

Synagogue, Siddur and Liturgy – An Introduction

(With Timeline)

for Messianic Believers

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History of the synagogue

During the period of the First Temple (957 to 586 BCE) and continuing for 2 or 3 centuries after it's destruction, the word of God was believed to come primarily through the prophets, the priests (using *Urim* and *Thummim*, see *1 Sam 28:6*), and dreams. A major shift occurred when it seemed that prophecy had departed from Israel after the last prophets died (b. B. Bat.14b); the *Urim* and *Thummim* disappeared; and dreams were no longer considered divine messages from heaven (b. Ber.55b). Therefore, these methods for discovering the divine will were replaced with the Bible.*

The role of mediators between God and man switched to the Rabbis. The Jewish people had been given a Book which was understood to be God's revelation. Thus a new era with continuous revelation for all began by way of the Bible. *

Eventually, the religion and culture of Israel developed around the *Tanakh* in Houses of Study, in schools and at religious celebrations. In time, the need to hear the word of God led to the rise of the synagogue as a place where Jews could gather to listen to the word of God and discover its meaning. After a while, these gatherings became organized. Synagogues popped up in towns everywhere*, including one right next to the Second Temple!

By the time of Yeshua, the primary purpose of the synagogue was for the study of the 24 books of the *Tanakh*.

**The Jewish Study Bible Essays*, pg 1929, (JPS *Tanakh*) by Oxford University Press, 2004

This New Testament period of the synagogue is explicated by Rabbi Herb Opalek of blessed memory in *Why I prefer the term Congregation, rather than Synagogue*.

There are significant usages of synagogue in the Brit HaChadasha (*New Testament*); Matthew 12.9-14 and parallels shows that the assembly is meeting on Shabbat to hear the Torah read and interpreted. This is evident from the same passage in Luke 6.6 where we find that Luke further explains 'He went to the synagogue and taught'. Here it is obvious that synagogue was a study hall and not a house of prayer.

In Matthew 10.17 and 23.34, Mark 13.9, Luke 12.11 and 21.12 note the parallelism between *synedria* or judicial councils and *synagagoi* or assemblies. These verses do not refer to a prayer house but to a judicial assembly.

In John 9.22, 12.42, and 16.2, we come upon a unique usage of *aposynagogo* or 'out of the synagogue'. While some have interpreted this as expulsion from the house of prayer, the proper definition would be expulsion from the community.

In modern English, the Jewish usage of the word synagogue connotes a gathering for communal prayer or Torah study. In the Greek, it refers to gatherings of varied sorts. As we have seen - not every synagogue in antiquity was a synagogue of prayer.

[\(Video of Rabbi Herb's testimony & sermons\)](#)

Formation of the Siddur and Liturgy

Bear in mind that Jewish liturgy has its roots in antiquity, evolving and developing throughout the ages to emerge in its present, largely standardized form.

Since about 850CE, one of Judaism's central means of liturgical expression has been the traditional rabbinic prayerbook or *siddur*. The *siddur* refers to the established "order [of prayers]". It is the Jewish prayerbook of life's events, from the cradle to life's milestones to the grave. While there have been efforts to standardize the *siddur* over the centuries there is no "standard" Jewish prayerbook. Meanwhile, there are a lot of common elements in the different *siddurim* (*pl* for *siddur*) such as the *Shema*, *Amidah*, numerous biblical texts, *piyyut* (poems written by sages and rabbis) and prayers.

See *The Jewish Study Bible Essays, (JPS Tanakh)* by Oxford University Press; *A Guide to Jewish Prayer*, by Rabbi Adin Steinsaltz

"The Siddur is not a finished work produced by the efforts of a particular author, but rather a kind of treasury in which the people of Israel, generation after generation, have deposited things of exquisite beauty. Each generation chooses its own pearls of wisdom and emotion, stringing them together to form verses of prayer."

"The Siddur is like a garland, intertwining all the strands of Judaism--encompassing all fields of Jewish creativity". (*A Guide to Jewish Prayer*, by Rabbi Adin Steinsaltz, pg 4-5)

More from Rabbi Herb of blessed memory:

The development of the Hebrew prayerbook took many centuries and has been long in evolving into what it is today, with some remaining fluid to this very day!

We need to be cognizant of what *Berachot* (blessings) were really recited in Yeshua's lifetime and what version of the liturgy was in vogue.

