *Birkat haMinim: Jews and Christians in Conflict in the Ancient World* (TSAJ 120; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2007) (*non vidi*).

34. Matt 10:17, 23:34.

35. Cyril, *Sermo* 50; Augustine, *C. litt. Petil.* 2.14.

idea had put such a spell on early Christian minds that Cassiodorus found it wholly natural—in his substantial commentary on the book of Psalms—to link the notion of persecution directly to “the synagogue” and the “faithless Jews who dwell round the synagogue and not in it”—this in spite of the fact that there is absolutely nothing in the psalmist’s text that justifies an interpretation of this sort.<sup>36</sup>

These observations bring us, rather smoothly, to the third and final category. The absolute majority of passages in patristic literature that refer to the synagogue refer to it from the perspective of texts. These texts include, naturally, the NT. They also include the Hebrew Bible, because the Christians appropriated it as their OT. It hardly needs to be stressed that the above-named phenomena—looking at “the synagogue” through the eyeglass of authoritative texts—had far-reaching ramifications for the ways in which the synagogue would henceforth be perceived in early Christian circles. This was particularly so because from an early period onward (long before the canon of the Christian Bible was finally agreed upon), Christian exegetes began reading these texts figuratively. Importantly, these efforts were not dictated by clearly defined and universally accepted hermeneutical rules. Thus, one of the less-desirable side effects of this rather uncontrolled approach to Scripture was that it permitted exegetes to read statements into the biblical texts that no longer bore any resemblance at all to whatever original meaning or meanings the texts may have had.

Once this procedure had been established, it was not just the NT that could be employed to argue that “the synagogue” had become historically superfluous; the OT also could be mined indefinitely to show that God’s rejection of “the synagogue” had been imminent all along. As an example of the way that “the synagogue” was perceived through texts that were interpreted allegorically, one may refer to the patristic view of the biblical matriarchs Leah and Rachel. Beginning with a passage in the writings of Justin, from the mid-second century onward, “weak-eyed” Leah was being interpreted as prefiguring the rejected synagogue, whereas the beloved Rachel was seen as symbolizing a victorious early Christian church.<sup>37</sup> Once coined, the image held an enormous appeal among the Fathers in both East and West down to the very end of Antiquity and beyond. Although the following list is probably incomplete, we know that, in any case, figures such as Justin in Asia Minor, Cyprian in Roman North Africa, Commodian at an undisclosed location somewhere in the West, Jerome in Roman Palestine, Ambrose and Maximus in Italy, Gregorius of Elvira and later Isidorus of Seville in Spain, Caesarius of Arles in France, and Pope Gregory the Great in Rome were all familiar with it and propagated it in their work.<sup>38</sup> The reason that this image gained such popularity was not just, as Ambrose phrased it, because

36. Cassiodorus, *Exp. Ps.* 30.279.

37. Justin, *Dial.* 134.

38. Cyprian, *Test.* 1.20; Commodian, *Instr.* 1.39; Jerome, *Epist.* 22.21, 123.13; idem, *Jov.* 1.19; Maximus of Turin, *Con. Jud.* 5; Gregory of Elvira, *In Cant. Cant.* 4.5; Ambrose, *Jac.* 5.25; Caesarius, *Sermo* 88.2–4 and 104.1; Isidorus Hispalensis, *All. ex Vet. Test.* 28.105; Gregory, *Moral.* 30.25.

Leah with her infirm eyes was “like the synagogue that could not see Christ from the blindness of spirit.”<sup>39</sup> Nor was it because, in the words of Cyprian, “the younger beautiful Rachel . . . brought forth Joseph, who also was himself a type of Christ.”<sup>40</sup> It was especially because Rachel, although the younger wife, had taken precedence over Leah. Thus, it could be argued that there was something deeply and inevitably biblical about the fact that God now favored the younger church over the much older synagogue.

