

AMERICAN ESSAYS IN LITURGY

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FOUNDATIONS OF
CHRISTIAN MUSIC:
The Music of
Pre-Constantinian
Christianity

EDWARD FOLEY

WIPF & STOCK • Eugene, Oregon

Wipf and Stock Publishers
199 W 8th Ave, Suite 3
Eugene, OR 97401

Foundations of Christian Music
The Music of Pre-Constantinian Christianity
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Softcover ISBN-13: 978-1-7252-8097-7
Hardcover ISBN-13: 978-1-7252-8096-0
eBook ISBN-13: 978-1-7252-8099-1
Publication date 5/19/2020
Previously published by The Liturgical Press, 1996

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Abbreviations

- EJ *Encyclopaedia Judaica*. Eds. Cecil Roth and Geoffrey Wigoder. 16 vols. Jerusalem: Keter Publishing House, 1972.
- IDB *The Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible*. Ed. George Buttrick et al. 4 vols. New York and Nashville: Abingdon, 1962.
- Mishnah All translations from *The Mishnah*. Trans. Jacob Neusner. New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1988.
- NGDMM *New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians*. Ed. Stanley Sadie. 20 vols. New York: W. W. Norton, 1980.
- NJBC *The New Jerome Biblical Commentary*. Eds. Raymond Brown, Joseph Fitzmyer, and Roland Murphy. Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice Hall, 1988.
- NTA *New Testament Apocrypha*. Eds. Edgar Hennecke and Wilhelm Schneemelcher. 2 vols. Trans. R. McL. Wilson. Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1976.
- TDNT *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*. Eds. Gerhard Kittel and Gerhard Friedrich. Trans. Geoffrey W. Bromiley. 10 vols. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1964.

Introduction

For the student of liturgical music, the search for an adequate overview of Christian worship music in the first three centuries of the common era can be a daunting experience. There are many fine surveys of Church music, but few of them give much attention to the time before Constantine (d. 337). While there are numerous particular studies on various musical texts, practices, or personalities in the early Christian community, these seldom supply an adequate picture of the basic trends in early Christian worship or its music.

The reasons for this lacuna are multiple. The sources about worship in the first three centuries of the common era are quite fragmentary. There was little concern among the early believers to document their cultic or musical practices for later generations. What sources we do have provide little specific information about music, or contain information that is often allegorical and difficult to interpret. Yet more problematic than the sources is the question about the very nature of music within emerging Christianity.

In order for the contemporary inquirer to understand the music of pre-Constantinian Christianity it is necessary to think cross-culturally. The first Christians lived in a world very different from our own: a world not only dissimilar in time and geography, but distinctive in the ways that its inhabitants perceived and talked about reality. Any attempt to understand early Christian worship music, therefore, requires more than simply learning a new vocabulary or developing an ability to reconcile divergent texts about music in the ancient world. Rather, it compels us to think differently about music and its relationship to ritual. In doing so we will discover that some contemporary categories—such as distinctions between music and speech—are anachronistic frameworks that the ancients did not employ. Furthermore, many contemporary practices, such as our ability to celebrate worship without music, would be completely unintelligible to Christians of the first centuries. In order to enter

into the world of early Christianity and comprehend the place and function of music in that world, we have to imagine and penetrate an auditory environment very different from our own.

Although there are many aspects of this ancient auditory environment that deserve our attention, none is more critical to the current study than the role of sound phenomena in divine revelation and worship. While contemporary Western society is visually oriented and believes what it sees, the first followers of Jesus—like their Jewish forebears—lived in a world where hearing was believing. Whether the interchange was a human affair or a divine-human dialogue, sound events were the prime mediator of presence and truth. This aural way of knowing deeply influenced the tonal landscape of early Christian worship which was as much a sonic as an optic event.

Before asking specific questions about early Christian music, therefore, we will first explore the tonal landscape of ancient Judaism and the New Testament world. This investigation will provide the necessary context for raising specific questions about “music” in early Christianity. After this preliminary investigation we will consider specific “musical” aspects of early Christian worship.