According to the Rabbis, soon after 70CE a formal version of the *Shemoneh Esreh*, was adopted at a Synod in Jamnia, under the leadership of the Younger Gamliel (*not Paul's teacher*) and his colleagues. However, the precise wording was still left open. The order, general ideas, opening and closing lines were fixed. Most of the wording was left to the individual reader. It was not until several centuries later that the prayers began to be formally fixed. By the 1000's CE, the texts of the prayers were nearly fixed, and in the form in which they are still used today.

Torah Readings and the Prophets (*Haftorah*) also formed part of the prayer services. To this framework numerous Jewish sages added, from time to time, various prayers, and, for festivals especially, numerous hymns. The earliest existing codification of the prayer book was drawn up in Sura, Babylon, about 850 CE by Amram Gaon.

It is axiomatic that theology creates liturgy and not vice versa. Early liturgy during Yeshua's time on Earth was an amalgam of the Psalms, the Ten Commandments, the Shmoneh Esrai and reading of the Torah and Haftorah portions.

For more about the siddur and Jewish liturgy see:
<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Siddur>

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Rabbi Herb Opalek

Temple and Synagogue

The main function of the Temple was as the only place to perform sacrifices and certain other religious rituals. The synagogue provided the place where Jews came together for Torah study. Later, it became a place for prayers as well.

In modern Hebrew a synagogue is called either a **בית כנסת** *beyt kneset*, meaning "house of assembly"; **בית תפילה** or *beyt t'fila*, meaning "house of prayer", in Yiddish **שול** *shul*, from the German for "school."
Wikipedia: <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Synagogue>

Today, the synagogue has morphed into the Jewish equivalent of a church. It is the center of the Jewish religious community: a place of prayer, study and education, social and charitable work, as well as a social center. (<http://www.jewfaq.org/shul.htm>) It is incomprehensible today to think of a Jewish community without a synagogue.

Recitation of prayers is the central characteristic of Jewish worship. These prayers, often with instructions and commentary, are found in the *siddur*. The length and content of the synagogue service depends on the sect and the customs of the particular community. Many synagogues have a *hazzan* (cantor) who is a professional or lay-professional singer employed for the purpose of leading the congregation in prayer. Traditionally a *hazzan* was always a man. Today a woman can be a *hazzan* (also called a *cantor*) in the more liberal sects of Judaism.

Today there are many of sects of Judaism that differ in the way they observe Judaism therefore its important for people to be aware of the differences so as not to think that all synagogues are the same. The main branches are: Orthodox, Conservative, Reformed, Reconstructionist and Humanist.

See
<http://judaism.about.com/od/denominationsofjudaism/p/branches.htm>

Why use a prayerbook?

Fixed prayers from a *siddur* serve as a means of expressing thoughts when a person may not be able to think clearly for himself. They provide a train of thoughts, themes and concepts. The worshipper recites the words written in the *siddur* and tries to understand them so as to focus his heart and mind on them. When he succeeds in doing so properly, his own thoughts and feelings add a further dimension of meaning to the words on the page before him.^

Another component is the praying congregation itself, which, both as a whole and as a collection of individuals affects each particular worshipper. Each person is affected, whether consciously or not, by the assembled congregation within which he is praying; by the voice of the *Hazzan*; by the voice of the congregation; by the mood of the congregants; and by the personal relationships the person has with them.^

Responsive readings is another way to hear the voice of the congregation in a different way and adds to the mood and variety of the service. It is a dialogue between the Leader and the congregation with each having their own part.

Some have likened the prayer of the individual worshipping in a congregation as a musical performance where each component—the score and members of the orchestra—is dependent on and affecting the others involved.^

So what we have is that the individual worshipper prays according to what is written in the *siddur*, but at the same time his thoughts and words give to each phrase his own unique interpretation, while his personality and the mood of the congregation affects the fixed prayer texts.

^ *A Guide to Jewish Prayer*, by Rabbi Adin Steinsaltz, pg 24

Why use a siddur instead of digital slides?

As has been presented here, the Jewish prayerbook goes back centuries and is very traditional. When each person uses a *siddur*, it brings a fuller sense of unity to the congregation and an awareness and connection to the Hebraic roots of our faith that reach back into time.

