Prayer Customs in First-Century Judaism

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A young, contemporary Jewish lad receives his first phylactery during his Bar Mitzvah. His prayer shawl is called a talith.

ILLUSTRATOR: PATOYEN TOUCHTON (SPTH)

[Image of a group of people in a courtyard with one individual wearing a tallit and holding up a phylactery]
ALWAYS A PRAYING PEOPLE, Jews during Jesus' time found guidance from the Old Testament in what to pray. The Book of Psalms had become the prayer book for first-century Jews both in the land of Palestine and in the Dispersion. Jewish materials such as the Dead Sea Scrolls and the Apocrypha indicated that Jewish prayers were still developing and changing. Set prayers that people memorized and repeated without change for generations were not the rule, although certain patterns of praying were quite strong.

TEMPLE PRAYERS

As early as Isaiah's day, the Jerusalem temple was called a "house of prayer" (Isa. 56:7, NIV). Jesus claimed that this should continue to be true (Matt. 21:13). In fact, the time of the daily morning and afternoon animal sacrifices (at the third hour and the ninth hour—nine a.m. and three p.m.) on the great temple altar was an occasion for the Jews to gather for public prayer. The afternoon sacrifice was so closely associated with prayer that it was simply "the time of prayer" (Acts 3:1).

SYNAGOGUE PRAYERS

The Jewish synagogues came into being during the centuries after the Old Testament era. As the place for worship on the Sabbath and other Jewish religious holy days, synagogues were especially places for prayer and the reading of Scripture. The ancient Jewish historian Josephus sometimes called a synagogue simply "the Prayer-house." The synagogue prayers were offered by one of the Jewish men present who was called on by the ruler of the synagogue to lead in prayer. After the prayer the congregation responded, "Amen." Nehemiah 8:6 refers to an early form of this custom (see also 1 Cor. 14:16).

The prayers in the synagogues especially included the Tephillah, or standing prayers, always offered to God from a standing position (Matt. 6:5). These prayers included praises and thanksgivings to God as well as petitions for forgiveness and healing. By A.D. 100, these prayers had expanded into a ritual form called the "Eighteen Benedictions" (Shemoneh Esreh in Hebrew), so-called because each of the 18 parts included the following lines:

Exalted and hallowed be his great name in the world, which he created according to his will.
May he establish his kingdom in your lifetime and in your days, and in the lifetime of the whole household of Israel speedily and at near time.

The Qaddish may have been partly the foundation Jesus used in formulating His own Model Prayer.

PRAYERS AT QUMRAN

The people of the Qumran community, who wrote the famous Dead Sea Scrolls, left behind little description of their regular services. Their scrolls, however, overflow with prayers. Benedictions, amens, petitions, and confessions are among the handwritten texts that survive. Because the people of Qumran rejected the temple sacrifices as illegitimate, they developed the belief that heart-felt prayer could substitute for animal sacrifice: "The offering of the lips...is like a sweet-savored offering of righteousness.""

DAILY PERSONAL PRAYERS

Deuteronomy 6:7 instructed the people of Israel "when you lie down and when you get up" to confess the words of the Shema, Deuteronomy 6:4-9, that begins with the words, "Hear [shema], O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one" (Deut. 6:4). Josephus noted that this had already become a general Jewish practice: "Twice each day, at the dawn thereof and when the hour comes for turning to repose, let all acknowledge before God the bounties which He has bestowed on them through their deliverance from the land of Egypt." In the first century, Jewish boys both inside and outside Israel learned the Shema as soon as they could talk and had to repeat it regularly from age 12. Women, children, and slaves were not required to do this."

Many pious Jews followed Daniel's example, who prayed "three times a day" (Dan. 6:10,13). The time of the afternoon temple sacrifice became the other appropriate time for personal prayer, attested as

Lesson Reference: CUS, Matthew 6:5-15
early as the apocryphal books.10 Even Gentile God-fearers such as Cornelius might have kept a similar schedule, as Acts 10:1-3 indicates. One of the earliest Christian writings apart from the New Testament exhorted believers also to pray three times a day, but with the words of the Lord’s Prayer instead.11

According to one expert on Jewish backgrounds, a devout Jewish man of Jesus’ day kept the following personal prayer schedule:12

1. At sunrise: repeat the Shema and pray, perhaps the Tephillah.
2. At three p.m., the hour of the afternoon temple sacrifice, pray, perhaps the Tephillah.
3. At sunset: repeat the Shema and pray, perhaps the Tephillah.