It is worthwhile to note in this context that this kind of early Christian supersessionist reasoning—hunting out the biblical text for models of superior, or rather, of unbeatable quality—was not an invention on the part of the Fathers. Rather it was of Pauline origin. In Rom 9:12–13, Paul observed, while paraphrasing Gen 25:23, that “it was said unto her [Rebecca], the elder shall serve the younger, even as it is written, Jacob I loved, but Esau I hated.” And in Gal 4:22–31, Paul had remarked that the biblical story of the son born of the “bondswoman, Hagar” versus the son born subsequently of the “freewoman,” Sarah, should be understood allegorically as referring to two covenants. According to this second, longer passage, one of Abraham’s wives was “bearing children unto bondage,” while the other had to be understood as being the mother of us “brothers,” who “are, as Isaac was, children of promise.” Paul was perfectly clear as to what needed to be done in this situation: “cast out the handmaid and her son, for the son of the handmaid shall not inherit with the son of the freewoman.”

Not surprisingly, the Fathers were all too eager to follow in Paul’s exegetical footsteps. Thus, above-mentioned themes recur in the works of Tertullian, Augustine, Maximus of Turin, and Ambrose, with the latter in particular taking this opportunity to stress that the synagogue was “the son of the slave-girl” and therefore nothing but a slave herself.<sup>41</sup> None of these Fathers, however, could surpass Caesarius of Arles when it came to tracking down scriptural precedents showing that in biblical times the younger had almost always been favored over the older. His preaching on “the synagogue” in one of his sermons led him to draw up a long list of pairs fitting into such a bipartite scheme: Cain and Abel, Hagar and Sarah, Ishmael and Isaac, Esau and Jacob, Leah and Rachel, Ephraim and Manasseh, Moses and Joshua (on the count that Moses, although leader of the Jewish people, was not allowed to enter the Promised Land), and Saul and David.<sup>42</sup> In the eyes of the Fathers of the church, then, the OT was nothing but an enormous treasure-trove in which God had ingeniously enshrined the idea that the one and only role of the synagogue in history was that of going to be surpassed by Christianity in general, and by the church in particular.

As for the Fathers’ reading of the NT, one cannot but expect that the same kind of approach—the allegorical approach—was common, as in fact it was. Thus, the

39. Ambrose, *Jac.* 5.25.

40. Cyprian, *Test.* 1.20.

41. Tertullian, *Adv. Jud.* 5; Maximus, *Sermo* 28.3; Augustine, *Enarrat. Ps.* 78.10; Ambrose, *Jac.* 3.10 and 3.13; idem, *Exp. Luc.* 3.29.

42. Caesarius, *Sermo* 104 passim. See also idem, *Sermo* 85.5 and 86.3.

parable in Luke 13:6–9 that relates the story of a man who wanted to cut his fig tree because it had failed to produce fruit was understood by Ambrose as referring to the Jews who, Ambrose said, fell on the ground “as unripe figs.” Ambrose also believed that it concurrently referred to the synagogue, because it should be cut down “as a barren tree.”<sup>43</sup> Augustine’s image of the synagogue as a withered (fig) tree has similar NT roots, as does Zeno’s notion of the synagogue as a vine no longer capable of producing grapes.<sup>44</sup> It hardly needs stressing that also in the case of the NT this procedure—trying to understand Scripture figuratively without the restraint of clear hermeneutical rules—enabled the Fathers to engage freely in associative thinking and to pass this off as good exegetical and, ultimately, as good pastoral practice.

A few examples should suffice to show that the connections made by the Fathers in the process are really quite astonishing. Matt 24:41, which states that, at the end of times, “two women shall be grinding at the mill; one is taken and one is left” led Maximus of Turin to expand and observe that “the synagogue grinds in vain; indeed it attempts to work with one millstone, the old covenant alone and consequently it does not so much grind as scatter and destroy.”<sup>45</sup> The same Maximus understood the story of Jesus healing a man with a withered hand on the Sabbath as recounted in Mark 3:1–6 as having a deeper meaning: “the hand of the synagogue grew unhealthy, for whoever deserts the source, who is Christ, immediately gets sick.”<sup>46</sup> And the reference to two boats, one of which served Jesus as he was preaching to the masses on the shores of the Sea of Galilee (Luke 5), was again seen by Maximus as a reference to the synagogue and the church, respectively, with the synagogue-boat all of a sudden lying “empty and useless” on the shore and the church-boat belonging to Simon Peter and carrying Jesus.<sup>47</sup>

