Chapter 2

Psalms in the Early Church

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HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

For three thousand years, the Old Testament Book of Psalms (*Tehillim*, "praises") has provided the richest treasure of poetry for the Jewish, Roman Catholic, Orthodox, and Protestant faiths. And within Protestantism, it has contributed an abundance of source material for congregational song. But it has also shaped the very understanding of that faith as well as impacting its forms of worship and liturgical practices. This investigation will focus upon the role of the Psalms in the early church, covering roughly the period from AD 30 (Pentecost) to AD 476 (fall of Rome).

Although Jesus prophesied, "I will build my church and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it" (Matt 16:18b, ESV), the early church was clearly a work in progress, taking shape in an apparently ungainly and improvisatory manner. Its origin is generally traced to the Jewish Festival of Pentecost (fifty days after Passover), one of three annual feasts wherein a Jew could fulfill the requirement of annual attendance at the temple in Jerusalem (Exodus 23:17). In Acts 2 we are told that as Jesus' followers were gathered together, the Holy Spirit fell on them, and the apostles began to preach Christ's resurrection to a vast gathering of foreigners who had come to the festival. Peter delivered a powerful sermon, proclaiming that the

prophecy of Joel 2:28–32 was being fulfilled that day, and 3000 new converts responded to the message.

Certainly, a pressing question for them as Jews, who had now found their Messiah, would have been how to relate traditional beliefs and practices to their understanding of Jesus, revealed as the Messiah. Several factors seem most influential: their temple practices, the replacement role of the synagogue, the writings of the apostle Paul, and the music of the Psalms in the early centuries.

Temple Practices

For those living in Jerusalem, there was no reason to reject Jesus' example of attendance at the Temple (Luke 21:37) or to alter their daily practice of "attending the Temple together" (Acts 2:46, ESV). This likely involved the normal hours of prayer at 9 a.m. and 3 p.m., as when disciples "Peter and John were going up to the temple at the hour of prayer, the ninth hour" [3 p.m.] (Acts 3:1, ESV). Observant Jews also frequented the Temple to present sacrifices (Luke 5:14), offerings (e.g., the widow in Mark 12:41–44), tithes, and temple taxes. Perhaps surprisingly, there are no commands in the Old Testament that Jews should regularly meet to worship at any appointed time or place.[1] Sabbath keeping was related more to refraining from work and meeting together as a family unit. No specified schedule of observance or worship was required.

Yet, for Jews, the Temple represented God's physical presence among his people; it was the tangible symbol of what it meant to be a Jew. It was only natural that Jews would associate with the Temple to the degree that was practical in terms of proximity, profession, and piety. From this, one realizes that Jewish believers in and around Jerusalem would have had various degrees of contact with the Temple. But what kind of exposure to and participation in the Psalms might they have experienced? The first-century Temple, known as Herod's Temple or the Second Temple, was understood as having three functions: sacrifice, prayer (Jesus demanded that the Temple be treated as a "house of prayer" when he overthrew the moneychangers in Matt 21:12–13), and reading the Torah.

Nowhere does one find a first-century description of Psalmic activity in the Temple. Although there are extensive passages in 1 Chr 22 about David's preparation for music in Solomon's First Temple as well as an account of the glorious musical events accompanying its dedication in 2 Chr 5, there

1. There were prescribed annual festivals, and some think the "holy convocation" of Lev 23:3 suggests weekly Sabbath worship.

is no Old Testament record of how the Psalms might have been employed or performed. Further, the question lurks as to whether the elaborate musical institution described in Solomon's Temple enjoyed any echo in Herod's Temple nearly a millennium later.

