

Your QUESTIONS About Prophecy ANSWERED Part 7

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A SYNAGOGUE IS NOT THE TEMPLE

Previously we discussed the various theories on where the Temple was located on the Temple Mount. We also touched upon the different views the Jewish people have on rebuilding the Temple. If you didn't have a chance to read these articles earlier, they are posted on our website at: www.middleeastministries.org/Prophecy.htm.

In this issue, we are going to take a brief look at the history of the synagogue and answer the question, "Do Jewish people offer sacrifices today?"

"The Jews are about ready to offer sacrifices!" So read a headline of a newsletter article sent out by a leading prophecy speaker in 1981. The writer went on to write that the Great Synagogue being built in Jerusalem at the time was going to be used to reinstate the sacrificial system. In the years since, I have driven by the Great Synagogue many times and have not seen any evidence of animal sacrifices. What the writer was revealing was his ignorance of Judaism and Jewish history.

The first interesting fact about a synagogue is the name itself and its first mention as a place of worship in the

Bible. The word "synagogue" is derived from the Greek word "synagōgē" meaning a gathering of people for religious or secular purposes. While the word is found over 200 times in the Greek translation of the Old Testament (LXX), it was not used to designate a place of worship. The first time in our Bible where "synagōgē" designates a place of worship is in the New Testament. While some in Judaism hold

that the institution of the synagogue was given by Moses in the oral traditions, most scholars believe the synagogue developed as an institution during the Babylonian exile.

The Babylonian exile created a unique problem for the Jewish people. The Temple had been destroyed; therefore there was no place to perform Temple sacrifice and worship. Even if there were a Temple, many of the people were exiled making it too far to travel to Jerusalem. Scholars today say, in part to rationalize Judaism without a Temple, that the institution of Temple worship had served its course and God was ushering in a new way of worship.

All this formalism, primitive in character, changed when the many thousands of captive Jews had been driven by Nebuchadnezzar into Exile in Babylonia in 586 B.C.E. It was in adversity in a foreign land that the synagogue came into being, evolving primarily from practical considerations. The exiles, far from the Temple which lay in ruins in Jerusalem, desperately wished to maintain the continuity of their religious life in Babylonia. But since they could no longer offer sacrifices in their own sanctuary nor were permitted to build a new one in Captivity, only prayer was left to serve their religious needs: 'so will we render for bullocks the offering of our own lips.' In this manner, the institution of congregational prayer was first established. (The Book of Jewish Knowledge -1964)

According to many, this movement from the centrality of a formal Temple worship which was empty and soulless to prayer and a more earnest

questioning of religious values began with the prophets, Isaiah and Amos. *"To what purpose is the multitude of your sacrifices to Me?" Says the LORD. "I have had enough of burnt offerings of rams And the fat of fed cattle. I do not delight in the blood of bulls, Or of lambs or goats (Isaiah 1:11). "I hate, I despise your feast days, And I do not savor your sacred assemblies. Though you offer Me burnt offerings and your grain offerings, I will not accept them, Nor will I regard your fattened peace offerings (Amos 5:21-22).*

The synagogue soon became the central place for learning and prayer which replaced the need for animal sacrifices. The first century Jewish philosopher Philo wrote: "though the worshipers bring nothing else, in bringing themselves they offer the best sacrifices, the full and truly perfect oblation of noble living, as they honor with hymns and thanksgivings their Benefactor and Savior-God."

Soon there were synagogues wherever there was a Jewish community. Even after the Temple was rebuilt, the institution of the synagogue flourished. The Talmud states there were 394 synagogues in Jerusalem alone during the time of Herod's Temple. Some believe there may have even been a synagogue or two on the Temple Mount. It may have been in one of those synagogues where Mary and Joseph found Jesus "sitting in the midst of the teachers, both listening to them and asking them questions" (Luke 2:46). The synagogue was the place people gathered to discuss the scriptures and the teachings of the rabbis.

The Temple still had a powerful emotional effect through its festival ceremonies, but it was the synagogue that functioned as the religious center for the Jewish people. The rabbis (Pharisees) were increasing in their influence while the priests (Sadducees) were declining in their influence over the religious life of the Jewish community.

The synagogue also provided the right atmosphere for a visiting teacher to come and discuss issues and teach the scriptures. Jesus often went to a synagogue to teach. Paul, whenever he went to a new city, would first go to the synagogue to share his faith. It provided the natural environment for sharing new ideas. Sadly, the synagogue also created a mindset that rejected the Gospel. The foundation of the Gospel message is that sin has separated us from God and a sacrifice is required to reestablish that broken relationship. The synagogue, with its institutions, taught that sacrifices are not as important as prayer, good deeds, and knowledge (understanding the teachings of the rabbis). This was Paul's heartache when he wrote, "*Brethren, my heart's desire and prayer to God*

for Israel is that they may be saved. For I bear them witness that they have a zeal for God, but not according to knowledge. For they being ignorant of God's righteousness, and seeking to establish their own righteousness, have not submitted to the righteousness of God" (Romans 10:1-3).

Though the destruction of the Temple had an impact on Judaism, it was not catastrophic because of the institution of the synagogue. It became much easier for the Jewish scholars to say that God wanted his people to be a people of prayer, good deeds and knowledge rather than be participants in an antiquated sacrificial system. The synagogue also provided the glue that held the Jewish community together as it was scattered around the world after 70 AD.

Today, the synagogue is the center of activity for every religious Jewish community. The desire of Jewish people for a rebuilt Temple varies among different groups. The Orthodox believe the Temple must be rebuilt and the sacrificial system reinstated. The more moderate Jews (Conservative) believe the Temple may be rebuilt but it will not include animal sacrifices. Finally, the liberal Jews (Reform and Reconstructionists) believe the Temple is totally unnecessary. To emphasize

this position, they call their synagogues temples to indicate that the synagogue has replaced the Temple.

Do Jewish people offer sacrifices today? Not animal sacrifices, but sacrifices of prayer, good deeds, and learning.

The synagogue has been an instrument to preserve the Jewish people. Is it possible that God may use it to bring His people back to Himself in these Last Days? **A recent survey of Israelis reveals that 40 percent have been seeking God in a more meaningful way.** They no longer find their hope in a strong military or in political solutions - all have failed. Add to this the popular view in the world-at-large that the Jews do not have a legitimate right to the Land. The Israelis are beginning to realize their only source for a legitimate right to live in Israel is the Bible, not the teachings of the rabbis or a U.N. resolution. The prophet Hosea wrote: "*For the children of Israel shall abide many days without king or prince, without sacrifice or sacred pillar, without ephod or teraphim. Afterward the children of Israel shall return and seek the LORD their God and David their king. They shall fear the LORD and His goodness in the latter days" (Hosea 3:4-5).* It will be interesting to see if God uses the same institution that Jesus and Paul used to bring the Good News to Israel again. Remember, 144,000 Jewish men will be sealed for ministry during the Tribulation. Where do they come from? How do they come to believe in Jesus as Messiah after the Church has been raptured? The synagogue may be the answer.

Let Paul's prayer be ours: "*Brethren, my heart's desire and prayer to God for Israel is that they may be saved" (Romans 10:1).*

-Larry Jaffrey