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this holy place, and who will continue to give charity in the future. May that person be blessed. Amen, Amen, Selah. And to me, Amen."

Acknowledging this holy status, the emperor Valentinian I (ca. 370 C.E.) referred to the synagogue as a *religionum loca* (a religious place) in an imperial edict justifying the prohibition against soldiers seizing quarters there.

What did the Jews mean when they used the terms "sacred" and "holy" to describe their synagogues?

We don't know for sure. There are several possibilities. Were synagogue buildings holy because of God's reputed presence there? Did holiness derive from the "holy congregation," sacred objects (e.g., the Torah scrolls), or religious functions (e.g., the prayer service) conducted therein? Moreover, terms such as "holy" and "sacred" may have had markedly different meanings to different communities or from one period to the next. It is quite possible that the members of one community did not even understand these terms in the same way. Also they might have been competing with Christian churches for the mantle of "sacred" or "holy" at a time when some churches were claiming to be replicas of or substitutes for the Jerusalem Temple and thereby the legitimate heirs of Temple practice. Spurred by Christian practice and polemics, the association of the synagogue with the Temple, Jerusalem, and holiness may have gained impetus in the Byzantine era.

What happened after the Byzantine period ended?

With but few exceptions, synagogues disappeared soon after the Arab conquest in 640 C.E. Jewish life in Palestine declined precipitously as the focus of Arab rule shifted away from the Mediterranean Sea and the coastal areas and to the desert and caravan cities.

Still, these same forces that had encouraged a surge of creativity in the ancient synagogues of Byzantine-era Palestine were at work in the Diaspora as well. It is that story we will tell in our next installment. □

▶ **Next: Part IV, Diaspora Synagogues in Late Antiquity**