Neither the Apocryphal writings nor Josephus's *Antiquities of the Jews* (ca. AD 94) provide much help. Nor does the New Testament make musical references to the Temple. But around AD 200, Rabbi Judah ha-Nasi compiled the *Mishnah*, the first major collection of Jewish oral traditions, approximately 130 years after the destruction of the Temple in AD 70. It provides fascinating descriptions of how the Psalms were supposedly employed. In summary, it enumerates (Tamid 7:5) that certain Psalms were recited on particular days at the hours of prayer/sacrifice: Day 1—Ps 24; Day 2—Ps 48; Day 3—Ps 82; Day 4—Ps 94; Day 5—Ps 81; Day 6—Ps 93; Day 7 (Sabbath)—Ps 92. Each of these Psalms contains references to Temple worship such as "in the midst of your Temple" (Ps 48) or "in your house" (Ps. 93), while Ps 92 for Day 7 appears with the ascription, "A Psalm for the Sabbath."[2]

Two additional passages (Middot 2:5; Sukkah 5:4) state that during the Feast of Booths, the fifteen Psalms encompassing 120–34, often called "Songs of Ascents," were sung by Levites with a large instrumental ensemble on the fifteen steps connecting the Court of Israel and the Court of Women. Another passage (Pesahim 5:7) records that when Israelites came to the Temple with personal offerings, priests read Ps 113–18, known as the "Hallel." This series was also performed at other Jewish festivals, as well as family celebrations of the Passover. While only fourteen specific Psalms have been linked to Temple worship, over one hundred may have been present in the actual repertoire, based upon evidence that, by the first century, the Psalms were already understood as a singular compilation (Luke 20:42; 24:44).

From this, one can reasonably assume that Jews who frequented the Temple would have been exposed to a wide range of Psalms. Combined with their domestic experiences during Sabbath worship, these poetic statements were some of the most familiar sections of the Old Testament.

Synagogue

Despite the centrality of the Temple, most Palestinian Jews were not regular frequenters. Where most Jews found both their identity with a gathered assembly and practical daily help was in the synagogue.

2. Smith, *Music in Ancient Judaism*, 89.

While its origins are unclear, its presence by the first century seems to have been ubiquitous in Jewish life. Acts 15:21 (ASV) states, "For Moses from generations of old has in every city them that preach him, being read in the synagogues every Sabbath." All four of the Gospels record Jesus teaching in the synagogue(s). Even in Jerusalem, during the glory of Herod's Temple, there were apparently numerous synagogues operating in the city.

As there was no commandment for Jews to worship in a particular place, or even as a community, the synagogues constituted a wide range of functions. In addition to prayer, reading, and teaching the Torah, the synagogue fostered education as well as social and charitable work. Especially after the Temple's destruction in 70 AD, some synagogues took on aspects of temple worship that could no longer be practiced. But in most instances, the synagogue was more functional than ritualistic. A variety of terms were employed to describe it with *proseuche* (prayer) being the oldest.

It is important to realize that first-century Judaism was not monolithic. Factions included Nazirites, Pharisees, Sadducees, Essenes, Zealots, and Scribes. But most of these were limited in number and/or did not survive the Temple destruction. Thus, much of Jewish belief and practice would have varied considerably throughout Palestine, and even more throughout the Diaspora.

Conspicuous by its absence is any first or second century documentation about Psalmic usage in these local assemblies. It is assumed that Jews carried their familiarity with the Psalms over into their worship practices, but much is speculation. In many locales, Jews were probably more influenced by Hellenistic culture than Jewish traditions. However, later discoveries such as the Qumran manuscripts and the Dead Sea Scrolls attest to the popularity of Psalmic material. The New Testament writers quote the Psalms sixty-nine times—more than any other ancient source. As Gary Rendsburg has observed, "Jews (and Luke too) knew their Psalms during the time of the fluorescence of the Jerusalem Temple—and . . . after its demise as well."[3] Significantly, at the Jewish Feast of Pentecost, Peter's seminal sermon (Acts 2:25–35) quotes from Ps 16:8–11 and 110:1. Although there is limited direct evidence of Psalmic usage in the synagogue, its apparent widespread familiarity in other sources suggests a central presence in synagogue life, as well.

In some locations after Pentecost, Jewish believers continued participation in the synagogues, but in others, tension arose. Acts 6–8 records that in the aftermath of Stephen's martyrdom, believers in Jerusalem experienced persecution, and many fled the city. In particular, Saul's persecution in Jerusalem and elsewhere received official sanction from the high priest

3. Rendsburg, "Psalms as Hymns," 117.

(Acts 9:1–2). This forced many believing Jews to abandon their traditional assembly/synagogues and form new bodies that were in essence proto-early churches, with some of these including believing Gentiles.

