

The Hour of Prayer

In Acts 3:1 we are told Peter and John went to the Temple at the “hour of prayer, the ninth hour.” What was the hour of prayer and from where did the Jew’s practice of praying at specific hours originate?

The requirement to pray at certain times of the day isn’t found in the Torah (first 5 books of the Hebrew Bible), but it appears to have been a tradition among the Jews centuries before Jesus was born. Jewish tradition holds the practice dates back to the Patriarchs. Abraham established the morning prayer, his son Isaac introduced mid-day prayer, and his grandson Jacob added the evening prayer.

However the practice started, it eventually made its way into Jewish religious law. The rabbis taught Jews to pray three times per day, citing the examples of David (Psalm 55:17) and Daniel (Daniel 6:10). Eventually, fixed times were set for the observance of these prayers (1) the 3rd hour (roughly 9am), the 6th hour (roughly 12pm), and the 9th hour (roughly 3pm). The morning and evening prayers may have coincided with the morning and evening sacrifices offered by the priests in the Temple (Ex 29:38-39; Num 28:2-8).

It appears many of Jesus’ disciples continued the practice of regular daily prayers even after the Lord’s ascension. In Acts 3:1, Peter and John were headed to the Temple at the “hour of prayer.” In Acts 10:9, before going to Cornelius’ house, Peter was praying on the rooftop “about the sixth hour.” Some devout Gentiles may have also adopted this practice. Cornelius told Peter a messenger of God appeared to him while he was praying in his house at the “ninth hour.”

Interestingly, key events of Jesus’ crucifixion aligned with these designated times. Jesus was crucified the 3rd hour (Mark 15:25), darkness covered the land at the 6th hour (Mark 15:33), and Jesus died at the 9th hour (Mark 15:34-37).