To be sure, Maximus was not alone in approaching the NT in this way. Ambrose interpreted Luke 21:6, “there shall not be left here one stone upon another that shall not be thrown down,” not so much as a reference to the Jerusalem Temple, but as a prediction of what was about to happen to “the synagogue of the Jews.”<sup>48</sup> Luke 11:33—a passage stating that no man puts a lamp under a bushel but on a stand instead—was regarded by Ambrose as referring to the high priest and to the synagogue, where “the light has gone out” because it was placed under “the bushel of the law.”<sup>49</sup> But it was the story of the healing of the daughter of the synagogue’s *archon* Jairus in Luke 8:40–56 that inspired Ambrose to let go of his last bit of interpretational moderation. Thus, in his long *Exposition on the Gospel of Luke*, he argued that Jairus’s real

43. Ambrose, *Exp. Luc.* 7.172–73. Compare *Luc.* 7.161–65; idem, *Isaac* 4.36. For other passages, see Gregory Figueroa, *The Church and the Synagogue in St. Ambrose* (Studies in Sacred Theology 2.25; Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 1949), 31–34.

44. Augustine, *Sermo* 39.1; cf. Matt 21:19. Zeno, *Tract.* XB (II.28); cf. John 15:1.

45. Maximus, *Sermo* 20.4–5; cf. 33.5–6.

46. *Ibid.*, 43.2.

47. *Ibid.*, 49.2.

48. Ambrose, *Exp. Luc.* 10.6.

49. *Ibid.*, 7.98–99.

concern was not his dying little daughter but the synagogue, because it was on the brink of destruction, being driven into death after having been deserted by Jesus.<sup>50</sup> This totally fabricated explanation clinches the more general argument that, while none of the NT passages discussed in this paragraph has anything to do with actual synagogues, they had everything to do with the Fathers' preconceived and hostile notions regarding "the synagogue of the Jews."

Although none of the comments we have just seen can be considered particularly congenial toward Jews, there was one area where the Fathers' associative, free-style hermeneutics vis-à-vis "the synagogue" was to take on an especially nasty and consequential twist: in discussions of the death of Jesus. Inasmuch as patristic literature blamed the execution of Jesus on the Jews, and inasmuch as the Fathers concurrently equated "the Jews" with "the synagogue," it was only a matter of time before "the synagogue" became coterminous with "the crucifiers of Christ." Augustine's work is indicative of this development. He states plainly, in his *Commentary on Psalms*, that "the synagogue was indeed the murderer of the Lord."<sup>51</sup> To be sure, the idea can be seen to surface from a very early time onwards already—in the East in the works of Origen and in the West in a fragment of Hippolytus.<sup>52</sup> At this time it also makes its appearance in the earlier layers of such works as the *Apostolic Constitutions*.<sup>53</sup> Later, as the destruction of actual synagogues was underway toward the end of the fourth century, the idea that Jesus "was crucified from their synagogue" had become wholly self-evident.<sup>54</sup> Not only did Ambrose and Augustine refer to it as a matter of course, in far-away corners of the later Roman Empire, hymnists such as their slightly older contemporary Ephraem the Syrian did so as well.<sup>55</sup>

It is not hard to imagine that this notion, the idea that "the synagogue" was responsible for the killing of the son of God, the savior of all of humankind, infuriated the Fathers to no small degree. However, it was only because of the pervasiveness of their associative reasoning that this idea took on a life of its own—with the result that patristic exegesis on "the synagogue" was now really spinning out of control. Where in earlier patristic thought, "the synagogue" had been considered the murderer of Jesus alone, Gregory of Elvira began expanding this idea by saying that "the synagogue" was responsible for killing *everyone* who had believed in Christianity's Messiah.<sup>56</sup> Wherever the Fathers encountered "murder" in their texts, they now began linking it to the synagogue. Thus, commenting on the story of the death of John the Baptist in Matt 14:6–11, Maximus of Turin observed that the request of Herodias's daughter (she had asked for the head of John as compensation for her dancing

50. Ibid., 6.54.

51. Augustine, *Enarrat. Ps.* 73.4.

52. Origen, *Comm. Matt.* 14.17; Hippolytus, *Fr. Prov.*

53. *Apos. Con.* 2.56.

