

105 Communal Worship Part Two

Things Change Suddenly—When Jewish apostasy, idolatry and gross immorality (2 Kings 21 & 23:7) bring the Babylonians to capture Jerusalem in 606 BC and destroy the Temple in 587 BC, the people of the southern kingdom of Judah are led off to far-flung places all over the Babylonian empire, then:

- 1] All the prescribed practices of animal sacrifice immediately come to an end
- 2] The priests and Levites become unemployed
- 3] Communal worship abruptly ceases
- 4] Pilgrimage to the Holy City is terminated
- 5] A major spiritual vacuum comes into existence

Things Change Gradually—Human social, psychological and spiritual needs aided by human ingenuity and creativity bring about new and unprecedented solutions:

- 1] It seems only normal and natural that Jews wherever they now reside should meet together in homes to reminisce about the “good old days”
- 2] Those who had brought scrolls with them from the homeland [a Psalm or two, parts of the Torah, writings of the Prophets] shared these with others. So they begin studying them together for mutual encouragement and enlightenment
- 3] Some musical members of the group suggest singing a Psalm or two or just humming along while one person sings for them
- 4] Those with physical, financial or family problems ask for prayer. If no priests or Levites are present, the elders among them might be asked to intercede for the needy ones
- 5] So that Jewish culture not be lost in coming generations, each local synagogue becomes a school as well, teaching boys Hebrew while instructing them in the Law of Moses
- 6] Idolatry is eliminated finally once for all. No record exists that it was a problem again after the return from exile *They shall not defile themselves anymore with their idols and their detestable things, or with any of their transgressions.* Ezek. 37:23

So gradually without any divine instruction, interference or intervention, without any human directives from the top down, the synagogue system comes into being. Judaism will never be the same again!

Another Major Change

In 536 BC Cyrus the Great, a champion of civil and religious rights, allows the captive peoples of the newly conquered Babylonian empire to return to their homelands and to rebuild their places of worship with government help. Some Jews return and rebuild Jerusalem and the Temple. In 515 BC animal sacrifice is once again reinstated. Priests and Levites are rehired.

However from now on two entirely different systems of worship exist—the central Temple versus the local assembly. The first, autocratic; the second, democratic. The first, rigid; the second, loosely structured. The personal, user-friendly atmosphere of the synagogue wins out. Social activities, such as weddings, funerals, Bar Mitzvas, birthdays, find a natural home in the local meeting place, the synagogue. Jesus makes good use of it. So does Paul.

Ancient records show that at the time of Jesus, 30 synagogues existed within the Temple Compound in Jerusalem. In one of these Stephan spoke and argued for the Gospel. Act 15:21 shows how well the synagogue system thrived and flourished throughout the towns and villages of the known world. *For from ancient generations [for over 500 years] Moses has had in every city those who proclaim him, for he is read every Sabbath in the synagogues.”*