What one finds within the church at Jerusalem was probably typical elsewhere. The earliest leaders were those who had served with Jesus. But there was also a range of believers with relevance to Judaism. There were devout Jews, culturally Hellenistic Jews, followers of a mixed heritage (such as Timothy later), and Gentiles or pagans who had come to Christ. To what degree Jewish worship practices would have impacted this diverse group is unclear.

It appears logical that some Jewish believers transferred what experiences they could from the Temple and synagogue as that would have provided ready-made models for worship, while Gentiles would have possessed only models from pagan worship, meeting with skepticism or outright rejection.[4] Thus, it seems reasonable to assume that some level of Jewish worship influence was present in the early church as it was improvising its way toward new forms and practices.

As recorded in Acts, while a majority of Jews rejected the gospel, Peter and Paul found a receptive ear among the Gentiles. The resulting assemblies (*ecclesia*) formed by these Gentile believers had fewer links to Jewish life. This phase reflects a broadening demographic to encompass the non-Jewish believers who soon came to govern.

Apostle Paul

From the perspective of the New Testament writers—especially Paul—it appears the early church was highly decentralized in terms of religious practice. While Paul, in his epistolary instruction to the churches, covers a variety of topics—including communal worship matters—his references to musical practices seem to be descriptive rather than prescriptive.

Thus, it appears that as the early church morphed from a more Judaically influenced entity into a more Gentile-dominated one, and as the Jewish world grappled with the Temple's demise, the early church is probably best understood as a dynamic entity, evolving its forms and practices as its ethnic membership changed and its geographic locales varied.[5]

Certainly the most important influence on the early church is that of the Apostle Paul, who was dramatically converted on the road to Damascus,

4. See Quasten, *Music and Worship.*

5. See Bradshaw's *Search of the Origins*, 54, where he calls these diverse practices "pluriform."

becoming its most successful missionary as he planted churches and expanded the message of the gospel. In his letters, he touches upon matters theological, practical, and personal. And he does so from the perspective of a well-educated and cultured citizen of both the Jewish and Greco-Roman worlds. In Phil 3:5 Paul asserts his Jewish pedigree: "Having been circumcised on the eighth day, I am of the nation of Israel, from the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews. As far as the Law is concerned, I was a Pharisee" (NIV), but he is equally at home in the dominant Roman culture, debating Greek philosophers on Mars Hill (Acts 17), even spontaneously quoting their own poets to make his case. Culturally and pragmatically, Paul was at home in both the Jewish and Gentile worlds and was in touch with his readers' knowledge and practices.

That understanding is central when considering two passages. Eph 5:19 reads, "Speaking to yourselves in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody in your heart to the Lord," while Col 3:16 enjoins, "Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly in all wisdom; teaching and admonishing one another in psalms, and hymns, and spiritual songs, singing with grace in your hearts to the Lord" (KJV). Perhaps surprisingly, Paul is not instructing on what elements are required for public worship or how to conduct it. Rather, he is providing instruction in daily Christian living and using the model of singing as a practical tool to accomplish this. Of particular interest is Paul's repeated use of the terms "psalms, and hymns, and spiritual songs." It certainly appears that Paul had something specific in mind. What that was is open to debate.

Some scholars, such as Egon Wellesz, see Paul as referring to three genres of sacred music: "psalms" designating the Old Testament book of Psalms available in the popular Greek translation, Septuagint; "hymns" are thought to be newly minted Christological devotional poetry, fragments of which may be found in Phil 2:5–11 or 1 Tim 3:16b; and "spiritual songs" are posited to be improvised creations, perhaps reflecting the practice of glossolalia (speaking in an unknown language under inspiration of the Holy Spirit).[6]

Other scholars believe Paul's terms are not categorical but are simply synonyms for religious singing in general, employing language widely associated with both the Psalms and other types of song. If this is the case, they offer little illumination about the genres of church music in the early church. However, if Paul was including the Old Testament Psalms within any of these terms, he seems to assume his readers' familiarity with and ability to participate in some meaningful way in their singing. This implies that,

6. Hustad, *Jubilate*, 146–148.

even within the Gentile churches at Ephesus and Colossae, Psalms were a common commodity of worship, accessible by Jews and Gentiles alike. It has already been noted that both Jewish and Gentile writers of the New Testament quoted the Psalms more than any other Old Testament book. Exactly which Psalms Paul may have had in mind is unclear, yet it appears that the historic Psalms were, to at least some degree, the *lingua franca* of singing within the early church.