While there are many ways in which to organize such an investigation, I have chosen to organize the material according to the various places or types of places in which the followers of Jesus worshipped. We will begin with the Temple of Herod, then the synagogues of the first century, the borrowed spaces that characterized emerging Christianity in the first century, and finally the house churches of the second and third centuries. In each chapter we will describe the setting, and then attempt to answer questions about the type of “musicians” that functioned in that setting, the texts that might have been sung there, the manner of performing those texts, and the place of instruments in the worship. A brief summary will conclude each chapter.

Although there is much we do not know about the role of music in the emerging Christian community, there is an abundance of references, reconstructions, and hypotheses about the music of this era. There is no way that this slim volume can do justice to all of this material. Rather, what follows is intended as a guide to the central questions about the role of music in the emerging Christian community, as well as a credible survey of key primary and secondary sources about early Christian “music.” Such historical considerations are foundational for those who wrestle with contemporary is-

sues of liturgical music, and who need to befriend the tradition in order to respond adequately to the challenge of sung worship.

1 The Auditory Environment¹

Oral Societies

While there are numerous ways in which to characterize societies of various ages, in terms of communication it is possible to divide cultures "into three successive stages: (1) oral or oral-aural, (2) script . . . and (3) electronic."² The fundamental distinction between stages one and two—between an oral and what might be called a proto-literate society—is that the former does not use any form of phonetic writing.³ While an alphabet is not the only system which allows for phonetic transcription,⁴ the presence of an alphabetic system does signal that a society has at least begun the transition out of its oral stage.

For those who wish to understand the nature of an oral society, Walter Ong offers an important caution: "the differences between oral-aural culture and our own technological culture are . . . so vast and so profound as to defy total itemization."⁵ These differences are underscored by Ong's own limited itemization of some of the characteristics of an oral society, explanation of which is possible only by drawing negative parallels with contemporary experience. For example, Ong suggests that "one of the most striking and informative differences [between an oral culture and our own] is that an oral-aural culture is necessarily a culture with a relationship to time different from ours." In developing this concept, Ong relies almost exclusively on negative parallels to make his point: "[An oral-aural culture] has no records. It does have memory, but this is not by any means the same as records, for the written record is not a remembrance but an aid to recall. It does not belong to us as memory does. It is an external thing."⁶

Havelock proposes that one way to recognize the difference between our culture and an oral culture is by recognizing that in pri-

mary orality, relationships between human beings are governed exclusively by acoustics.

The psychology of such relationships is . . . acoustic. The relation between an individual and his society is acoustic, between himself and his tradition, his law, his government. To be sure, primary communication begins visually with the smile, the frown, the gesture. But these do not get us very far. Recognition, response, thought itself, occur when we hear linguistic sounds and melodies and ourselves respond to them, as we utter a variant set of sounds to amend or amplify or negate what we have heard.⁷

While there are many other features of an oral society that one could enumerate,⁸ this initial foray into cautions and characteristics alerts us to the radical differences between contemporary technological culture and the world of the ancient Near East.

Orality in Ancient Israel

In order for us to grasp something of the acoustic environment of ancient Israel we need to sketch in general terms when Israel was at the stage of primary orality and when, with the introduction of an alphabet and writing, it moved to the proto-literate stage. This necessitates the briefest of historical introductions to ancient Israel, followed by a similarly abbreviated overview of the history of alphabetic script in ancient Israel. These sketches will provide us with a framework for discussing the rise of writing within Israel, its movement from oral to written prophecy, the continuance of what might be termed "residual orality" as ancient Israel developed into a literate society, and allow some general comments about the dynamic nature of Hebrew language and thought. These historical-cultural reflections will allow us to gauge the auditory environment in Palestine in the first centuries of the common era, at the birth of Christianity.

An Historical Framework

The history of Israel⁹ commonly begins with the patriarchal period, which Roland de Vaux suggests can be roughly dated to the first half of the second millennium B.C.E.¹⁰ A second phase of Israel's early history is connected to the sojourn in Egypt and Joseph's

rise to power (Gen 37-50).¹¹ A third phase encompasses the Exodus and Conquest events. The former, possibly involving two separate exoduses,¹² can be dated in the middle of the thirteenth century B.C.E. The latter—which was as much a period of coexistence, peaceful infiltration, and interdependence between the residents of Canaan and the Hebrew settlers as it was a time of conquest¹³—spanned the period slightly before the Exodus(es) until the mid-eleventh century B.C.E. The later part of the period of the Conquest is roughly coterminous with the age of the Judges. By the middle of the eleventh century B.C.E. a series of cultural and political developments gave rise to the monarchy in Israel. At the death of Solomon (922 B.C.E.) the kingdom was divided. The northern kingdom (Israel) fell to Assyria in 721 B.C.E.; the southern kingdom (Judah) fell to Babylon in 587 B.C.E.

