



2014 HAWAII UNIVERSITY INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCES  
ARTS, HUMANITIES & SOCIAL SCIENCES  
JANUARY 4, 5 & 6 2014  
ALA MOANA HOTEL, HONOLULU, HAWAII

# THE PSALMS AS SIGNIFIERS OF SACRED TIME AND SPACE

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### **Introduction**

Although some Christians continue to view the existence of the Psalms as prophetic expressions of King David,<sup>1</sup> most biblical scholars today views the Psalms primarily as an expression of the yearnings, experiences, and understanding of Israelites in their own time. For those scholars who work to correlate New Testament statements with a view of Old Testament prophecy, the Gospel writers took material that was broadly applicable to the covenant people, and applied it directly to their view of Jesus.<sup>2</sup> In other words, the experiences of Israel expressed the future experiences of their Messiah, and became a type of His life that was understood by the gospel authors as representing him.<sup>3</sup>

This paper will demonstrate that the Psalms were often used in early Israelite practice and throughout time in the context of liturgical worship, in order to create divisions of sacred time and space. More specifically, we will show that the Psalms were set to music in order to enhance worship, and will show the various forms that the Psalms have taken that would have functioned

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<sup>1</sup> An example of this type of prophetic text, for Christians, is Psalm 22:16, which in the King James Version reads, "They pierced my hands and my feet." Although this version of Psalm 22:16 does not exist in the Masoretic text, it is a correct translation of the Septuagint, and is also found in the Dead Sea Scrolls. See Peter W. Flint, *The Dead Sea Psalms Scrolls and the Book of Psalms*, ed. F. Garcia Martinez and A. S. Van Der Woude, vol. 17, Studies on the Texts of the Desert of Judah (New York: Brill, 1997). 88.

<sup>2</sup> For this viewpoint, which reflects the direction of most modern biblical scholarship, see Stephen P. Ahearne-Kroll, *The Psalms of Lament in Mark's Passion : Jesus' Davidic suffering*, Society for New Testament Studies monograph series (Cambridge ; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007). 3-9.

<sup>3</sup> William L. Holladay, *The Psalms through Three Thousand Years* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993). 37-39.

to teach lessons through music and to help draw the worshipper into a state in which she or he was prepared to commune with God. In order to demonstrate this, we will first discuss the various types of Psalms, how most of these could have connected to worship in the ancient temple, and the evidence showing the importance of music in Old Testament times. We will suggest textually how the Psalms were designed to mirror important functions of the sacrificial ritual. Finally, we will show some of the most wide-spread forms that the Psalms have taken in music over time, down to the present day, and how many of those musical forms were designed to teach and to mirror the progress of the soul into a state of communion.

### **Psalms as forms of worship in ancient temples**

Numerous biblical scholars see the existence and use of many of the Psalms as connected to worship in the Temple of Solomon, or to later in the 2<sup>nd</sup> Temple that was built after the Jewish return from exile in Babylon.<sup>4</sup> 1 and 2 Chronicles – likely written by a temple Levite around 350 BC during the time of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Temple – connect Israelite music directly to the office of the Levites and to a temple setting. Although scholars disagree whether these accounts reflect an accurate understanding of the use of Psalms in David's day, or if they instead are more indicative of temple usage during the 2<sup>nd</sup> Temple (or with an idealized view of temple worship that was never fully realized), the connection with temple worship is not under debate.<sup>5</sup> 1 Chronicles 15 shows David leading a procession in song and dance as they brought the ark of the covenant, the

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<sup>4</sup> See, for just a few examples: Sigmund Mowinckel, *The Psalms in Israel's Worship*, trans. D. R. Ap-Thomas (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1962), 2:29-31; S. Holm-Nielsen, "The Importance of Late Jewish Psalmody for the Understanding of the Psalmic Tradition," *Studia Theologica* 14 (1960), 1-53; Erhard S. Gerstenberger, *Psalms Part I: With an Introduction to Cultic Poetry* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988), 108-13; Claus Westermann, *Praise and Lament in the Psalms* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1981), 64-79; Margaret Barker, *Temple Themes in Christian Worship* (London: Continuum, 2007); Laurence Paul Hemming, "With the Voice Together Shall They Sing," *BYU Studies* 50, no. 1 (2011): 25-45; Andrew Wilson-Dickson, *The Story of Christian Music: from Gregorian chant to Black gospel*, 1st ed. (Oxford, England; Batavia, Ill.: Lion Pub., 1992). 20; Holladay, *The Psalms through Three Thousand Years*: 17-18.

<sup>5</sup> S. Holm-Nielsen, "The Importance of Late Jewish Psalmody for the Understanding of the Psalmic Tradition," *Studia Theologica* 14 (1960), 1-53.

most central symbol of God's presence in Israel, back among the Israelites to reside in the tabernacle. According to the biblical author, as the Levites made holy sacrifices and entered into the tabernacle/ temple, David delivered a Psalm of thanksgiving (1 Chronicles 16:4-36), and urged his people to: "Sing unto [the Lord], sing Psalms unto him,... Glory ye in his holy name.... Seek the Lord and his strength, seek his face continually" (1 Chron. 6:9-11). David thus connected music with the temple activity of seeking the face of the Lord, as found symbolically at the ark. The backdrop for David's Psalm includes the music of the Levitical priests, who had been appointed "to minister before the ark of the Lord... with psalteries and with harps... with cymbals... with trumpets continually before the ark of the covenant of God." Asaph, whose name is found today at the beginning of many of the Psalms, was specifically mentioned as a musician there.