Music of the Psalms in the Early Centuries

More vexing is the issue of what music was employed in voicing the Psalms. It is unlikely that Gentiles would have been familiar with Jewish tunes; in fact, there was almost certainly no standard body of Jewish tunes that would have been recognizable to Paul or other believers as they traveled from church to church. Music was generally local throughout the Greco-Roman world, because music was basically monophonic, that is, containing melody and rhythm only with no accompanying harmony (a development arising again in the European Middle Ages). That monophonic quality allowed music to circulate in an oral tradition, and it wasn't written down. It was passed along in the context of its culture. As long as there were those who sang a particular tune, it remained available for others to learn and repeat. When it fell out of favor, it was generally lost forever. Many of the melodies employed certain melodic and rhythmic formulas, but there was no core of tunes widely available to numerous churches, spread over a large geographical area. While it is possible that itinerant missionaries or even traders could have taught a beloved tune from their home congregation to a church they were visiting, this would have been the exception, not the rule.

While a few references to singing the Psalms during the first three centuries can be found in the writings of Clement of Alexandria, Tertullian, Ambrose of Milan, Augustine of Hippo, and Basil,[7] it wasn't until the fourth century that a growing body of documentation provides more direct connection to the Psalms in worship.

Some of this arises from the popularity of desert monasticism around the fourth century. Beginning with individual ascetics who often lived in caves or in isolation for the purpose of "unceasing prayer," as mentioned in 1 Thess 5:17, the practice spread to entire communities of men and women who were admired for their spirituality. To successfully foster the practice of continued prayer, it was found that reciting the entire book of Psalms was ideal. Ascetic monasticism soon became the idealized goal of Christian

7. Music, *Hymnology*, 3–17.

living, although relatively few could actually follow it. Yet, whatever its degree of practice, chanting or singing the Psalms was central.

Another popular form of Psalmody appeared in nightly vigils, services held in anticipation of a feast or important religious observance. In 375, Basil of Caesarea described his church's practice concerning nightly "vigils, prayers and common psalmody" that were esteemed throughout the Christianized East. The best-known account of a vigil involving Psalmody derives from Ambrose of Milan recalling how, in 386 when the new Empress Justina attempted to impose Arianism on the city, his flock of believers took refuge in the church for protection, spending their time "recit[ing] psalms with the faithful."[8] Niceta of Remesiana also provided a lengthy discussion of psalmody connected to vigils in his *De psalmodiae bono*.[9]

Perhaps one of the most detailed accounts relevant to Psalmody was that of Egeria, a woman who made a three-year pilgrimage (ca. 380) to the Holy Land and recorded a wealth of information. Her descriptions suggest the development of a series of daily services that came to be known as the Offices.[10]

John Chrysostom (349–407), revered church father and Archbishop of Constantinople, best summed up the centrality of the Psalms when he penned:

> If we keep vigil in church, David comes first, last, and central. If early in the morning we want songs and hymns, first, last and central is David again. If we are occupied with the funeral solemnities . . . or if virgins sit at home and spin, David is first, last and central. O amazing wonder! Many . . . know the Psalter by heart. . . . In monasteries, among those holy choirs of angelic armies, David is first, last and central. In the convents of virgins . . . David is first, last and central. All other men at night are overcome by sleep. David alone is active, and gathering the servants of God into seraphic bands, he turns earth into heaven, and converts men into angels.[11]

8. Music, *Hymnology*, 9, 11, 12.
9. McKinnon, "Christian Church," 800–801.
10. McKinnon, "Christian Church," 799–800.
11. McKinnon, "Christian Church," 799.

THEOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVES

While the Psalms' relationship to song has long been recognized, the Psalms—individually and as a collection—impacted the early church in a much less obvious but critically important way: in its sense of identity and its theology. "Theology was the key, not poetry, or hymnody. When one considers the fact that the Psalms were being read as promises that Christians saw fulfilled in the story of Jesus the Christ as told in their creedal statements, it becomes understandable that they played not just an auxiliary role but a decisive one in the shaping of Christianity's foundational narrative."[12]

This allegorical/typological hermeneutic of perceiving Christ in the Psalms as fulfilled in the New Testament became a normative way of interpreting Old Testament prophecies, continuing throughout the Middle Ages—as evidenced in both art and music—and well into modern times when the eighteenth-century British hymn writer Isaac Watts "Christianized" the Psalms by paraphrasing them in light of New Testament passages that speak of Christ's fulfillment (e.g., "Jesus shall reign, where'er the sun" based on Ps 72).

"In addition to its impact on the theological foundations, the Psalms supplied the church with a ready-made vocabulary. The Psalms shaped the very self-understanding of early Christians as they began to define their faith and as they developed language for an appropriate expression of their message. Words and phrases such as 'Christ the king,' 'Son of David,' 'Son of God,' 'salvation,' 'new creation,' the 'people of God,' the 'assembly;' themes such as suffering and victory; and the language of sinning, confessing, having mercy, judging, saving, hoping, resting, and trusting all have a precedent in the Psalms."[13] This vocabulary, rich in metaphors, soon became the basis of hymnic expression as later poets appropriated the words and ideas from the Psalms for new songs of the faith.

In addition to providing basic theological concepts and vocabulary, the Psalms also served as a theologically reliable body of song for the early church as it struggled with heresies such as Gnosticism and Arianism. In 325 AD, the first of many Church Councils convened to deal with matters of belief and practice. While the Council of Laodicea (363 AD) was only a regional body with limited influence, its promulgation of Canon 59, stating, "No songs by private individuals nor any uncanonical books may be read in the church, but only the Canonical books of the Old and New Testaments"

12. Froehlich, "Discerning the Voices," 76–77.
13. Froehlich, "Discerning the Voices," 77.

has long been cited.[14] While it does not directly address singing, it certainly makes a case that the Psalms provided the most theologically trustworthy poetry to sing in the early church. Almost all the church fathers penned commentaries on the Psalms, becoming the most popular genre of patristic literature, providing a common basis for preaching, teaching, and singing. In essence, the Psalms comprised the very DNA of the early church, dramatically celebrating both the Who of God (his nature) and the What (his actions).

CONTRIBUTIONS TO LITURGY AND WORSHIP

In addition to its impact on theology, the book of Psalms provided a model for worship—its liturgy. That pattern involved the practice of singing. As the Jewish Psalms were closely connected with being sung, it is not surprising that the early church also became noted for the practice. This is evident in Paul's assumptions that song was a normal part of Christian worship (Eph 5, Col 3, 1 Cor 14), as well as James' admonition (5:13) to express joy through song. And then there was John Chrysostom's boast that his church knew Pss 62 and 141 by heart.[15]

Singing one's faith was evident even to skeptics. The famous report of Pliny the Younger to the Emperor Trajan (ca. 111) observes that believers "met before light on an appointed day to . . . utter songs to Christ as to a god."[16] Additional enthusiasm for singing one's faith came from the practice of heretical teachers such as Bardaisans of Syria (ca. 200) who produced his own rival "psalter" to lure converts.

Singing must have seemed natural as the early church experienced an embarrassment of poetic riches.

> The Psalms speak of both social just and personal transformation; they embody hand-clapping exuberance and profound introspection; they express the prayers of both the exalted and the lowly; they are fully alive in the present, but always point to the future on the basis of the past; they highlight both extravagance of grace and the joy of faithful obedience; they express a restless yearning for change and a profound gratitude for the inheritance of the faith; they protest ritualism but embody the richest expression of ritual prayer.[17]

14. Music, *Hymnology*, 17–18.
15. McKinnon, "Christian Church," 799.
16. Music, *Hymnology*, 4.
17. Witvliet, *Biblical Psalms*, xviii.

