

FIRST CENTURY CONGREGATION

During the first century c.e. the congregation of Israel was made up of both Jews and non-Jews. The non-Jews, otherwise known as *G-dfearers*, were not allowed to be a part of the services. They simply stayed at the rear of the congregation and observed and learned about the G-d of Israel. This was not to say that they were shunned by the Jewish people, it only means that they were not yet learned enough to participate in the services.

The service arrangements came from the Temple services. This meant that they were preset in their form and style. Everything had to be done at a specific time and in just the right manor. Only qualified persons could lead in the services and since the G-dFearers were only just starting out in their walk and understanding of G-d, they were only allowed to watch and learn until such a time as they were ready to convert fully to Judaism, at which time they would then move completely into the services just as though they were born Jewish.

The Scriptures clearly state that G-d desired that the G-dFearers be treated equally with the Jewish people in the congregation. The services were to remain the same, but the G-dFearers could now partake in the services. In fact they could even lead the services if they met the requirements. It was the *House of Shammai* that forbade the non-Jew from the services, it did not matter to the House of Shammai if they were G-dFearers or pagans. The study of Hillel and Shammai are far from the scope of this brief article but they play a crucial part in understanding the first century congregation and its services.

The services are called *Avodah* in Hebrew and *Latreia* in the Greek.

Both mean the Services of G-d. The Thayer's Greek-English Lexicon, on the Strong's #2999, *latreia* #2 says:

in the Greek Bible, *the service or worship of G-d acc. to the requirements of the levitical law* (Hebr. *Avodah*, Ex. xii.25 sq., etc.)

...

In Romans 9.3-5 the scriptures say that the services come from G-d and He gave them to the Jews...

For I could wish that I myself were accursed from Messiah for my brethren, my countrymen according to the flesh, who are Israelites, to whom pertain the adoption, the glory, the covenants, the giving of the Torah (*Law*), the service (*latreia*) of G-d, and the promises; of whom are the fathers and from whom, according to the flesh, Messiah came, who is over all, the eternally blessed G-d. Amen.

The services of G-d are the Temple services as found in the Torah (*instructions*) of G-d. Ezra, during the time of the rebuilding of the walls of Jerusalem and the return to G-d of the people, started what has come to be called the synagogue. Ezra was the first of the Men of the Great Assembly. These men restructured Judaism over a period of time to what it had become in the Time of Yeshua.

Synagogues were set up for the study and reading of the Torah. However, after the destruction of the Second Temple in 70 c.e. the Synagogue was again forced to go through a revision and much of the Temple Services (*Avodah*) were integrated into the Synagogue.

The services that we see today are a result of that revision. It is true that some things have been added

through the ages but for the most part they are still the same. The reading of the Torah and the Prophets are the same.

The largest change in the Synagogue is the way that the Synagogue is operated today. In the First Century the Rabbi, Pastor or Elder was not a paid member of the congregation. He was to work outside the congregation for his income and livelihood. We can see a good example of this in the Apostle Paul...

"So, because he was of the same trade, he stayed with them and worked; for by occupation they were tent makers."

Acts 18.3

"Yes, you yourselves know that these hands have provided for my necessities, and for those who were with me. I have shown you in every way, by laboring like this, that you must support the weak. And remember the words of the lord Yeshua, that He said, 'It is more blessed to give than to receive.'"

Acts 20.34-35

The Elders were called *Z'keinim*, or *Z'kein* for one Elder. They were to shepherd and protect the congregation and teach them in the ways of G-d. In each congregation there were to be a minimum of three *Z'keinim* (*Elders*). They were of the same status in the congregation, that is to say that one had no more authority than another. They would appoint a speaker who would announce a ruling of the Elders or any other time that the Elders were to be heard on any given subject. This was the role of James (*Ya'akov* or *Jacob*, in *Hebrew*) the brother of Yeshua in the book of Acts...

Then all the multitude kept silent and listened to Barnabas and Paul declaring how many miracles and wonders G-d had worked through them among the Gentiles. And after they had become silent, James answered, saying, "Men and brethren, listen to me: Simon has declared how G-d at the first visited the Gentiles to take out of them a people for His name, and with this the words of the prophets agree, just as it is written: 'After this I will return and will rebuild the tabernacle of David, which has fallen down; I will rebuild its ruins, and I will set it up; So that the rest of mankind may seek the L-rd, even all the Gentiles who are called by My Name, says the L-rd who does all these things.' Known to G-d from eternity are all His works. Therefore I judge that we should not trouble those from among the Gentiles who are turning to G-d, but that we write to them to abstain from things polluted by idols, from sexual immorality, from things strangled, and from blood.

Acts 15.12-20

This judgment made by the Beit Din (*House of Judgment*) in Jerusalem was addressed to the G-dFearers and the requirements that they must keep. In essence the G-dfearers were told that they did not have to convert to Judaism to enter the Kingdom of G-d. This will be in line with the teachings of Paul throughout the New

Testament.

The only paid officer of the synagogue was the *Chazan ha-Kanesset*. His role was to care for the synagogue, and perform certain other functions in the services. He was paid because his role was not that of making decisions. The Elders however, made very important decisions and if they were paid then the congregation would have the possibility of forcing a decision that was not righteous, or the Elders might treat a wealthy man better than a poor one because he was a big supporter, in finances, of the Elders.

If the Elders, Apostles and congregation of the first century were to see the congregation of today they would weep bitterly to G-d and ask where it went wrong. The answer to that question is found in about the first three centuries after the death and resurrection of Yeshua. At first all the believers were Jewish, the faith was completely Jewish and things were the way they were supposed to be. This is not to say that the first century didn't have its share of problems, they most certainly did, but they were being dealt with in a Torah observant fashion.

As the Apostles began to die, more and more non-Jews began to move into the congregation. With this non-Jewish remnant moving into the faith they brought with them their pagan rites. In the first century the believers kept Passover, Shavuot, Sabbath, etc., but shortly after the first century the non-Jews

wanted to start keeping their old festivals and worship G-d with them. They did want to worship G-d, but not with the Jewish Festivals, for it was now very unpopular to keep Jewish ideals. To this G-d answers...

"take heed to yourself that you are not ensnared to follow them, after they are destroyed from before you, and that you do not inquire after their gods, saying, 'How did these nations serve their gods? I also will do likewise.' You shall not worship the L-rd your G-d in that way; for every abomination to the L-rd which He hates they have done to their gods; for they burn even their sons and daughters in the fire to their gods."

Deuteronomy 12.30-31

These scriptures never even imply that the people want to forsake G-d and worship other gods, it simply says that the people want to worship G-d in a fashion that He does not approve of. This is where we are today, we worship G-d but not in a way that is pleasing to Him. We must repent and turn from following our own ways and return to the ways of G-d that we might please Him. G-d has very clearly laid out how, when and where to worship Him. It is our duty to follow the plan that He has laid out and worship Him in truth and do what is pleasing to Him and forsake ourselves.