2 Chronicles 5:12-13 records similar behaviors at the dedication of Solomon's temple, when the Lord actually entered his temple. The text makes clear that the Levites had been sanctified and were dressed in liturgical temple robes of white. A number of them, again including Asaph, played "cymbals, psalteries, and harps", standing at the east end of the altar with one hundred and twenty priests playing trumpets. The "trumpeters and singers were as one, to make one sound to be heard in praising and thanking the Lord.... When they lifted up their voice... that then the house was filled with a cloud, even the house of the Lord" (2 Chron. 5:11-14). This passage points to the music and singing itself as the behavior that directly led to the presence of God entering into the temple.

Although almost certainly added later, subtitles such as those found in Psalms 83 and 84 connected various of the Psalms to figures such as Asaph or the sons of Korah (see Ex. 6:24). These were Levitical priest figures who served in the temple of God, again demonstrating the

biblical connection between the Psalms and temple worship. Many Psalms also give directions for how to perform the music as the words are being sung, showing that the Psalms were given in the context of musical performance. For example, although modern scholars cannot agree on the translation of the word “*selah*”, almost all are in accord that it indicated some type of instruction to the performers, with the largest group believing that it indicated a pause in the music (see Psalm 3:2,4,8).<sup>6</sup> Although it is impossible to know precisely how the ancient music was performed, the ways in which post-temple Jewish readers and singers have interpreted the markings of the Hebrew bible to guide their performance of the Psalms will be discussed below. One modern musical scholar, Suzanne Haik-Vantoura, believed that she had actually unlocked the code of the markings found in the Hebrew text, and proposed that they were intended to provide a complex system of musical notation centuries before similar systems could be found elsewhere. Although her proposal has not received broad scholarly acceptance, it is interesting to note that the music produced by following her proposals creates tunes that mirror the general mood and tone of the individual Psalms.<sup>7</sup>

Although written many centuries later, the Talmud supports the view that one of the most important roles of the Levites was to sing in the temple during the performance of sacred ritual, as can be seen in this description of the Day of Atonement:

They gave him the wine for the drink offering, and the high priest stood by each horn of the altar with a towel in his hand, and two priests stood at the table of the fat pieces with two silver trumpets in their hands... When he stooped and poured out the drink-offering the lead priest waved the towel and Ben Arza clashed the cymbals and the Levites broke forth into singing. When they reached a break in the singing they blew upon the trumpet

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<sup>6</sup> James Limburg, "Psalms, Book of," in *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*, ed. David Noel Freedman (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 5:527.

<sup>7</sup> David C. Mitchell, "Resinging the Temple Psalmody," *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 36, no. 3 (2012): 355-78. In this study, Mitchell reviews the traditional understanding of the *te'amim* in the Masoretic text, but finds support for Suzanne Haik-Vantoura's fascinating proposal that these markings have been completely misunderstood, and that they actually reflect an early Jewish notation system for singing the scriptures.

and at every blowing of the trumpet a prostration. This was the rite of the Daily Whole-offering... This was the singing which the Levites used to sing in the temple.<sup>8</sup>

The Talmud even indicated that certain Psalms were sung on each day of the week: Sunday – Psalm 24, Monday, - Psalm 48, Tuesday – Psalm 82, Wednesday – Psalm 94, Thursday – Psalm 81, Friday – Palm 93, and Saturday (the Sabbath) – Psalm 92.<sup>9</sup>

The themes expressed by the Psalms as mentioned below connect closely with the purposes of temple worship and animal sacrifice as viewed through a priestly lens: forgiveness, prayers of thanksgiving, pleas for aid in trials, holy festivals, the anointing and support of kings, songs to prepare for temple worship, and religious instruction.<sup>10</sup> The poetic temple prayers set to music were designed to express the feelings of a wide range of the people, so that they could be sung alone or together, and heighten the mood of worship in various circumstances. The categories in the Psalms can be divided into seven groups, which will be described here in order to show how they connect with temple worship in various situations:<sup>11</sup>

1) Psalms of Lament or Prayer – These likely arose from times of national or personal crisis, when the community gathered (when possible at the temple) in order to offer sacrifice and pray for deliverance – 12, 22, 23, 44, 60, 74, 79, 80, 83, 85, 90, 94, 108, 123, 129, 137. Saul's desire to sacrifice before going to war (1 Sam. 13:8-10) is an example of the type of circumstance in which these Psalms could have been performed. Many of these Psalms exhibit a three-part division. After addressing themselves to God, the supplicants first describe their trial, second plead for help, and third express their complete confidence that God will deliver them,

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<sup>8</sup> Tamid VII:3.

<sup>9</sup> Tamid VII:4.

<sup>10</sup> Baruch A. Levine, "Leviticus, Book of," in *Anchor Bible Dictionary*, ed. David Noel Freedman (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 4:311-21.

<sup>11</sup> In the creation of these categories, we have adapted information from Limburg, "Psalms, Book of," 531-34.

sometimes speaking of God's help as if He has already saved them. This three-part division likely connects with the ritual of sacrifice and will be discussed further below.