With such of range of experience, it is no wonder that the Psalms incited the development of larger forms of worship. These include the monastic Offices (also called Canonical Hours as observed in monasteries and cathedral churches) and the Roman Mass.[18]

With regard to both the music and the manner of performance, much speculation abounds. As noted earlier, melodies to which the Psalms would have been sung were mostly local and were not written down. In some churches, Psalms could have been sung to existing Jewish melodies. Eric Werner (*The Sacred Bridge*, 1934/1974) contends there was a strong link between Jewish cantillation from the Temple and melodies employed in the early church, thus providing a link to the development of later plainsong (commonly called "Gregorian chant").[19] Psalms may also have been adapted to familiar melodies (even non-religious ones) in a practice called *contrafacta*. (The Medieval carol "What child is this" is a famous example of sacred words being combined with a secular tune known as "Greensleeves.") This practice no doubt furnished ready-made melodies for churches to intone the Psalms. Original melodies, whether consciously crafted or improvised on the spot (reflecting the exercise of Spiritual Gifts as recorded in 1 Cor 14:26), were also another source to intone the Psalms.

Such singing might be found in church services, *agape* (last supper) celebrations, vigils, funerals, or wherever a group of believers might gather. Organized choirs did not develop until much later when they blossomed in the context of monastic life. While instrumental accompaniment (such as a lyre) may have occurred at times, the written record does not support such usage. Concerning the actual practice of singing Psalms, there are multiple references to what seems to be "responsorial" singing (a soloist, answered by a group) and "antiphonal" singing (alternation of two groups, perhaps men and women). In a description (375) that Basil the Great claims to be common practice, he records, "At first they divide themselves into two groups and sing psalms in alternation with each other. . . . And then they entrust the lead of the chant to one person, while the rest sing in response."[20] Both approaches make sense in view of the poetic construction of the Psalms, known as "parallelism," in which an initial statement is then re-stated or contrasted by a second: "The cords of death encompassed me; the torrents of destruction assailed me" (Ps 18:4, ESV).

18. McKinnon, "Christian Church," 798–802. McKinnon addresses the Psalms' important contributions to these seminal worship forms.

19. Hustad, *Jubilate II*, 160.

20. McKinnon, "Christian Church," 800.

Antiphonal singing is clearly evident in later Medieval practices where, in a cathedral, the choir is placed on opposite sides, facing each other, to alternate the Psalm verses. This organization of worship space was certainly one of the longer-lasting and most visible impacts of antiphonal Psalmody upon liturgical developments. Although St. Paul admonished women to keep silence in the church (1 Cor 14:34–35), there is little evidence that his admonition was applied to singing, and there are plenty of sources that report mixed singing.[21]

NOTABLE HYMNS

Because the Psalms were written long before the church age, no new Psalm texts have come from that era. And because our musical system is completely different, we no longer share any of the same melodies. However, many of the texts we do sing are related to the original Psalms to varying degrees. English prose (non-poetic) translations occur in the Responsive Reading section of many hymnals. In the Service Music section, Psalms are often chanted by choirs or congregations (in liturgical churches such as Anglican or Lutheran). When the Psalms are translated into metrical form, versions such as "The Lord's my Shepherd, I'll not want" from the *Scottish Psalter* of 1650 are sung. James Montgomery's "The Lord is my Shepherd, no want shall I know" provides a freer paraphrase, while Dorothy Thrupp's "Savior, like a shepherd lead us" is thematically based on Ps 23.[22]

Isaac Watt's hymn "O(ur) God our help in ages past" both directly quotes and paraphrases Ps 90, while his "Joy to the world" reinterprets Ps 98's prophecies as being fulfilled in Christ (partly by changing future tense verbs to present tense fulfillment: the Lord *is* come). Luther's "A Mighty Fortress" (English translation by Frederick Hedge) is loosely based on one of Luther's favorite Psalms, No. 46.

That pattern of writing hymns, based to various degrees on the Psalms, continues into the present, especially with an emphasis upon recovering Psalmody among Reformed traditions (Presbyterian Church USA and the Christian Reformed Church) by introducing a large number of Psalms into their hymnals with both traditional and new tunes. Some "Scripture Choruses," popular among twentieth century evangelicals including James Filmore's "I will sing of the mercies of the Lord forever," and contemporary "Praise Songs," such as Martin Nystrom's "As the deer pants for the water," are based on Psalms. While the vast majority of religious songs from the last

21. Music, *Hymnology*, 15, 18.

22. Eskew and McElrath, *Sing with Understanding*, 49–51.

two millennia have been discarded, we still sing the divinely inspired poetry of David and his brethren, gathered into the Old Testament Psalms.

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