

What was the “Synagogue of the Freedmen” mentioned in Acts 6:9?

Response by James Moriello, Firm Foundation Christian Church, Woonsocket, RI, USA, 2017

In summary, this was an orthodox Jewish community of Hellenist (Greek speaking) Jews that existed back in the first century A.D. It was made up of those who were of the dispersion, and drew upon the thought and teaching of the prominent rabbinic communities which then existed in Alexandria and Cyrene in particular. The “Synagogue of the Freedman” may have originally got its name from its founding members having been liberated from Roman slavery. It also may have gotten its name from a place in North Africa called Libertum (hence the term “Libertines”, which is here translated “Freedmen”), from which its founders may have originated. In any case, the name of the synagogue was probably more derived from its founding than any circumstance which existed in the days of Stephen in the Book of Acts.

The following article, written from a Jewish perspective, may be helpful in furnishing additional information and details.

Jerusalem Synagogue of the Freedmen (Prof. Peter Shirokov, eTeacherBiblical)

According to New Testament, Josephus and rabbinic sources in the first century there were hundreds of synagogues across Israel. (Mark 1:21; Luke 7:1; Acts 9:2; Babylonian Talmud, Ketubot 105a, Tosefta, Sukkah 4.5, Josephus, Wars 2. 285-290, Life 277, Antiquities XIX. 300). Despite the temple being the central place of worship Jerusalem had many synagogues. The book of Acts mentions one of these Jerusalem synagogues that bears an unusual name.

And Stephen, full of grace and power, did great wonders and signs among the people. Then some of those who belonged to the synagogue of the Freedmen (as it was called), and of the Cyre'nians, and of the Alexandrians, and of those from Cili'cia and Asia, arose and disputed with Stephen. But they could not withstand the wisdom and the Spirit with which he spoke. (Acts 6:8-10 RSV)

The Synagogue of the Freedmen (συναγωγή τῶν Λιβερτίνων) is mentioned in Acts 6:9. The Greek term Freedmen (Λιβερτίνος) is a loan word from Latin *libertini*, who were freed slaves. In the Roman world this was a reference to one's social status, usually for the purpose of differentiating one from someone who was never a slave. In Acts 6:9 those who belonged to this synagogue together with Cyrenian, Alexandrian, Cilician and Asian Jews argued with Stephen, one of the deacons (servants) in the Jerusalem Assembly. As a result of this theological dispute Stephen was falsely accused of blasphemy, tried and stoned outside the city (Acts 6:11-7:59). Only a handful of historical references provide clues to the nature and composition of this Synagogue of Freedmen in Jerusalem, producing multiple scholarly theories and speculations.

In seeking to understand the nature of this synagogue some scholars focus on the name Freedmen, who could have been Jews taken into slavery by the Romans under Pompey in 63 BC (Philo, Embassy to Gaius 23). The descendants of slaves who were freed were also called Freedmen. It is possible that these freed slaves were proselytes (προσήλυτοι), enslaved non-Jews, who embraced the Jewish way of life. Ancient sources mention thousands of slaves embracing Jewish beliefs (Tacitus, Annals 2, 85, Philo, Embassy to Gaius 155). The names of the synagogues can refer to the makeup of the language of the congregation, such as "synagogue of the Hebrews". But there are examples of synagogues being named after their patrons and founders, for example, Synagogue of the Agustans, Agrippans, Herodians. The Synagogue of the Freedmen may have been somehow connected to freed slaves at the time of its establishment, but its membership could have been very different in the 1st century. There is also a less popular opinion, based on ancient Armenian and Syriac commentaries, that the synagogue name did not mention freed slaves, but Libyans, which would make all names in Acts 9:6 geographical locations (Levine, Bruce).

A first century inscription, discovered by Raymond Weill in 1913-1914 in the lower City of David, confirmed the existence of a Greek-speaking synagogue in Jerusalem. The plaque identifies Theodotus son of Vettenus as a founder, priest and the head of the synagogue. The inscription credits the builder with the construction of ritual baths and a guesthouse available to travelers. Because Theodotus is a Greek name and Vettenus is a Latin name some scholars (Weill, Clermont-Geneau, Reinach, Vincent and others) theorized that Vettenus was a Freedman, who bore the name of his former master. Other scholars (Safrai, Roth-Gerson, Bruce, Kloppenberg and others) reject this theory and connection of the plaque to the Synagogue of the Freedmen mentioned in Acts 6:9 citing lack of tangible evidence.

Despite the scholarly disagreements there is a general consensus that the Synagogue of the Freedmen mentioned in Acts 6:9 was a Greek-speaking synagogue of the first century Hellenized Diaspora Jews. The other groups mentioned in Acts 6:9 (Cyrene, Alexandria, Cilicia and Asia) are all well-known Greek-speaking Jewish Diaspora communities which could have been distinct or a part of this same synagogue. Several Hellenistic Diaspora communities may have shared one facility, making them several synagogues, or gatherings under the same roof. Stephen himself was believed to be one of the Hellenist Jews (Ἑλληνιστής) who spoke and worshipped in Greek. If true, this would explain Stephen's appointment for service in Acts 6:1-7. However, Hellenistic orientation of the Synagogue of the Freedmen did not make them any less zealous in their beliefs, which is why the synagogue was involved in this conflict in Acts 6:9.

(This text is an excerpt from an entry in Online Lexham Bible Dictionary by Logos Press).