2) Psalms of Praise – These Psalms often begin with a command or call to Israel to gather as a community (most importantly at the temple) and praise the Lord – 8, 19, 29, 33, 47, 65, 66, 78, 93, 95-100, 103-106, 111, 113, 114, 117, 134, 135, 136, 145-150. After the call to praise, the hymns describe the power and the mercy of the Lord, often describing what He has done for Israel in the past and emphasizing His role as the creator and His divine reign as king of Israel. These Psalms, once thought of as synagogue hymns, are now thought to mark times of national gathering to festivals, such as the festival at Rosh Hashanah which commemorated God's creation of the earth and the anointing of God as king (and the mirrored anointing of the king of Judah/Israel) at the temple.

3) Songs of Thanksgiving – These Psalms reflect the gratitude of an individual or community after they have been delivered from a trial by God --18, 30, 34, 40, 66, 92, 116, 118, 138. This gratitude would typically have been demonstrated with a sacrifice at the temple, and would have been accompanied by the singing of a hymn or Psalm.

4) Royal Psalms – These Psalms celebrated important events in the lives of royalty, which for Christian readers of the Psalms often reflected the royal life and reign of the Messiah – 2, 18, 20, 21, 45, 72, 89, 101, 110, 132, 144. These often combine the previous two categories – pleas for aid and Psalms of thanksgiving – but are expressed in terms of royal favor and desire. Psalm 18, for example, could fit in category three in that it provides thanksgiving after a successful battle, while Psalm 20 could fit in category three in that it is a royal prayer for aid in war. Again, these types of prayers would frequently have been made in connection with some type of sacrifice at the temple. The example cited above, in which King Solomon dedicated the



temple to the accompaniment of Psalms, demonstrates the connection between the temple and this category of Psalms.

5) Songs of Zion – These Psalms celebrate the location of the temple at Mt. Zion, rejoice that the Lord’s presence is there, and express a longing to visit the temple that could have acted as a call to worship – 46, 48, 76, 84, 87, 122.

6) Liturgies – These Psalms are clearly designed for antiphonal dialogue (which will be described below) in a way that worshippers could respond to the call of a priest, or the Levites could perform a song in a call and response fashion, thereby strengthening the message of the Psalm – 15, 24, 50, 68, 81, 82, 95, 115, 132. Psalm 15, for example, appears to have functioned as a call and response which would allow the worshipper to enter into the temple.<sup>12</sup> The worshipper (or priest) would ask, “O Lord, who shall sojourn in thy tent [tabernacle]?” and the priest (or worshipper) would respond with the qualifications for temple service, “He who walks blameless and does what is right....” Psalm 24 functions in a similar way, with the worshipper (or the priest) asking “Who shall ascend into the hill of the Lord?” The priest (or the worshipper) would then respond, “He that hath clean hands and a pure heart....” The call and response format of the Psalm would have caused thoughtful reflection among the temple worshippers, and would have helped lift their souls to higher levels of devotion. Psalm 50 appears appropriate in the context of the re-initiation of a covenant, including a reference to a list of covenant requirements in vs. 16. Psalm 121 was likely used as a liturgical hymn for the use of pilgrims on their way to the temple in Jerusalem.

7) Wisdom and Torah Psalms – These Psalms seem to function differently than the others, not serving as a prayerful petition to God, but rather discussing religious truths and providing advice on how to successfully live a Godly life, similar to the advice found in Proverbs or

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<sup>12</sup> Wilson-Dickson, *The Story of Christian Music*: 21.

Ecclesiastes – 37, 49, 73, 112, 127, 128, 133. As such they do not connect inherently to the temple or to worship in the same way as the other Psalms, but they may indicate the importance of teaching groups gathered at the temple to be instructed by the priesthood, or they may reflect later synagogue settings, or similar gatherings at the home.

There is no way to know beyond educated guesses what form temple music would have taken. The form of some of the Psalms themselves, however, such as the call and response feature discussed in connection with Psalm 24 above (known as ‘*anah*’ or “reply” in Hebrew),<sup>13</sup> indicates that some of the music was likely responsorial or antiphonal (forms which will be discussed below). As has been mentioned, other Psalms show a type of three-part division. Biblical scholars describe these divisions as leading from one stage to another, from a lament, to a plea for help, to an expression of triumph or a statement of trust.<sup>14</sup> Using different titles, modern anthropologists have also recognized the commonality of a three-fold division in ritual behaviors.<sup>15</sup> The connections between the three divisions of many Psalms with the three divisions suggested by anthropologists – described below – and the possible connections of these stages with a three-fold division in the ritual of sacrifice, is in many respects unique to this paper. The tentative nature, however, of these proposed connections – meant to demonstrate one way in which the Psalms could have assisted in temple worship – should not call into question 1) that a three-fold division in many of the Psalms exists, 2) that the three-fold division would have been reflected musically; and 3) that many Psalms were clearly connected with temple ritual.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Wilson-Dickson, *The Story of Christian Music*: 21.

<sup>14</sup> See *Praise and Lament in the Psalms*, 64-79.

<sup>15</sup> For a description of this three-stage ritual process, see Victor Witter Turner, *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure* (Chicago,: Aldine Pub. Co., 1969), 94-96.

