

Temple, Synagogue and the New Testament

Temple and synagogues played a significant role in the New Testament. They show up in the letters of St. Paul and the Gospels. They also figure in the Acts of the Apostles. Other New Testament letters show some importance of one or both worship models. The Letter to the Hebrews is an exceptional example. It writes of a new covenant which implies a new sacrificial priesthood, one not tied to family inheritance. It introduces Jesus as a new high priest. His roots are attached not to the tribe of Levi but to the mysterious figure of Melchizedek, someone mentioned briefly in the Book of Genesis (14, 18). These changes introduce another form of worship. Sacrifices offered no longer from animal blood but from the blood of Jesus himself, blood offered on the cross. He becomes both the victim and the offering priest.

The entire New Testament is split into two time zones: whether written before or after the destruction of the Temple in 70 AD. Positioning these writings before or after, clarifies their information as contemporary observations or subjects recalled from memory. For example, St. Paul wrote while the Temple still shared worship responsibilities with various synagogues. But synagogues were spreading rapidly, not only in Israel but moreover wherever Jews were living throughout the Roman Empire. These two worship centers seemed to live peacefully with each other. Various synagogues were even alive and well under the shadow of the Temple in Jerusalem. People felt comfortable attending both — a luxury enjoyed by those living near the Holy City. Those living at greater distance attended the synagogue regularly and the Temple on occasion. Those living outside of Israel depended upon the synagogue as their only place of worship. The Temple for them would have been only a revered conviction, shown by such devotions as facing the Temple while praying.

Paul initially enjoyed a working relationship with the Temple before his conversion. Chosen as a Temple delegate, he traveled to Damascus with letters authorized by the high priest to arrest followers of Jesus. One might say he became the punishing arm of the Temple. He did their dirty work. With an irony that sometimes infiltrates the New Testament, Paul began his ministry preaching Jesus in a Damascus synagogue. The same Damascus toward which he was traveling on behalf of the Temple when he experienced the Lord. Negative responses and threats influenced him to turn his gaze to synagogues spread throughout Rome's vast empire. These prayer houses served as targets for his mission plan. Upon arrival in towns or cities, Paul would attend their synagogues and look for opportunities to preach the message of Jesus. Remembering again, Paul did not consider such speaking out as an attempt to convert listeners to Christian beliefs. He still considered himself and his message a part of the Jewish faith. What he was preaching he considered a developed messianic theme. Jesus was the one for whom so many awaited. That was good news. But he and his followers began distancing themselves from synagogues because of hostility shown them from what they were announcing.

Three of four Gospels were written ten to twenty years after the destruction of the Temple. They wrote from locations outside of Israel and of a Temple now only a memory with a bitter ending. The Gospel of Mark may be the only one written before the Roman invasion. After invasion and exile, contemporary experiences of Jewish worship became exclusively in synagogues outside Israel. Treatment of the Temple in the other three Gospels would therefore occur with knowledge of its ending. Endings often affect how people tell a story. For example, those Gospel writers who describe predictions concerning the destruction of the Temple wrote as authors already aware of what had taken place.

No Gospel so highlights the Temple as the Gospel of Luke. The Temple theme appears at the very beginning and at the end. In chapter one, an angel appears to Zechariah while he is functioning as high priest at the Temple and incensing the Ark in the Holy of Holies. There and then, an angel announces the unusual birth of a son. (Which creates interesting implications: John the Baptist belonged to a priestly family and therefore of the tribe of Levi. One is left wondering how someone born into such a Temple family ended up in the desert and baptizing by the Jordan River.) The ending of this same Gospel concludes tersely with the simple phrase: "There they were to be found in the temple constantly, speaking the praises of God" (Luke 24, 53).

Luke's Gospel alone describes visits to the Temple by the Holy Family. The prophetic Canticle of Simeon is placed in the courts when the child is brought for circumcision. Later, during a pilgrimage to the Holy City, the child is lost. He is found in the Temple which he refers to as "my father's house." Stories Jesus himself tells at times involve the Temple. Comparing the prayer of the Pharisee to the Publican takes place at the Temple. Before the good Samaritan attends to the wounded man, a priest and a Levite pass by. One may presume coming from the Temple. Most understand this famous story as pointing to the hated Samaritan as the hero who showed mercy. Which is true. Another dimension to the tale can also be added. The Samaritans worshiped on Mt. Gerizim, where their Temple was located. The sharper point Jesus draws is between someone who worships on Mt. Gerizim, who found mercy in his heart, to those worshipping at the Jerusalem Temple. Those who merely passed by. The passage articulates a familiar prophetic message concerning the need for virtue as well as Temple attendance. And when Jesus is crucified, Luke's Gospel tells us, darkness covers the land. At the moment of his death, the curtain in the Temple; what covers the Holy of Holies, is torn in two.