Mealtime was also a time for praying in devout Jewish homes. Based on Deuteronomy 8:10, Jews carefully observed this. The people of Qumran were particular about this; Jesus clearly followed this practice (Mark 6:41), as did the earliest Christians (1 Cor. 10:30). One common Jewish mealtime prayer was this simple blessing: “Blessed are you, Lord, who brings forth bread from the earth.”14

**PRAYER POSTURES AND ATTIRE**

In Jesus’ time, men prayed in public from a standing position, whether at the temple or in the synagogue. When Jesus criticized the hypocrites who stood and prayed on the street corners (Matt. 6:5), He probably did not mean that some of the Pharisees posted themselves there throughout the day to pray. Rather, at the time of the afternoon sacrifice, loud trumpets heard through the market of Jerusalem sounded from the temple.15 Some Pharisees apparently arranged their schedules so they would “just happen” to be in the middle of the market when the temple trumpets blew. Then they would have to stop and pray—to the admiration of the crowds.16

Jesus’ comments about the Pharisees in Matthew 23:5 add insight to His teaching in Matthew 6. “Everything they do is done for men to see: They make their phylacteries wide and the tassels on their garments long.” The phylacteries (tefillin in Hebrew) were small boxes containing tiny handwritten copies of Exodus 13:2-16; Deuteronomy 6:4-9; and 11:13-21.17 These were attached with straps to one arm and to the forehead, following a literal interpretation of Deuteronomy 6:8 and 11:18. The little Scripture box similarly attached to the door post of a Jewish house was called a mezuzah.18 Both phylacteries and mezuzah served as a reminder to pray.

The tassels (zizith in Hebrew) were fringes on the prayer shawls. The prayer shawl with fringe was an everyday part of a Jewish man’s attire, with which he covered his head while praying. Jesus Himself may have worn such a garment.19 Some Jewish men apparently used the knots in their tassels much as today’s Roman Catholics use rosary beads to track their prayers. For many Pharisees, however, long fringes and large phylacteries “had become badges of status and opportunities for ostentation.”20

**WHY FIRST-CENTURY JEWS PRAYED**

Surely the reasons that all religious individuals pray to their god are complex. I may not always know even in my own heart why I pray as I do. In Jesus’ time, however, Jews prayed as they did for three main reasons.

First, they prayed as they did to obey the clear teachings of the Old Testament. Personal morning and evening prayers as well as the mealtime prayers were rooted in the commands of the law. The psalms were a prayer resource for the Jew desiring a more spontaneous approach. Because people believed that the Old Testament taught wearing phylacteries, we cannot fault those who wore their “prayer boxes.” Those Jews who prayed out of obedience to their Scriptures clearly prayed from their desire to please God with their prayers. Such a motive is commendable.

Second, Jews prayed as they did to follow the expected Jewish traditions. The public prayers in connection with the morning and afternoon temple sacrifices were not mandated in the Scriptures. Because the synagogue developed after the end of the Old Testament, Jews had to develop new prayer customs. The use of the prayer shawl developed similarly. As much as possible, religious leaders based such traditions in the Old Testament. Jesus—and the early Christians—participated in synagogue services. Early Christians in Jerusalem joined other Jews in the public temple prayers at the daily afternoon sacrifice. Again, we should commend those who followed their traditions from a sincere desire to obey God and please Him.

Third, unfortunately some prayed as they did to be seen and approved by others. In Matthew 6:1,5; 23:5, Jesus criticized some of His contemporaries because they prayed for just this wrong reason. Jesus did not oppose public praying nor did He condemn prayer traditions based on the right motives. Instead, He reserved some of His harshest words for those who prayed to gain human approval rather than to receive divine blessing. Whenever today’s prayers—and other religious actions—are done to be seen and approved by our fellow humans, we risk falling into the same condemnation Jesus directed to the Pharisees.

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12. Dunn, 617.
14. Dunn, 617.
15. Dunn, 617.
19. *Judaism 9.1.*
20. Didache 8.3.
23. *Cited by Dunn,* 618.
24. Strach (the apocryphal book also called Ecclesiasticus) 50:16.
28. *Matthew 9:21.* The text speaks of the woman wanting to touch literally the fringe of His prayer shawl. See Blomberg, 161.

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