<sup>16</sup> For the ritual nature of the Psalms, see J.M Powis Smith, "Law and Ritual in the Psalms," *The Journal of Religion* 2, no. 1 (1922): 59-60.

Using the wording of modern ritual theory to describe the three-fold progression in the Psalm and in the sacrifice, many ritual behaviors begin with a separation stage – the lament stage – that is designed to disconnect the worshipper from previous worldly associations, attitudes, and behaviors. This would be symbolized by the worshipper’s entrance into the sacred precincts of the temple and movement towards the altar, where the sacrifice brought from the world would have hands laid upon its head to indicate its status as a proxy for the worldly sinner. The animal would then be sacrificed in an ultimate symbol of separation (see Lev. 1:3-4). The ritual behavior then proceeds to a liminal stage (from Latin *limen* meaning “threshold”) – the plea stage – in which the worshipper is moving from one state of being to another, and which is often characterized by new behaviors, orientations, and attitudes. This stage is reflected in the middle behaviors of the animal sacrifice, in which the blood of the animal is spilt, with some of it sprinkled upon specific corners or horns of the altar, and after which the animal is skinned and then divided into appropriate portions, with the entrails removed and taken care of appropriately (Lev. 1:5-7). Finally, the ritual behavior concludes in an aggregation stage – the triumph stage – in which the worshipper is brought into a new state of holier communion with God and with God’s people. This is symbolized by the placing of the various parts of the sacrifice upon the altar, where it is accepted by God’s priest, and where its smoke ascends up into heaven and becomes a pleasing savor unto the Lord (Lev. 1:7-9). The worshipper is thereby forgiven of his sins, or receives confidence that the Lord will help him to pass through his trials. He is separated from the world and he and God become one in a newly-formed, sacred community.

As has been stated, a similar three-fold ritual process is reflected in many of the Psalms, and may indicate that the words and music of these Psalms were designed to be sung by the Levites (or possibly by the worshipper or by hired performers?) at each stage of the ritual

process, indicating motion from one stage into the next. In that way the worshipper would be carried emotionally from the distressing state of separation – the lament stage – through the somewhat liminal state in which he has not yet been accepted by God – the plea stage – and triumphantly into the new relationship of holiness – the triumph stage – the music and words acting as an emotional and intellectual conduit throughout, strengthening the meaning of the ritual behavior and solidifying the results in the heart of the participant. Psalm 22 demonstrates this type of three-part division. Vv. 1-18, the separation or lament stage, describe the challenging condition in which the worshipper finds himself. He questions, “Why hast thou forsaken me?” (vs. 1), and states that he is “despised of the people” (vs. 6), that “trouble is near” (vs. 11), and that his “strength is dried up like a potsherd” (vs. 15). Although how the music would have been performed during the ritual is not known, it is possible to imagine a sorrowful tune accompanying these words as the lamb is being brought to the temple and is then killed in a symbol of difficulty and separation. For Christian readers, the images cited above most powerfully portray the “separation” experiences of Jesus that would lead up to his death, similar to the death of the innocent lamb. The second stage of the Psalm is characterized by pleas for help, found in vv. 19-21. The worshipper asks the Lord to “be not far from me” and “haste thee to deliver me” (vs. 19), and cries to the Lord to “save me from the lion’s mouth” (vs. 20). During this liminal stage in which the worshipper is not yet defeated but has not yet been delivered from his affliction, it is possible to imagine the music of the Psalm tending upwards or increasing in volume, reflecting the yearning of the soul for help and bringing the worshippers emotionally in tune with the ritual being performed, as the blood of the lamb is being sprinkled upon the altar and the parts of the lamb are being washed and placed upon the altar. Finally the Psalm enters the aggregation stage, found in vv. 22-31, in which the final success is anticipated

as if it had already occurred. The Psalmist declares that God “hath not despised nor abhorred the affliction of the afflicted; neither hath he hid his face from him” but “he heard” (vs. 24). The Psalmist states that his “praise shall be of God in the great congregation” (vs. 25), promising that he will continue to praise God for his successful deliverance as he is praising Him now in the singing of the hymn. The music of the Psalm would likely have reflected the triumphant conclusion of the sacrifice, in which God had accepted the offering and the worshipers were rejoicing in the assurance of their deliverance, feeling the reality of that deliverance as they participated in the sacred music of the Psalm. For Christians who read this Psalm, the effect that Jesus’ death had upon the temple, at which the veil was rent in two (Matt. 27:51), demonstrates that Jesus’ sacrifice was seen by the gospel writers as connected to the temple and as granting eventual access to all – the successful conclusion of the aggregation stage – back into the presence of God.

### **The Use of the Psalms by Jews and Christians after the temple**

As has been mentioned, performance of the Psalms did not find their way immediately into Jewish synagogue services.<sup>17</sup> This difference was likely caused because of the sharp distinction that was seen between the temple, in which worshippers attended under the direction of priestly authority to participate in ritual ordinances, and the synagogue, where priestly authority did not officiate.<sup>18</sup> The Jews, who had participated in both forms of worship

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<sup>17</sup> “Psalm-singing, or more specifically the singing of the daily psalms once used in the Temple, was one of the last elements of Temple worship to be taken up in the synagogue, to judge by its absence from documents of Jewish religious teaching before the sixth century.” David Hiley, *Western Plainchant: A Handbook* (London: Oxford University Press, 1995). 484-85. See also note 4.

