

THE ROLE OF THE SYNAGOGUE IN THE AIMS OF JESUS. JORDAN J. RYAN,
MINNEAPOLIS: FORTRESS PRESS, 2017. (396 PP) [ISBN 9781506428116]

Julia Van Den Brink
Auckland, New Zealand

Jordan J. Ryan's *The Role of the Synagogue in the Aims of Jesus* is a masterful piece of scholarship. He sets out to examine how Jesus used synagogues throughout Israel to further his ministry, and the case he presents is well argued and robust. He begins in chapter one by laying out the gap the book seeks to fill: the synagogue has not featured much in studies of the historical Jesus despite considerable focus on his Jewish background. Because synagogues regularly feature in the Gospels, they must fulfil a particular role in Jesus' aims and therefore his teaching in synagogues should be understood within that context. To achieve this, he uses a combination of historiography and philosophy of history, drawing particularly on the work of R. G. Collingwood (*The Idea of History*) and Bernard Lonergan (*Insight and Method in Theology*). (He discusses the work of both authors in more detail in the appendices.) This combination provides an intriguing answer to what Ryan (following Collingwood) terms the "scissors-and-paste" method (pg. 13) usually employed in historical Jesus studies, of which he is a harsh but fair critic.

In chapter two, Ryan reviews current scholarship on the synagogue and outlines the various Greek, Hebrew, and Latin terms used, concluding that these can refer to a gathering, a building, or one of the many functions of a synagogue. He argues for two types of synagogue: public and association. Association synagogues were mainly found in the Diaspora where they function like a modern-day club. Not everyone in a town or city can participate as they are gatherings for a particular group. By contrast, public synagogues were found in Israel because the Jews had political and religious control. They functioned more like a local council with the community gathering for a range of religious and political reasons. The third chapter looks into the details of the first century public synagogues, focusing on its functions, people, and buildings. Ryan evaluates how the synagogue is used in the study of Jesus in chapter four. He outlines three phases in the preceding scholarship and concludes that research done on the synagogue has not played a large role in any of them.

In chapters five to seven, Ryan explores how the synagogue fitted into Jesus' aims by looking at the evidence in the Synoptic Gospels. In chapter five, he notes that, despite the few occasions of Jesus preaching in the synagogues preserved in the Gospels, the Kingdom was a core element in Jesus' synagogue teaching. Chapter six focuses on Luke 4:16–30, particularly the debate regarding Jesus' level of literacy. Here Ryan's methodology shines as he is able to balance the historical evidence for literacy in the ancient world with a good dose of pragmatism and comes to a solid conclusion which respects both the extra-biblical evidence and the account of Luke. Chapter seven covers the healings and exorcisms that took place in synagogues (Mark 1:21–28; 3:1–6; Luke 13:10–17) and places them in the context of the public synagogue outlined in chapter three. The result is a well-rounded account of

Jesus engaging the challenges of the Pharisees and synagogue officials to convince the town that his teaching was legitimate.

Chapter eight turns to John 6:25–71 and posits a synagogue location for this event in Capernaum where Jesus is initially successful in convincing the synagogue audience. However, when he mentions eating his flesh and drinking his blood, they turn against and reject him. Ryan considers that the rejections at Nazareth and Capernaum could have led to Jesus changing his tactics, but only hints at whether the result was his journey to Jerusalem or a shift towards open-air teaching. This shift away from the synagogue could have been fleshed out further as it raised more questions than it answered.

The penultimate chapter (chapter nine) turns to Jesus' teaching in the temple. Ryan argues that the temple functioned in ways similar to the synagogue, but that its scope was national rather than local. He also discusses the reaction of the Jerusalem elites to Jesus' followers, who were threatened with exclusion from the synagogue. Such exclusion, Ryan argues, would result in those people being cut off from participation in an institution central to the functioning of first-century Jewish society. It could be argued that the drawbacks of such a fate are as clear as with a religious understanding of the synagogue. However, under Ryan's socio-religious-political synagogue, a much deeper threat is highlighted in that Jesus' followers faced an all-encompassing exclusion from the institution at the heart of their society, tantamount to being cut off from all government support today.

In concluding, Ryan sees this book making a three-fold contribution: 1) the adoption of a combination of philosophy of history and historiography as a method in historical Jesus studies; 2) the reconstruction of the synagogues as a local-official institution; and 3) the role of the synagogue in Jesus' aims.

Overall, Ryan's work is engaging and thorough, critiquing the downsides of historical Jesus studies while also providing a robust alternative method that draws greatly on the practices and realities of history. His challenge to the dominant "scissors-and-paste" method stems from a desire to see the field of historical Jesus studies move beyond a discussion of which sources are authentic to interpreting the historical value of those sources. Throughout chapters 5–9, Ryan clearly explained how he was using the central feature of his methodology, historical imagination, to draw his conclusions from the combination of the Gospel text and the historical reconstruction of the synagogue, providing a baseline for anyone wishing to utilise it in their research.

One of the many strengths of this study is how Ryan provides a glimpse into the workings of the first-century synagogue that is not limited to a religious function and has a central place in Jewish society. Against this background, Gospel events that take place in the New Testament appear in a more nuanced light than against a solely religious background. They transition from two- to three-dimensions and Jesus' actions in the synagogues and the reactions they provoke start to make more sense. Ryan's interpretation of Jesus' interactions with the synagogue provides details easily missed after twenty-one centuries of distance and are of considerable benefit to historical Jesus and New Testament studies.