54. Ambrose, *Jos.* 9.47.

55. For Augustine and Ambrose, see the previous notes. Ephraem, *Sermo de Dom. Nostro* 1.25.

56. Gregory of Elvira, *In Cant. Cant.* 2.3.

on Herod's birthday) must "be compared to the synagogue which kills Christ."<sup>57</sup> In turn, Chromatius of Aquileia made the synagogue into a murderer of prophets. The passage that induced him to make this allegation, Matt 23:37, did not speak of "the synagogue" but of Jerusalem instead, but this did not bother him much. After all, were not Jerusalem and "the inhabitants of Jerusalem" and "the synagogue of the Jews" all identical? For Chromatius, Jews were the quintessential persecutors that engage in this activity "even now."<sup>58</sup> What else was the synagogue but an image of that evil and heathen queen, Jezebel, the idolatrous and merciless persecutor of the prophet Elijah?<sup>59</sup>

This rhetorical question brings us, finally, to one of the vilest and most artificial passages on the "murderous" synagogue in the work of Chromatius. Agreeing with the idea that the Jews were "serpents," Chromatius noted that they were not to be considered just any kind of serpent but a specific subspecies, "the race of vipers." Why? Because, unlike other snakes, vipers kill their mother instantly. The Jews had done exactly this. Through their "impiety," they slew their mother, the synagogue. And by calling, "His blood be on us, and on our children," they also killed their own offspring.<sup>60</sup> This passage completes our picture. What had begun with the allegation of the killing of a single person had now been generalized into something far more comprehensive and detrimental: in fourth-century patristic literature, "the synagogue" did not just kill Jesus, or even his followers; it was perceived as wont to kill everyone it could lay its hands on.

In conclusion, three remarks need to be added. Perhaps as a result of the particular reception history of the book of Revelation in the early church, the term "synagogue of Satan" (Rev 2:9 and 3:9) does not seem to have enjoyed much of an afterlife in patristic literature. The only church father to use it freely as a standard pejorative term seems to be Jerome.<sup>61</sup> Second, in the absolute majority of cases, the Fathers associated the synagogue with the Jews. This is not to deny that individual Fathers were aware of the fact that Jewish-Christians might use the same term to denote their own houses of worship.<sup>62</sup> Nor should one wish to gloss over the fact that terms such as "the synagogue of the heretics," "the synagogue of the Magi from Egypt," or "the synagogue of the Antichrist" occasionally pop up in the writings of the Fathers.<sup>63</sup> The fact that terms of this sort exist in the first place is not so much the

57. Maximus, *Sermo* 88.4.

58. Chromatius, *Sermo* 13.1.

59. *Ibid.*, 25.4. The same notion recurs in Ambrose, *Ep.* 63.79.

60. Chromatius, *Sermo* 9.4.

61. Jerome, *Epist.* 75, 84, 112, 123, 149; *Ruf.* 2.12 and 2.30. Also Augustine, *Bapt.* 7.24.

62. E.g., Epiphanius, *Pan.* 30.18.2. And compare the evidence cited by Schrage, "Συναγωγή," *TDNT* 7:839.

63. Synagogue of the heretics: Cyprian, *Ep.* 74.14–16; *Apos. Con.* 2.56. Synagogue of the Magi: Eusebius, *Hist. Eccl.* 7.10. Synagogue of the Anti-Christ: Jerome, *Lucif.* 2 (referring to Arians) and *Lucif.* 28 (referring to Marcionites and Valentinians). Note also that *CTh* 7.8.2 speaks of the *synagoga Iudaicae legis*.

result of the historical reality to which these terminologies purport to refer. Rather, they result first and foremost from the associative thinking of the Fathers: once the notion of “the synagogue” as the locus of evil had come into existence, it was not difficult to extend it, by means of associative reasoning, to other, non-Jewish kinds of evil, including groups of heterodox Christians.<sup>64</sup> The fact that fourth-century canon law decreed that the term *ecclesia* should never be used in reference to heretics surely strengthened the Fathers’ resolve to subsume heretics and their houses of worship under the general notion of “the synagogue.”<sup>65</sup> These developments also explain, third, the fairly idiosyncratic use of the terms *ecclesia* and *synagoga* in *Vetus Latina* and the Vulgate: while the LXX regularly translates עֲרֵהָ as συναγωγή, the *Vetus Latina* employs the Latin equivalent *synagoga*, especially when it can do so in conjunction with negative notions. The Vulgate then brings this development to a close in that it tries to eschew the term *synagoga* altogether whenever the word עֲרֵהָ turns up in the Biblical Hebrew sources.<sup>66</sup>