<sup>18</sup> Wilson-Dickson, *The Story of Christian Music*: 22.

simultaneously,<sup>19</sup> may have been slow to adopt temple forms directly into synagogue worship. This reluctance in the synagogue seems to have been directed more at the singing of the Psalms than at their reading, since the reading of scripture was one of the primary purposes of synagogue worship. The time gap from the destruction of the temple until the adoption of sung Psalms in synagogue service likely accounts for the loss of knowledge regarding the precise performance of the psalms in the temple. Although Jewish synagogue cantors follow the cantillation marks found in the received Hebrew text, the style of music tends to reflect the local musical forms popular in broader society at the time.

Over time the synagogue adopted many Psalms into their synagogue services, using them particularly during the *shacharit* or morning service,<sup>20</sup> likely reflecting the ancient temple practice of the morning sacrifice.<sup>21</sup> Many additional Psalms are recited on the Sabbath,<sup>22</sup> and they also form an important part of other weekly services, such as the Friday evening service that begins the Sabbath, and of many festivals, including Passover, Shavuot, Sukkot, Simhat Torah, and Hanukah.<sup>23</sup> Additionally, certain Psalms are traditionally recited when someone is ill, or when a certain blessing is desired. Further personalizing the use of the Psalms, some Jews will recite a verse from the Psalms during *Amidah* – the most central prayer of the Jewish faith – that begins with the first letter of the worshipper’s Hebrew name, thereby connecting the worshipper’s name with the sacred, temple-centered text.<sup>24</sup> Ancient temple practices from the 2<sup>nd</sup> Temple are mirrored in all of these usages (with the possible exception of the last).

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<sup>19</sup> See Eric Werner, *The Sacred Bridge: Liturgical Parallels Between Synagogue and Early Church* (London: Schocken Books, 1970). 24-25.

<sup>20</sup> During the morning service, Psalms 30, 100, and 145-150 are all recited (with some variations in different Jewish congregations, such as Reform or Conservative, Sephardic or Ashkenazi), and the Psalm designated by the Talmud for each day of the week (listed above) is also added.

<sup>21</sup> For the information in this paragraph, see Holladay, *The Psalms through Three Thousand Years*: 134-49.

<sup>22</sup> Including Psalms 103, 19, 33, 90, 91, 98, 121, 122, 123, 124, 135, 136, 92 and 93.

<sup>23</sup> The Hallel, a group of praise Psalms including Psalms 113-118 is said on many of these occasions.

<sup>24</sup> For Jewish usage of the Psalms, see *ibid.*, 48-52.

The Christian churches appear to have begun their use of the Psalms in their worship services very early on. Paul directed Christians to worship by “speaking to yourselves in Psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody in your heart to the Lord” (Eph. 5:19). Eventually in both the Eastern Orthodox Church and in the Roman Catholic Church a cycle of Psalm singing was designed which would allow all 150 Psalms to be repeated every week, such as in the Eastern Orthodox *Kathismata*<sup>25</sup> or the Roman Catholic Liturgy of Hours or Divine Office.<sup>26</sup> In fact, in early centuries of Christian worship, it was expected that a candidate for Bishop would be able to recite all 150 Psalms from memory.<sup>27</sup> Some Protestant churches continue to imitate this use of the Psalms, reciting one Psalm each day of the month. The Eastern Orthodox Church uses Psalms in its rites of consecration, ordination, and the Eucharist and the Roman Catholic church uses various Psalms in rites of baptism, confirmation, Holy Communion, matrimony, funeral services, ordination, and consecration of churches. With their decreased emphasis on liturgy, Protestants often sing Psalms in their worship services, but do not always connect the Psalms directly with specific liturgies. Some protestant churches, such as the Reformed Presbyterian Church of North America, the Westminster Presbyterian Church in the United States, and the Free Church of Scotland only allow biblical Psalms to be sung during their worship services. Individual uses of the Psalms have always been important in Christianity, with favorite Psalms being used as prayers during illness or times of trial, and others to express gratitude.<sup>28</sup> For example, Augustine designated Psalm 23 as the “Psalm for Martyrs”, and it was often sung or recited by early Christians as they were being put to death.<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> For the information regarding the Eastern Orthodox use of the Psalms found in this paragraph, see John Alexander Lamb, *The Psalms in Christian Worship* (Glasgow: Blackie and Son, 1962). 47-69.

<sup>26</sup> For the information regarding the Roman Catholic use of the Psalms found in this paragraph, see *ibid.*, 80-127.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 24.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 139-42.

<sup>29</sup> Rowland E. Prothero, *The Psalms in Human Life* (London: Thomas Nelson & Sons, 1903). 22.

## **Early Forms of Psalm performance: Chanting, Plainchant or Plainsong, Responses, and Antiphonal Music**

Possibly because of their reluctance to adopt temple practices into the synagogue, early reading of the Psalms in the synagogue would have simply used the cantillation marks – known as *te'amim* – currently found in the Hebrew text which guide the reading of the scriptures in a heightened style of voice that somewhat resembles chanting or simple song forms, using pauses and the lengthening of certain syllables along with changes in the pitch of the voice to emphasize the scriptural message.<sup>30</sup> This type of reading has many of the benefits of musical forms that use a wider variety of tones. The vibrancy of the voice tends to connect new parts of the brain to the reading of the words, and aids in attention and memory, while also signifying an entrance into sacred time.<sup>31</sup> The reading/chanting of the texts, a practice still engaged in today and in which Jewish youth receive training before their *bar* or *bat mitzvah*, shows that the word of God should be treated differently than the mundane speech of every day. The use of this style of speech also emphasizes – by pauses, increased stress, raising and lowering in the pitch of the voice, and lengthening of words – the message of the scriptures in a way that affects not just the mind, but also the emotions.

