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Is Orthodox Worship Biblical?

From “day one” Christian worship has been based on pre-Christian Jewish models. All early sources referring to early Christian worship, both the Bible and other ancient documents, directly or indirectly indicate that fact. But, of course, we would quite naturally expect Christian worship to be based on Jewish models – the first Christians, including Jesus and His Apostles, were all devout Jews! They grew up worshipping in the Temple (where the sacrifices were offered) and in the synagogues of Israel (where “services of the word” were celebrated).

In the New Testament Scriptures there are abundant references to Jesus participating in Jewish worship. When he was forty days old He was formally presented to His Father in the Temple, in a liturgical act of worship (*Luke 2:22*), and many later verses in the Gospels tell of His participation as an adult in synagogue worship, “as was His custom.” (e.g. *Luke 4:16*) The Last Supper itself was a Passover Seder (see *Matthew 26:18, Luke 22*), a Jewish liturgical rite. The Acts and the Epistles indicate that the Apostles continued to worship in the Temple and in the synagogues. Significantly, in James 2:2 the term signifying a Christian place or assembly for worship, in Greek is “*synagogos*,” synagogue!

By the time of Jesus, synagogue worship (originating after 597 B.C., during the Babylonian Exile) had this standard order of service: 1) Scripture readings, 2) Preaching, 3) The chanting of Psalms, 4) Formal liturgical prayers called “Benedictions,” and 5) At the end of the service, the “cohens” or male Jews of priestly descent recited Aaron’s Blessing (*Numbers 6:26*).

The typical synagogue building was an open hall, with no seats for the standing congregation. At one end (facing Jerusalem if possible) there was a low platform called the *bema*, a sort of stage. At the back of the *bema*, in the center against the wall, there was the seat of the ruling elder, with seats on either side of him for his council of elders. In the middle of the *bema* was a table upon which sat both the *menorah* (the seven-branched lamp stand) and the *ark*, a well-made cabinet in which the scrolls of the Scriptures, after being carried in procession before the readings, were stored with great reverence.

The earliest certain outline of the order of worship in the early Church is in St. Justin the Martyr’s *First Apology*, written around 140 A.D. (Colossians 3:16-17, written some 80 years earlier, may well reflect the same order of worship.) Writing for non-Christians, St. Justin gives only the barest description of the Christian worship service. The service order he records is 1) Scripture readings, 2) Preaching, and 3) Prayers. Clearly, this is a Christian synagogue service! But unlike the Jewish service, this Christian Liturgy has as its final part, 4) The Eucharistic Celebration: “...Bread is brought forward along with wine and water, and the presiding presbyter gives thanks to the best of his ability, and the people call out their assent, saying ‘Amen.’ Then there is the distribution to each and the participation in the Eucharistic elements, which also are sent with the deacons to those who are absent.” *Apology 1, 67*. (Jurgens translation.)

Is there any place in the Bible where first century Christian worship is depicted? “Yes,” says French biblical scholar Oscar Cullmann, an Evangelical. In his classic little work, *Early Christian Worship*, he concludes that the Book of Revelation contains a number of references to early Christian liturgical practices, especially in chapters 4 and 5. There the worship of heaven is revealed in terms of first-century liturgical worship. St. John the Theologian (who wrote the Book of Revelation) hints at this in Revelation 1:10. There he notes, “I was in the Spirit on the Lord’s Day...” One wonders if these glimpses of heavenly worship do not reflect also the very Liturgy on Patmos he had attended that same Lord’s Day so long ago! The heavenly temple in Revelation 4 and 5 resembles both the Jewish synagogue and later churches. The worship service depicted there includes liturgical components still universal in the Orthodox Church – a throne, white-robed elders (Gk., *presbyters*) gathered around the throne, seven burning lamps, prostrations, incense, and more. Even the hymns are similar to later Orthodox hymns. The *feel* of this service is very much that of modern Orthodox worship, which is largely unchanged since the 300s. And the changes made in the 300s were not basic alterations, but rather *embellishments* made possible by the Church’s legalization by the Emperor Constantine. In every way – origin, content, style, *feel* – the testimony of history is that most definitely yes, Orthodox worship is thoroughly biblical. +