### **Implications**

The writings of the Fathers of the early church leave no room for doubt: in Late Antiquity, a semantic shift occurred that affected the term “synagogue” deeply and definitively. “The synagogue” ceased to be an actual place or a living institution. Instead it was abstracted into something else: the very essence of evil. Sure enough, “the synagogue” did not just become the church’s significant other. From the perspective of the early church, it evolved into the quintessential nemesis. Thus, for Christians “the synagogue” became the kind of arch-enemy that pagan or heterodox Christian groups could never be.

What is perhaps most striking about this process is its comprehensiveness in every possible way. For example, it was comprehensive in chronological and geographical terms. We have seen that it began manifesting itself early on in the second century and that, once this had happened, Fathers in all parts of the Roman Empire and down to the very end of Antiquity immediately picked up on it, only to elaborate on it further. There is also comprehensiveness in terms of the literary genres used to further this process. It occurs in commentaries on books of the Hebrew Bible—as in Augustine and Cassiodorus’s Psalm commentaries; in exegetical works on the NT—as in Ambrose’s exposition on the Gospel of Luke; in sermons—as in those of Chromatius of Aquileia, Maximus of Turin, or Caesarius of Arles; as well as in letters that were sent to communities all over the Mediterranean—as in those

64. This is particularly evident in *Apos. Con.* 2.56.

65. On canon law, see the short discussion and the reference in Amnon Linder, *The Jews in Roman Imperial Legislation* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press / Jerusalem: Israel Academy of Sciences and Humanities, 1987), 131 n. 17.

66. For a short discussion, see Peri, “*Ecclesia und synagoga*”; to which add the remarks of Cassiodorus, *Exp. Ps.* 7.178.



authored by Jerome. These remarks even occur occasionally in poetic works such as Commodian's *Instructiones*.

Finally, there is an uncanny comprehensiveness in terms of the imagery employed. As follows from the materials presented in the previous section of this essay, it is clear that the Fathers were at pains to represent the synagogue as an institution that was wholly incongruent with Christian society or, in fact, with any society. Thus they censured the synagogue from every conceivable angle: from a societal angle—the synagogue as slave and therefore socially defunct; from a legal angle—the synagogue as a home of robbers and murderers and therefore outside the law; from a moral angle—the synagogue as brothel and therefore incompatible with the ideals of Christian society; from a medical angle—the synagogue as leper and therefore both mortally ill and potentially infectious; and, naturally, from a theological angle—the synagogue as an institution that has been superseded, once and for all, by the church and therefore devoid of whatever *raison d'être* it may once have had.

What were the effects of the Fathers' anti-Jewish rhetoric vis-à-vis the synagogue? Were their misappropriations of Scripture nothing but exegetical exercises that arose in the heat of the moment? Or was there more to it than just that? One of the observations one could make is that the pronouncements presented in the section above should not be taken too seriously: this evidence is nothing but a condensation of ideas that, in reality, are spread evenly through an enormous corpus of literature that also deals with a great variety of other issues. Is it not true that the Fathers merely speak about the synagogue in passing? And is it not correct to observe that systematic treatises on "the synagogue" do not appear to have been very common?<sup>67</sup>

Rather than arguing against any possible impact, we must argue that it is precisely the pervasiveness of the Fathers' aggressive rhetoric against the synagogue that explains why, in the end, their writings had such lethal consequences for the Jews. We have seen that, without exception, the Fathers defined the synagogue in excessively negative terms. The fact that they did so—not just once, but again, and again, and again—could only have resulted in one thing: the readers of their writings and the listeners to their sermons began automatically to link "the synagogue" with everything that was undesirable and bad. The equation of "the synagogue" with "the Jews" made matters incomparably worse. After all, a whole range of dreadful things initially believed to apply to the Jews could now be applied without any restraint to the synagogue as well. By this point, the one term automatically triggered all the negative connotations associated with the other, and vice versa. By denouncing "the synagogue of the Jews" whenever the occasion arose, the Fathers were not just systematically indoctrinating their flocks. They were programming them neurologically.