This type of reading resembles the chant regularly used until the present day in Eastern Orthodox religions, which have preserved very early Christian adaptations of Jewish practices,

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<sup>30</sup> For an alternate proposal, see footnote 7.

<sup>31</sup> As Thomas Carlyle noted: "All passionate language does of itself become musical—with a finer music than mere accent; the speech of a man even in zealous anger becomes a chant, a song." Quoted in Bruce Chatwin, *The Songlines* (New York: Penguin Books, 1988). 302. For discussions on the mental and emotional impact of music discussed here and in other places in this paper, see Mantle Hood, *The Ethnomusicologist* (Kent, OH: Kent State University Press, 1982), xviii-xiv; Peter M. Hamel, *Through Music to the Self* (New York: Element Books, Ltd., 1991). 89-90; John Ortiz, *The Tao of Music: Music Psychology* (New York: Weiser Books, 1997); Suzanne Hanser, *The New Music Therapist's Handbook* (Chicago: Berklee Press Publications, 2000), 1-12.



and which would develop in the Roman Catholic Church into Plainsong chanting, and later (in the 8<sup>th</sup> century) into Gregorian chant. The Plainsong chant or Plainchant uses different tones to emphasize certain words and syllables, typically by a higher tone and a lengthening of the note. Its rhythm is completely dictated by the needs of the text.<sup>32</sup> This form of singing without meter continued as the primary method of singing the Psalms until the 16<sup>th</sup> century when the Reformation began to introduce metered forms. The unmetered singing reflects the nature of Hebrew poetry, which exhibits a type of meter in the rhythmic rise and fall of the Hebrew words, but that has no forms as rigidly metered as that found in poetic forms such as iambic pentameter. The chant was – at least for the first few centuries – sung in unison, although later developments witnessed the introduction of simple harmonies, known as *organum*. The effects of this type of chanting, which sounds even more musical than the type of reading from cantillation discussed above, has similar advantages, moving the congregation into a spiritual time and space in which the word of God is spoken differently, with greater resonance, than regular speech.<sup>33</sup> Additionally, the movement in Plainsong from one note to another, coupled with the emphasis on the absolute unity – bordering on sameness – of the singers, emphasizes the unifying power of the word of God. As the congregation listens, the worshippers' bodies practically reverberating with the power of unified singing, they are lifted into unity with the singers and with the power of the word of God. They are separated from their worldly existence and are prepared for communion with God in an emotionally altered, heightened state.

There is early evidence in Jewish and Christian usage for both responsorial singing and antiphonal singing, two related forms of music, although both seem to have been used first in

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<sup>32</sup> Wilson-Dickson, *The Story of Christian Music*: 29-34.

<sup>33</sup> See note 26.

Christian worship (besides their probably usage in early temple worship).<sup>34</sup> In responsorial singing, the leader, cantor, priest, or soloist sings a phrase of scripture, and then that phrase is repeated by the choir or by the congregation, with the leader at times guiding the choir through entire scriptural texts.<sup>35</sup> Responsorial singing can also contain a question from the cantor or leader, and an appropriate response from the choir or congregation. As mentioned above, some Psalms such as Psalm 24 function well not with simple repetition, but in this type of question and answer format. The cantor calls out a phrase of the Psalm such as, “Who shall ascend into the hill of the Lord?” and the congregation then responds, “He that hath clean hands, and a pure heart” (Ps. 24:3-4). In Psalm 24 the question and answer format continues through the entire Psalm, allowing for call and response throughout, although certain verses would have been sung in unison or sung only by the cantor in order to emphasize that message. The responsorial mode of singing not only allows the congregation to learn and participate in the singing of scriptural texts by repetition, but also brings disparate units – the priest, the worshipper, and the word of God (often represented by a soloist, the choir, and the musical text) – into unity as they sing the same words. Seen in a symbolic sense, the leader is bringing the worshipper through song into a higher level of holiness signified by the sanctified priest and his words. The repetition also emphasizes the authority of the priest and of the scriptural text, while engaging the respondents and allowing them to re-affirm codes of morality or scriptural truths with their own mouths. The cantor (or the scriptures themselves) is solidified in his role as teacher, while the congregation acknowledges its role as disciple learners, each playing a part in the sacred enactment of God’s word. The portions of unison singing allow the congregation to progress from a symbolic disunity, as indicated by the separate singing, into a state of oneness.

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<sup>34</sup> Wilson-Dickson, *The Story of Christian Music*: 30, 35.

<sup>35</sup> Charles Winfred Douglas, *Church music in history and practice : studies in the praise of God*, Hale lectures. (New York: C. Scribner's, 1937). 86.