A schematic of this history follows:

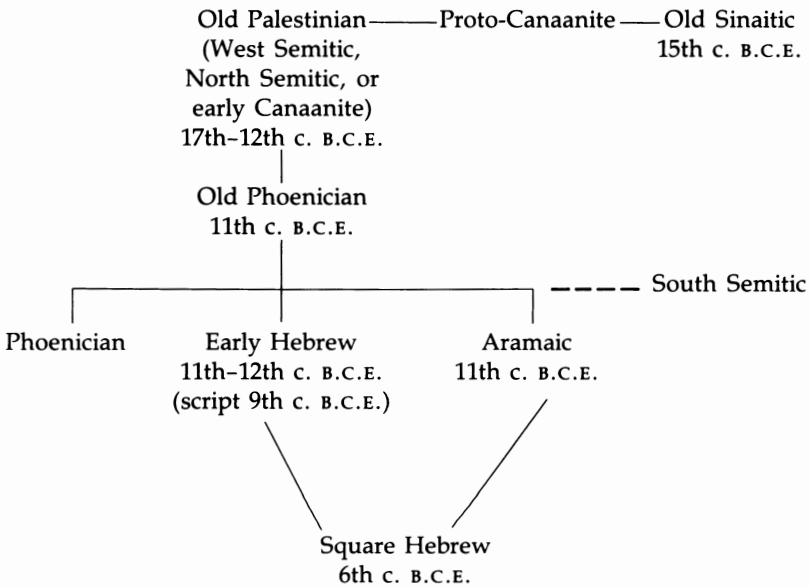
Patriarchal Period	ca. 2000–1700 B.C.E.
Sojourn in Egypt	ca. 1700–1300 B.C.E.?
entry of Semitic groups into Egypt	
the Joseph story	
Exodus and “Conquest”	ca. 1300–1050 B.C.E.
the Exodus(es)	ca. 1250 B.C.E.
the “Conquest”	ca. 1300–1050 B.C.E.
Age of the Judges	ca. 1200–1050 B.C.E.
Monarchy	ca. 1020–587 B.C.E.
division of kingdom	922 B.C.E.
fall of the northern kingdom	721 B.C.E.
fall of the southern kingdom	587 B.C.E.
Exile	587–539 B.C.E.

The Alphabet and Writing in Ancient Israel

It is possible that a Semitic alphabet¹⁴ could have appeared as early as 1900 B.C.E.¹⁵ The earliest extant Semitic texts are proto-Canaanite, dating from the seventeenth century B.C.E., from the region now known as Syria.¹⁶ Proto-Canaanite and Canaanite scripts were succeeded by Old Phoenician (or North Semitic) script in the eleventh century B.C.E. The Israelites borrowed either a Phoenician or a similar Palestinian script (a sub-species of proto-Canaanite)—employed in Palestine before their arrival—sometime after the thirteenth century B.C.E.¹⁷ Written Hebrew, properly speaking, has a

single witness from the eleventh century B.C.E., and many more by the eighth century B.C.E.¹⁸

A schematic of this history¹⁹ follows:



A comparison of this schematic with the preceding historical sketch suggests that writing entered the history of Israel very early. It is no coincidence that the refinement of Israel's national identity, symbolized in the rise of the monarchy, occurred in exactly the same period from which we have the first exemplars of Hebrew inscriptions.²⁰ It is possible that, since guilds of professional scribes existed in Egypt and Mesopotamia at this time,²¹ the emerging monarchy borrowed this element of statecraft from Egyptian or Canaanite governmental models.²² The emergence of Israel as a nation is intimately related to the emergence of the Hebrew language itself.

Writing, Scribalism, and the Deuteronomistic Movement

From the Old Testament we learn how widespread writing was among the Israelites. As de Vaux summarizes,

Writing was in common use at an early date. Besides the professional scribes, like those employed at the court for administration (2 Sam