The Gospel of St. John, last written of the Gospels, describes the Temple in its most radical Christian interpretation. The Gospel assertion "the Word became flesh," seriously shifts the traditional God image. Israel was primarily a religion of the ear. God is heard but never seen. Many a prophet began his preaching with 'Hear, O Israel.' In sharp contrast, John's Gospel heralds the visibility of God. Now God is not only to be heard but also seen. Such a break with the past, invites the accusation of idolatry. Within the Holy of Holies, the Divine Presence was specifically located between two seraphim, in the space between them where flowed the invisible air. This Gospel not only proclaims Jesus as God made-visible but also as the new Temple. The Gospel

writer explicitly interprets Jesus' remarks concerning the Temple when he writes, "actually, he was talking about the temple of his body" (John 2, 21). John's Gospel features sayings in which Jesus identifies himself. They are referred to as the "I am" sayings. I am: "the bread come down from heaven, the vine and you the branches; the good shepherd, the way, the truth and the light." Added to that list would be Jesus identifying himself as the new Temple — the Holy of Holies dwelling in him.

The road running from the Last Supper to Church liturgy is a cloudy one. Hints and clues abound but little organized information indicates any clear sequence. Yet characteristics of both Temple and synagogue impact Christian churches. Early Christians thought of themselves as a movement within Judaism. Therefore some terminology remained Jewish. Initially, they called their assemblies synagogues. They also set their time of worship one day after the Jewish Sabbath so that no conflict would occur between time spent in Temple or synagogue. Some attended synagogues for prayer and Scripture readings on Saturday, while sharing the Eucharistic meal on Sunday. In general, Jewish worship transitioned from Temple to synagogue, Hostile events created that necessity. Christian worship evolved, moving from synagogue to Temple. This process journeyed through fits and starts. Christian churches became more organized, leadership passed from synagogue elders to Temple priests. But external changes took longer to transform because of political situations in the Roman Empire. Periods of persecutions kept Christians' outer expressions on a course not to be noticed. They lived their faith unsure of Emperors who might decree another persecution. They prayed in places that attracted little attention.

The emperor Constantine and his policies of support of the Christian Church changed everything. Now Christian buildings began to absorb more characteristics of the Temple. Worship moved out of homes and hiding places to adopt more official buildings; specifically for prayer, Scripture, and sacrificial liturgy. Church worship expanded beyond houses of prayer to a greater Temple likeness. A Divine Presence also resided within church walls, where people were encouraged to pray. This general location also created a most obvious difference from the Jerusalem Temple. Christian churches celebrated its rituals inside its Temple building. No outside courts were present for attending or for sacrificial ritual. Like synagogues, prayers and even ceremonies now took place indoors. Nor did its Tabernacle occupy a whole building. The Tabernacle now consisted of an ornamented, metallic container resting upon an altar. No special room was reserved for the Holy of Holies, which few ever saw. A sanctuary portion of the church highlighted its location where believers could see and spend time in prayer. This Tabernacle contained this special Presence both day and night. A candle burned next to it to attest to its being there. Priests eventually became responsible for churches and they celebrated there a sacrificial liturgy. Animals no longer filled the role of victims of sacrifice. Now bread was broken and wine poured out. The mystery of faith proclaimed them the body and blood of the Christ.

As the Temple may have influenced the Liturgy of the Eucharist, so the synagogue may have influenced the Liturgy of the Word. It drew emphasis to the significance of readings from Scripture. Preaching initially became an aid to grasp the relevance or

implications of what was read. Synagogue service also served as forerunners in worship models carried out years later in cathedrals and religious orders. The Liturgy of the Hours formed another model of the Liturgy of the Word. In Western Christianity, monks and priests mainly carried out this spiritual tradition. It consisted of praying Psalms, proclaiming non-Gospel readings, and prayers. In contrast, the Liturgy of the Hours became a parish expression of faith in Eastern Churches. Eastern Churches celebrate the Eucharistic Liturgy on the Sabbath only. During the week, they celebrate the Liturgy of the Hours. The Second Vatican Council has encouraged widening this particular devotion in the West beyond clergy and religious to the lay population. In "The Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy," the Council Fathers write, "And the laity too, are encouraged to recite the divine Office, either with the priests, or among themselves, or even individually" (Documents of Vatican II, #100).