The call and response mentioned above is also found in antiphonal singing, a more complex form of responsorial singing that is typically sung by a choir while the audience listens.<sup>36</sup> With the ability to practice and prepare, the choir can thus develop much more intricate melodies with memorized lines that either mirror or contrast beautifully with each other, leading to eventual unity (whether in unison or in harmony.) Psalm 124 offers another type of poetry that functions well with antiphonal singing, since it progresses by repeating portions of the preceding phrase. Vs. 1 states, “If it had not been the Lord who was on our side, now may Israel say...” and vs. 2 continues, using the same phrase, but modifying the ending, “If it had not been the Lord who was on our side, when men rose up against us...” Vs. 3 then gives a new phrase, stating, “Then they had swallowed us up quick...” and vs. 4 modifies the phrase, giving, “Then the waters had gone over our soul.” It is possible to imagine the effectiveness of these modified phrases being sung by opposite sides of a choir, progressing through the Psalm, often taking turns, but then beginning to sing their various parts at the same time and finally ending in unison. Indeed, the very parallel nature of Hebrew poetry allows antiphonal singing to work effectively with almost any Psalm. Psalm 23:2 demonstrates the balanced, repeating messages that are constantly employed in the poetically parallel portions of the Old Testament: “He maketh me to lie down in green pastures” opens the verse and is followed by a parallel concept, but using different imagery: “he leadeth me beside the still waters.” Antiphonal singing serves to emphasize the repetition, but with unique imagery, that exists throughout the Psalms. It should also be noted that antiphonal singing can be used similarly to responsorial singing, in which the two sides of the choir repeat the same phrases, at first not overlapping each other, then singing at the same time (or in close succession), and eventually building to unity. This practice was developed extensively later in what is known as the fugues, in which one portion of the choir

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<sup>36</sup> Ibid., 87-89.

musically chases the other portion through a series of harmonized, repeated lines, until eventually evolving into unity at the end.<sup>37</sup>

The antiphonal mode of singing exhibits the same advantages of responsorial singing, with repetition and the unifying of the choir or the congregation with the cantor. In the Catholic tradition, the beauty of this type of antiphonal singing is emphasized aurally and visually with the choir at times positioned in the two opposite transepts that form the arms of the cathedral's cross-shaped formation (although they are more frequently stationed at the end of the nave in clear view of the worshippers). Additionally, in some forms antiphonal singing also provides a three-part division that can mirror the ritual process found at Solomon's temple and in some of the Psalms. The choir first is divided and separated, singing phrases apart from each other. This singing evolves into a liminal stage in which the choir sings similar parts, but the parts overlap each other in ways that are not completely unified. The singing ends in an aggregation stage in which the choir comes together in a beautiful unity of sound and timing. Thus the listening congregation is first confronted with feelings of isolation and then moves through a tense and exciting stage of liminality, before being brought, emotionally prepared, into a state of union.

### **The Development of Meters; Harmonizing; Other Modern Adaptations**

Since the Psalms come from Hebrew poetry which, as has been mentioned, does not demonstrate strict meter, settings in music that adhered faithfully to the text could not be metrical in the modern sense (such as the meter of iambic pentameter). For this reason the music of the Psalms continued without meter until the 16<sup>th</sup> century. At this point, influenced by the Reformation, it began to slowly adopt more popular, metered forms (although the traditional forms continued, as well). In connection with the Reformation's choice to translate the scriptures into language understandable to the laity, and with its growing distaste for the strict, liturgical,

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<sup>37</sup> Karl Kroeger, "Dynamics in Early American Psalmody," *College Music Symposium* 26(1986): 103.

ritual styles employed by the Roman Catholic Church, a departure from long-held traditions with relation to the Psalms began. The popular, metered, religious tunes that had previously been used for other hymns were now adopted for the Psalms, and eventually tunes that had been used for non-religious singing were even connected with them.<sup>38</sup> This, of course, necessitated a change in the words of the Psalms, as they were adapted to the tune, rather than the tune adapting itself to the words. Once the words were being altered to fit the meter of the tune, the alteration was continued by creating rhyme, which had also not existed previously since it is not found in the Hebrew poetry of the Bible. These types of tunes can be found in the popular Bay Psalms Book, which rendered all 150 Psalms into metered tunes with rhyming words.<sup>39</sup>

Two additional trends were strengthened in this shift. First, although harmonies had already been in use for hundreds of years in singing the Psalms, the versification of the Psalms into recognizable tunes that were often repeated several times over the course of the song allowed for greater creativity and diversity in harmonizing by a lay audience, rather than just by the choir. Thus harmony in Psalm singing became the norm for many Protestant churches while unison singing dropped into greater obscurity. Second, while dynamics had previously been employed to emphasize the meaning of specific words in the text, the importance of dynamics in order to focus on beautifully moving music was now increased. The usefulness of dynamics in order to understand the meaning of the Psalm was not lost, but this understanding now focused more on the general concepts rather than on specific words, since the overall message, rather than the individual words, was seen as sacred.<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>38</sup> Walterus Truron, "The Rhythm of Metrical-Psalm Tunes," *Music and Letters* 9, no. 1 (1928): 29-33. See also Charles P. St-Onge, "Music, Worship and Martin Luther," (2003).

<sup>39</sup> Henry Wilder Foote, *Three centuries of American hymnody* ([Hamden, Conn.]: Archon Books, 1968). 51-54.

