

WHAT IS THE SYNAGOGUE OF SATAN? by Mottel Baleston, www.MessiahNJ.org

Every discerning believer understands that in the last year, ever since the barbaric October 7 attack by Hamas terrorists against Israel, anti-Semites have felt emboldened to crawl out from under their rocks and publicly make not only anti-Israel statements, but actually call for violence against Jewish people who have nothing to do with Israel. We've always clearly said that there is a place for legitimate criticism of some of the policies of Israel, Israelis do this all the time, but recent statements have become clearly racist as various groups agitate against Jews worldwide. For those of us who are Jewish believers in Messiah Yeshua, this is not a theoretical issue but one that is very real, something we experience with increased frequently and can be upsetting.

Recently a Jewish believer I know, someone who is involved in full-time evangelical ministry, related hearing bold statements which were clearly anti-Semitic in an otherwise Bible believing church. The particular phrase used was that Jewish people who have not yet come to faith in Messiah Jesus are the "Synagogue of Satan". That particular phrase is most often found in the propaganda by racist groups of various stripes as an attempt to agitate against the Jewish people as an entire group. The same racist groups frequently also agitate against other racial minorities, albeit in different ways. However when used by people who claim to be Christians, it often has reference to a couple of verses found in many English translations of the Book of Revelation. Here are the verses:

"I know about the slander of those who say they are Jews and are not, but are a synagogue of Satan.
(Revelation 2:9)

"Behold, I will cause those of the synagogue of Satan, who say that they are Jews and are not, but lie – I will make them come and bow down at your feet, and make them know that I have loved you"
(Revelation 3:9).

VARIETY WITHIN THE JEWISH COMMUNITY OF THE FIRST CENTURY

Before attempting to understand these two verses, we need to be reminded that the Jewish community of the first century, the community from which the Messiah and the Apostles came, was not uniform but was very diverse, with conflicts that sometimes became violent. Many would be shocked to know that in the year 103 BC the Hasmoneans, the predecessors of the Sadducees, were locked in a struggle with the Pharisees for dominance within Judaism. In that year a wealthy Sadducee Prince, Alexander Jannai, had 800 Pharisees crucified after he took power. Similar struggles would go on for hundreds of years and are even on display in the New Testament. When outsiders of that day looked at the struggle between the Jewish believers in Jesus and those who held to Rabbinic Judaism during the first century, that contest seemed familiar, in keeping with the pattern they had seen within Judaism. Each group claimed to be the inheritors of the mantle of biblical faith. The rhetoric that one sometimes encounters in historical Jewish literature between different Jewish groups actually makes the language of the New Testament sound relatively mild. At the same time it must be always kept in mind that this was an intra— family struggle, one group of Jews asserting Yeshua was Messiah and the other group denying it. Even in the New Testament when we see conflicts between Jewish believers in Yeshua and those in mainstream Judaism, that conflict was not Christianity against Judaism, because those two phrases as they are understood today only came into their current form 500 years after the New Testament narrative. Too

often people read of these New Testament conflicts between these two Jewish groups as a conflict between what we now call Christianity and Judaism. They forget that there has been over a thousand years of violent persecution by the powerful and often corrupt institutional denominations of Christendom against Jewish communities in Europe who were defenseless. That sort of institutional Christendom also often persecuted Bible believing, genuine Christians. So again, the New Testament narrative must be read in the context of an inter family Jewish struggle over one central question: was Yeshua our promised Messiah?

THE USE OF THE GREEK WORD 'SYNAGOGUE'

A most important matter is the use of the Greek word synagogue in the New Testament. In the development of Koine Greek, συναγωγή, initially the word '*synagoge*' simply meant a gathering of people, not one that was necessarily Jewish. Not only is it used of non-Jewish gatherings, in James 2:2 the Greek word "synagogue" appears in the original text to designate a gathering of believers in Jesus. Yet most English versions translate the word as 'assembly' or 'meeting'. It's the same word as the two occurrences in Revelation, yet many Christian translations choose to translate the positive use of that word as simply an assembly, but then choose to translate the negative view of that word as synagogue, a word that is now thought of as being exclusively Jewish. Do you see what's happening there? It's like the artwork of the Renaissance period showing New Testament scenes. The Jewish apostles of Jesus are shown looking very fair skinned and European, whereas Jewish people who are not believers are depicted in less than flattering artwork. In reality, it was the same ethnic group. Those painters are exposing their bias, as are some translators when they 'spin' the translation to put Jewish people in a negative light in the two passages in the book of Revelation.

WOULD MESSIAH HAVE WORSHIPPED IN A SYNAGOGUE OF SATAN?

For those who take an extreme anti-Semitic view and regard the two Revelation passages as speaking of Jewish people generally, they have a mammoth problem in that Messiah Yeshua grew up worshiping in the synagogue in Nazareth. Mary and Joseph also brought him up to Jerusalem for Jewish worship services when he was 12 years old. The apostle Paul also entered Jewish synagogues throughout the book of Acts for both worship, saying that he was a Hebrew of Hebrews of the tribe of Benjamin, and in that context to deliver the good news of the arrival of our Messiah. Would Yeshua and the Apostle Paul have participated in these ceremonies in a 'Synagogue of Satan'?

WHAT WAS THE SITUATION THAT REVELATION ADDRESSES?

First off, even if you scan good evangelical commentaries which take a literal approach, there is much diversity on how to understand the Letters to the seven churches in Revelation 1, 2 and 3. Are the conditions mentioned and the warnings given specifically applicable to those specific geographic locations and assemblies? There are some good scholars who hold this view. Are these seven churches representative of seven church ages throughout history? That's a view which has been popular in some of our circles, but is increasingly being questioned. It may well be that the two instances which say "those of the synagogue of Satan who say that they are Jews and are not" are referencing particular situations in Smyrna and Philadelphia where a group of people who claim to be ethnically Jewish,

thinking it granted them favored standing with God, but were not actually Jewish, were harassing the believers in those two churches. There were many such schisms during the first century some, some referenced in the book of Acts. Because we understand that the word synagogue did not at that time carry the modern religious understanding of being exclusively Jewish, is easy to see that this was a gathering of individuals who are harassing the believers and whose doctrine was distinctly in error. In no way should that local situation be exploited to justify someone's racist bigotry against Jews today, yet there are believers who embarrass themselves by maintaining just that position.

Of course, for many who hold onto prejudice against the Jewish people, they believe that passages such as Romans 2:28-29 teach that all born-again believers become spiritual Jews and that helps them label nonbelieving Jews as the 'synagogue of Satan'. It was exactly that sort of twisting of Scripture that gave justification in the twisted minds of some church members that the Holocaust was justifiable. That error of replacement theology completely overlooks whom that passage is actually addressed to; ethnically Jewish people as seen in verse 17. He is warning them that it is not enough to be ethnically Jewish, they must also embrace saving faith through the Jewish Messiah to really be 'Yehudim', the Hebrew word for Jews, a word meaning 'praisers of God'. He challenges them in verses 17 through 29 that it is not enough to simply be ethnically Jewish if you reject our Jewish Messiah.

In these days when many believers are getting their teaching from bigoted YouTube videos against the Jewish people, it is sad to see people being gullible and embracing bigotry and conspiracy theories against the Jewish community that they are directly warned against in the entirety of Romans 11. All of us who've come into the family of God have an equally beloved standing. We are told to be content in whatever state God has called us, whether Jewish or Gentile, and to use the time available to call all people to a saving knowledge of Messiah Yeshua.

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