“A Jew may use his own words when praying to God, but when he uses the words of a *siddur*, he becomes a part of the people.” (*To Pray as A Jew, Rabbi Domin, pg 7*)

Holding a *siddur* in the hands rather than reading words on a screen, helps a person to make a real connection to the text, to concentrate on the words and on Adonai, to block out distractions and to encourage *kavannah*^ (*full concentration of heart and mind*). Saying the prayers with *Kavannah* is a worthy goal and gives an opportunity for new thoughts and emotions. ^ *A Guide to Jewish Prayer, Rabbi Adin Steinsaltz, Chapter 5*

Putting the words from the siddur on an overhead divorces the siddur from the liturgy and causes a loss of that personal connection to the siddur and the prayers and poetry therein.

For more about Jewish prayer and liturgy:

A Guide to Jewish Prayer, by Rabbi Adin Steinsaltz.

The Jewish Study Bible, (JPS Tanakh) by Oxford University Press, 2004; see: The Bible in the Synagogue and other essays in the back; great study notes on the scriptures

Praying with Fire – Igniting the Power of Your Tefillah by Rabbi Heshy Kleinman

How to Pray as a Jew, A Guide to the Prayer Book and the Synagogue Service by Rabbi Hayim Halevy Donin

Branches of Judaism:

<http://judaism.about.com/od/denominationsofjudaism/p/branches.htm>

Urim and Thummim: <http://www.jewishencyclopedia.com/articles/14609-urim-and-thummim>

TIMELINE FOR SYNAGOGUE AND SIDDIR

Compiled by Pari

(Dates are approximations)

1300 BCE The Torah was given to the Israelites in the Sinai Desert

1260 BCE Israel arrived in Canaan

1025-928 BCE United monarchy in Israel (Solomon-968-928)

Yehovah revealed His will through Prophets, Priests and dreams

See *The Jewish Study Bible Essays, (JPS) by Oxford University Press*

957 BCE First Temple was built

586 BCE First Temple destroyed; Babylonian captivity; **Urim and Thummin** believed lost

516 BCE Second Temple consecrated

586-300 BCE continuing revelations through prophets and dreams

445/444 BCE Nehemiah rebuilds the Temple (*Rabbis say this was the spring-time in the national history of Judaism*)

420 BCE Prophet Malachi, the last prophet, delivered his prophecies; Temple worship declines (see Malachi)

Rabbis believe that Yehovah's will now revealed through Scriptures

See *The Jewish Study Bible Essays, (JPS) by Oxford University Press*

Synagogues, Siddurim and Liturgy are developed

400 BCE and forward building of synagogues began and development of liturgies

<http://www.jewishmag.com/44mag/synagogues/synagogues.htm>

300 BCE in Egypt

100 BCE in Israel

First century liturgy at time of Yeshua was an amalgam of the Psalms, the Ten Commandments, the Shmoneh Esrai and reading of the Torah and Haftorah portions (Rabbi Herb Opalek)

70 CE Second Temple destroyed

Early Synagogues and Siddurim



Nazareth Village pictures of a reconstructed first century synagogue
used by permission of Nazareth Village – www.nazarethvillage.com

For more about these pictures see. <http://www.nazarethvillage.com/research/content/synagogue>

4th century synagogue - Capernaum



We know almost nothing about the beginnings of the first synagogue because the main Jewish sources which mention them, the Mishna and Talmud, are not older than the year 200 BCE.

The first synagogues were very simple buildings with one room and benches along the sides of the walls.

As the standing of the synagogue developed, they were expanded into more elaborate constructions with a courtyard, rows of columns, and an apse for the Torah shrine.

Up to 8th century, prayers were memorized and not written down (*How to Pray as a Jew, A Guide to the Prayer Book and the Synagogue Service* by Rabbi Hayim Halevy Donin, pg 15)

- 850 CE oldest prayer book drawn up in Sura, Babylon, by Amram Gaon
- 900 CE Rav Saadia Gaon also of Sura, a siddur, in which the rubrical matter is in Arabic
- 1486 siddur printed by Soncino in Italy (*printing press invented in 1440 CE*)
- 16th century Ashkenazi siddur was developed
- 1738 siddur by Gamaliel ben Pedahzur, London
- 1837 a different translation from that of Pedahzur was released in the United States

Siddur references:

http://www.myjewishlearning.com/texts/Liturgy_and_Prayers/Siddur_Prayer_Book.shtml

<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Siddur>

Synagogue references:

<http://www.nazarethvillage.com/research/content/first-century-synagogues>

<http://www.jewishmag.com/44mag/synagogues/synagogues.htm>

<http://www.jewfaq.org/shul.htm>

<http://conservapedia.com/Synagogue>

<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Synagogue>