<sup>40</sup> Kroeger, "Dynamics in Early American Psalmody," 100-03.

Although there may have been some loss in meaning with these alterations, to the Reformers the memorability of the tunes enhanced the congregation's understanding of the overall meaning of the Psalms, and allowed these scriptural prayers to be called to mind more readily in times of personal need. Because the tunes were easy to learn, the congregation was able to participate more readily in the unifying process of worship through singing.<sup>41</sup> With the greater liveliness of some of the tunes, the body was inclined to respond with the heart and mind in an emotional, physical response. In this sense the tunes helped prepare the congregation for connection with the divine. With regards to the meter, rhythm, and rhyme of the Psalms, these forms, differing as they do from typical forms of speech, retained and possibly even enhanced the sense that the singers had entered into sacred time and space, and that they were worshipping in the ordered and orderly forms pleasing to God. The order and organization of a metered hymn mirrored the order and organization found in heaven. Or, in other words, the harmonies bore witness of the natural order that had been restored and that was made possible to Christians through the power of Jesus' gospel. The beautiful harmonies gave the sense that the singers were each contributing in their own ways that in the composite became a unified plea or witness of God's love and power.<sup>42</sup> The audible wave-lengths created by harmony compared with those of voices in unison emphasized the power of unity with God. The increasing use of minor keys that resolved at the end of the hymn, and of leading notes that reached completion at the end of the hymn, mirrored the ritual feeling of a soul in a liminal state moving into a state of aggregation. The dynamics helped raise the soul of the singer into ecstatic or reverent communion with the divine, as the setting required. Thus sacred time was still marked by the singing of Psalms, although in a modified form from that engaged in previously.

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<sup>41</sup> Kroeger, "Dynamics in Early American Psalmody," 105.

<sup>42</sup> Kroeger, "Dynamics in Early American Psalmody," 105.

Further adaptations of the Psalms have occurred in modernity, as their use outside of liturgical purposes has encouraged their presence outside of traditionally religious settings. Psalms have been adapted for use in the music of rock groups with religious undertones and groups that would be considered almost completely secular. A survey of modern usage of Psalm 23 includes such groups and singers as Kanye West (“Jesus Walks”), Coolio (“Ganster’s Paradise”), Good Charlotte (“The River”), Puff Daddy and Notorious P.I.G. (“You’re Nobody ‘til Somebody Kills You”), Alice in Chains (“Sickman”), U2 (“Love Rescue Me”), Pink Floyd (“Sheep”), The Grateful Dead (“Ripple”), Megadeth (“Shadow of Death”), and Peter Tosh (“Jah Guide”).<sup>43</sup> While ancient and many modern worshippers might be shocked by the broad use to which the Psalms are now placed, in another sense the dispersing of the concepts taught by the Psalms can also function to lift those who are not inclined to worship in liturgical settings.

Megadeth’s “Shadow of Death” functions as a fascinating example of the continued relevance of the Psalms. In the portrayal of Psalm 23 the lead singer recites the English text without any alteration and the psalm provides the only words spoken in the song. The song begins, continues, and ends with the sound of discordant tunes played by an electric guitar, providing a sense of chaos. In the background the sounding of a bell maintains a cadence, reminding of the Christian call to worship. For those accustomed to a liturgical use of the Psalm in the context of the Christian tradition, the effect is jarring and can be offensive. To most from a traditional religious background, the juxtaposition of a sacred text with heavy metal sounds seems designed to offend and mock that which is considered sacred. This certainly may have been the intent of the band. Other possibilities exist, however. The song could be intended to bring the text into the hearts and minds of the band’s audience, using the musical forms with

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<sup>43</sup> Karl Jacobson, “Through the Pistol Smoke Dimly: Psalm 23 in Contemporary Film and Song,” *SBL Forum*. <http://www.sbl-site.org/publications/article.aspx?articleId=796>. Accessed 11/1/2012.

which they are comfortable. The chaos of the music could potentially symbolize the band's view of the chaotic world, with the scriptural text providing a message of strength and comfort in the midst of that chaos. Or, the band may have intended the song as a critique of the dominant society that has held Psalm 23 sacred, but that has not reflected the message of the Psalm in its treatment of the needy or the outsiders in that society. Whatever the purposes of the band, it is fascinating to see how the Psalms continue to play a role in modern society, both inside and outside of their more traditional forms.

## **Conclusion**

Throughout time the Psalms have been used with music in order to bring the soul into communion with the divine. An awareness of the historical foundation of the Psalms in the Israelite temple can heighten the appreciation of modern audiences for the Psalms, whether in traditional worship services, in modern religious adaptations, or in nominally secular settings. The call and response format of many Psalms, the physical engagement of the body in the temple rituals, and the prescribed, orderly nature of these ritual behaviors all served to mark the entrance into sacred space and time, with the actions marking the movement through the ritual stages of separation, liminality, and aggregation.<sup>44</sup> This three-fold movement, as found in the Psalms, begins with an open acknowledgement of challenges, proceeds through the liminal process of healing, and ends with an expression of confidence in the sufferer's ability to triumph in the future or with gratitude that the challenge has been overcome. This understanding of the Psalms continues to have universal meaning no matter the specific context today.

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<sup>44</sup> We offer our thanks for the excellent research assistance provided by Quinten Barney that made the writing of this article possible.