



Zmanim

“Times of Prayer”

“Now He was telling them a parable to show that at all times they ought to pray and not to lose heart.” (Luke 18:1)

Zmanim: Times of Prayer

Shacharit (Morning Prayer)	Time
Earliest Time	Sunrise
Latest Time	Midday
Mincha (Afternoon Prayer)	Time
Earliest Time	1/2 Hour After Midday
Latest Time	Sundown
Ma'ariv (Evening Prayer)	Time
Earliest Time	Nightfall
Latest Time	Midnight

A Biblical Hour

The above times for the prayers are based on traditional Scripture interpretations. Note that an hour in the Bible is not a clock hour like we think of it. Rather, a biblical hour is calculated by taking the total time of daylight (from sunrise to sunset) and then dividing it into twelve equal parts.¹ For example, if the sun rises at 5:00 AM and sets at 7:00 PM, then an hour would be 70 minutes. Yeshua alludes to this *halacha* in the Gospel of John by stating, “Are there not twelve hours in the day?”² Therefore all the hours discussed in this paper should be read as scriptural hours and not clock hours.

This means that “midday” [*chatzot*] is six biblical hours after sunrise and six biblical hours before sunset. Astronomically it is the exact moment when the sun is at its highest or zenith point in the sky for a particular location on that day. “Midnight” [also *chatzot*] in turn is six biblical hours after sunset and six biblical hours before sunrise.

The oldest source to codify the times of prayer is found in the *Mishnah* (approximately 200 CE):

The morning prayer [can be said] until midday...

The afternoon prayer [can be said] till evening [sundown]...

The evening prayer has no fixed limit.³

This is the source for all *halacha* surrounding prayer times. However, when approaching a passage of oral Torah such as this, it is important to measure it against the written Torah, as well as the Apostolic scriptures. When we do this, we find is that this *halacha* is indeed rooted in Scripture.

Shacharit (Morning Prayer)

In Numbers we read that the first offering of the day was to take place “in the morning.”⁴ The Hebrew word for “morning” is *boker*. *Boker* can be defined as “morning, from split, penetrate, as the dawn the darkness.”⁵ Therefore, the earliest time that the sacrifice could take place was at sunrise. It is the same for the morning prayers.

There also needed to be a cut off point (or latest time) that morning prayers could be recited. While morning was defined as ending at midday, traditionally it was considered a good practice to start one’s prayers as early as possible, before eating or other daily activities. It was eventually decided

that it was best to finish one's prayers within four hours after sunrise. It is likely that Yeshua and the disciples were in line with this *halacha*, since we see this practice in the book of Acts, where the disciples are in the Temple praying at the third hour of the day.⁶ Also Messiah gives the example of arising early to pray in Mark 1:35.

***Mincha* (Afternoon Prayer)**

The *mincha* service is linked to the time of afternoon sacrifice, which is commanded to take place at "twilight."⁷ The Hebrew phrase for "twilight" is *bein ha-'arbayim*, which literally means "between the settings." The *JPS Torah Commentary* on Numbers comments that *bein ha-'arbayim* "clearly means the time between sunset and dark."⁸ Rabbinic interpretation saw this as the time between when the sun begins its decent at midday and when it sets behind the horizon. The *Mishnah* interprets that the afternoon sacrifice in the Temple should take place around the ninth hour.⁹ (Remember that this is nine biblical hours after sunrise, which could be more or less than 540 minutes after sunrise depending upon the time of year.) Therefore it is tempting to reject the rabbinic interpretation of the sacrifice taking place at the ninth hour and go with the seemingly more literal "between sunset and dark."

Literal Definition	Rabbinic Definition
Between sunset and dark	Between midday and sunset

Which is right? Surprisingly enough the Gospels and the book of Acts clearly approve of the rabbinic interpretation by indicating that sacrifices and petitions were offered at the ninth hour. Our Master dying at this time in Mark 15:34-37 also seems to support this interpretation. In Acts 3:1 we get a clear indication that the Scriptures and the disciples accepted this as the time of prayer and sacrifice, "Now Peter and John were going up to the temple at the ninth hour, the hour of prayer." The earliest the afternoon prayer could be prayed was just after midday, and it appears that Peter prays an early *mincha* when he went up on the roof top to pray at "about sixth hour".¹⁰ The latest time was sunset.

***Ma'ariv* (Evening Prayer)**

The evening prayer is related to the sacrifices left over from the daily services. These were burned all night on the Temple altar.¹¹ Since these offerings were burned all night, this prayer could be said from when it got dark all the way until sunrise, i.e. as the *Mishnah* says, "no fixed time." Later the sages added the fence of midnight for practical reasons: if most people waited later than that, they would fall asleep and not perform the service.

***Keriat Shema* (Recital of the Shema)**

A final note: the times listed for *Shacharit* are traditionally not the same parameters set for reciting the *Shema*. The earliest time for the *Shema* is earlier than that of morning prayers, since Scripture equates the morning recital of the *Shema* with "when you rise up"¹² which could be earlier than sunrise. The earliest most people would wake up in Biblical times was dawn, so therefore the earliest time of the *Shema* recital was originally when "one can distinguish between blue and white."¹³ Due to the subjective nature of this ruling, it was determined that the time for reciting the *Shema* would begin approximately 45 minutes before sunrise. The latest time for reciting the *Shema* is 3 hours past sunrise. This arose from an ancient custom: this was the time when kings would customarily awaken, so it therefore would be the latest time anyone else would "rise up."¹⁴ It may be that when Messiah prayed before sunrise (i.e. when the time of morning prayers begins), He started with the *Shema*.¹⁵

Endnotes

- 1 In Hebrew this is called *sha'ah zemanit* [proportional hour].
- 2 John 11:9.
- 3 m.*Berachot* 4.1. The section here is paraphrased as to what was believed to be present in the first century according to David Instone-Brewer, *Traditions of the Rabbis from the Era of the New Testament*, Volume 1 (Cambridge, UK: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2004), 53.
- 4 Numbers 28:4.
- 5 Francis Brown, S.R. Driver, Charles A. Briggs, *The Brown-Driver-Briggs Hebrew and English Lexicon*, (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 1999), 133.
- 6 Acts 2:15.
- 7 Numbers 28:4.
- 8 Jacob Milgrom, *The JPS Torah Commentary: Numbers*, (New York, NY: Jewish Publication Society, 1989), 239.
- 9 m.*Pesachim* 5:1.
- 10 Acts 10:9, see Joseph Shulam and Hilliary LeCornu, *A Commentary on the Jewish Roots of Acts*, (Jerusalem, Israel: Academon Ltd., 2003) 558.
- 11 Leviticus 6:1–6.
- 12 Deuteronomy 6:7.
- 13 m.*Berachot* 1:2. The blue and white are an obvious reference to the *tzitzit*, Instone-Brewer, 43.
- 14 m.*Berachot* 1:2. Some even extended this to four hours after sunrise.
- 15 Mark 1:35.