Even worse, however, was the fact that this new definition of "the synagogue" kept interacting with the original definition. In Late Antiquity, the term "synagogue"

67. Gennadius (*De vir. ill.* 58) observes that Cyril of Alexandria wrote a treatise "On the Downfall of the Synagogue."

was not just an abstracted notion that had been stripped of its specificity; it could still be used to refer to the actual building, as has already been observed. Having been brainwashed to regard the synagogue as the very incarnation of evil, not just naturally but inevitably, Christians began to see the actual synagogue buildings of Late Antiquity as local manifestations of a much larger phenomenon. They thus commenced to consider individual synagogue buildings as the perfidious local outgrowths of a much more abstract, deeply troubling, and fundamentally threatening kind of problem.

It is at the point where the abstracted, wholly negative notion of “the synagogue” collided with the ongoing reality of the actual buildings—buildings in which people congregated who had lost their individuality as a result of patristic exegesis—that Christian theologians and the masses they addressed began to think that they now needed to translate thinking into practice. What other conclusion could one possibly draw when major ecclesiastical figures such as Ambrose argued, in reference to the dispersion of the Jewish people, that the Jews did not possess “a prescribed place of exile, but an unlimited one,” and that the purpose of this was so that “the place of the synagogue may never remain in the world”?<sup>68</sup> There can be little doubt indeed that the Fathers of the early church were directly responsible for what the *Theodosian Code* calls, in reference to the spoliation and destruction of synagogues, “illegal deeds” performed “under the name of Christian religion.”<sup>69</sup>

Modern empirical research indicates that exposure to violent media generally increases aggression in people, especially when violence seems justified, or when it is believed to have been sanctioned by God or has biblical support.<sup>70</sup> In the sources we have studied in the course of this contribution, we have seen that all the ingredients necessary for the eruption of such religiously inspired violence are present in our materials as well: early Christian communities were continually exposed to preaching that stressed by means of allegorical exposition of Scripture that an immoral synagogue had killed Jesus and that God had punished this same synagogue for this through the agency of the church. Thus, it was no longer a question “if” but “when” early Christian preaching on “the synagogue” would lead to actual violence. Early Christian writings concealed a time bomb that was ticking away ever more loudly as the fourth century entered its second half. By the time the really nasty patristic invectives against the synagogue appeared—John Chrysostom in the East; Ambrose, Zeno of Verona, Chromatius of Aquileia, and Gregory of Elvira in the West—this bomb finally exploded.<sup>71</sup>

68. Ambrose, *Exp. Luc.* 9.21–22.

69. *CTh* 16.8.9 of 393 C.E. Along similar lines, *CTh* 16.8.26 of 423 C.E.

70. Brad J. Bushman et al., “When God Sanctions Killing: Effect of Scriptural Violence on Aggression,” *Psychological Science* 18 (2007): 204–7.

71. Ramsay MacMullen (“The Historical Role of the Masses in Late Antiquity,” *Changes in the Roman Empire: Essays in the Ordinary* [Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990], 250–76, esp. pp. 271–73) argues that in Late Antiquity the masses were not propelled into action by

Why it happened at this point in time rather than earlier or later was probably not only the result of sustained and ever-more-intense preaching against “the synagogue” during this period by the early Christian ecclesiastical leadership. The fact that, during these same years, Christianity was declared a state religion is likely to have contributed to this process as well. So did a more general trend in early Christian thinking: coercion was a legitimate means to further the spread of what the proponents saw as the one and only true Christian religion.<sup>72</sup> The sheer violence that ensued as a result of all these developments was, in any case, enormous. As evidenced by the *Theodosian Code*, aggression was not directed only at synagogues. By the early fifth century, Jewish houses needed protection by the state as well.<sup>73</sup> Legislators wanting to maintain law and order passed edicts against this sort of behavior and appear to have done the best they could. Nevertheless, they were not impervious to change, nor could they go against the spirit of the times. In fact, once the example had been set with the Callinicum affair in 388 C.E., it took Christian theologians a mere 35 years to obliterate the age-old tradition of Roman legal tolerance toward Jews and to force upon the late Roman legislature their conviction that the construction of new synagogues should be outlawed once and for all.<sup>74</sup>

Taken together, the evidence allows us to draw the following conclusion. By the end of the fourth century, “the synagogue” had become not just a formidable opponent. It had become Christianity’s quintessential foe. While this foe was largely a hermeneutical construct, Christians were not blind. In real life, the synagogue as a building assumed more monumental proportions than ever before. In addition, the community associated with it kept its appeal for Christians. For the Jews themselves, the synagogue of Late Antiquity was more than just a building: throughout the later Roman Empire in inscriptions composed in Greek, the term ὁ ἅγιος or ὁ ἁγιώτατος τόπος began to replace the more traditional συναγωγή.<sup>75</sup> All of this bothered

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sermons and preaching but by slogans that were set to music. Such an explanation is too one-dimensional to be convincing.

72. Peter Brown, “St. Augustine’s Attitude to Religious Coercion,” *JRS* 54 (1964): 107–16. On the lethal combination of monotheistic religion and a coercive state, see also the useful but rather declarative statements of Rodney Stark, *One True God: Historical Consequences of Monotheism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001), 119–22.

73. *CTh* 16.8.21 of 412 C.E.

74. This happened in 423; cf. *CTh* 16.8.27.

75. A quick count produced the following results as to the number of late antique (late third through mid-sixth century) inscriptions in which these terms occur: “synagogue” (as building): four versus “holy” or “most holy synagogue” or “place”: fourteen (includes one inscription in Latin). For the evidence, see Yann le Bohec, “Inscriptions juives et judaïsantes de l’Afrique romaine,” *Antiquités Africaines* 17 (1981): 178, no. 13; Lea Roth-Gerson, *The Greek Inscriptions from the Synagogues in Eretz-Israel* (Jerusalem: Yad Ben-Zvi, 1987), nos. 10, 17, 21, and 23 [Hebrew]; William Horbury and David Noy, *Jewish Inscriptions of Graeco-Roman Egypt* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), no. 17; Noy, Panayotov, and Bloedhorn, *Inscriptiones Judaicae Orientis*, vol. 1, Mac 7, Ach. 23, 47, 54, 58; Walter Ameling, *Inscriptiones Judaicae Orientis*, vol. 2: *Kleinasien* (TSAJ 99; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2004), nos. 20, 49, 158, 191 B, 219; D. Noy and

Christians. Their exegetes had long told them that “the synagogue” was theologically extinct. How, then, could the existence of such monumental synagogue buildings be explained, let alone endured?

While the late Roman state protected the integrity of Jewish property, at least in writing, it was the Christian redefinition of the term “synagogue” that provided early Christian preachers the powerful weapon for which they had been looking. By stripping the term “synagogue” of its particular characteristics and then appealing to a sense of retributive justice and a desire to be counted good Christians, early Christian preachers successfully turned their communities into overly excited crowds—or rather, into raging mobs ready to torch actual synagogues or to turn them into churches. Thus, the destruction of synagogues in Late Antiquity documents the fact that there is a rather sinister flip side to John Chrysostom’s infamous *Adversus Iudaeos*. Typically used to document the continued importance of meaningful contacts between Jews and Christians and as evidence of Christianity’s inability to prevent these contacts, Chrysostom’s treatise should also be seen as part of larger and all-too-successful effort on the part of the Fathers to create an atmosphere in which hate crimes against the Jews and their synagogues were considered both desirable and mandatory. That the early Christian exegetical construct of “the synagogue” should spill over into reality in the way it did shows that in the later fourth century early Christian self-definition was characterized not just by a strong desire to maintain boundaries by force. The need to behave punitively toward people believed to be identical with a hermeneutically constructed “other” was no less an integral part of Christianity.

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Hanswulf Bloedhorn, *Inscriptiones Judaicae Orientis*, vol. 3: *Syria and Cyprus* (TSAJ 102; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2004), Syr 34. On the phenomenon of synagogue sanctity in general, see Steven Fine, *This Holy Place: On the Sanctity of the Synagogue in Greco-Roman Times* (Christianity and Judaism in Antiquity 11; Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1997).