

**The Origins Of
Early Christian Liturgical Music**
David Mitchell

Although many scholars believe that “Jewish music was the direct ancestor of Christian liturgical music and of Gregorian chant,”¹ there is no conclusive evidence that early Christians intended to consciously model their music after the music of the Jews. However, several musicologists build a convincing circumstantial case for the antecedents of Christian liturgical by comparing similarities in the purpose of music in the liturgy, the method of presentation in the service, the method and purpose of musical notation, melodic fragments, and the writings of early church historians. This paper will explore the similarities and differences between the early liturgical music of the Jewish and Christian faiths. It will show how the early Christian musical tradition borrowed from the Jewish musical tradition in the early days of the church.

The purpose of music in the liturgical traditions of both the Jewish and Christian faiths is the same. It is to make the text of the Bible and the Talmud grammatically clear to the congregation and easy for the priest or cantor to recite aloud in the service. To listen to a priest read a biblical text in a monotone voice is boring, and it is difficult for the priest to do with any volume. According to Jeremy Yudkin, “...in the [Christian] liturgy the word and music are indissolubly connected... in the clearest possible way the music is tied to the *structure* of the text, illuminating and clarifying the grammatical sense.”²

¹ Don Michael Randel, *The New Harvard Dictionary Of Music* [The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1986], 420

² Jeremy Yudkin, *Music in Medieval Europe* [Prentice Hall, History of Music Series, 1989], 43

In both traditions the structure of the text determines the structure of the music. This clarifies the syntax and makes it easy for the congregation to understand. According to Eric Werner, "...the intonation [of Jewish liturgical music] is determined by the structure of the sentence and its logical and syntactic relations; neither its music nor its notation are therefore in anyway autonomous."³ This means that the shape of the melody and the rhythm of the music are dependent on the rhythm of the text and structure of the sentence. The cantor or celebrant starts at a lower pitch and rises up to a reciting tone to signal the beginning of a sentence. On the reciting tone, the rhythm is like a recitative. It changes according to the rhythm of the text. At the end of the sentence, the pitch falls to indicate a period or rises to indicate a question. These slight inflections clarify the text and its syntax.

Both traditions also have open and closed couplet endings that further clarify the syntax of the verse. A finalis that signifies the end of a stanza is common to both musical traditions. An excellent example of this type of syntactically based traditional Jewish cantillation is on youtube.com, search for Cantor Yaakov Stark (Anainu).⁴ This video demonstrates many of the aspects of Jewish and how it clarifies the text.

Besides clarification of text, both traditions use music to delineate the parts of the service. Syllabic settings are used in text-heavy doxologies in both traditions, and melismatic text settings are used during solemn moments of the service. In the Christian mass, melismas occur just before the reading of the gospel and just before the Eucharist to signify the most solemn moments of the Christian service. Additionally, Jewish

³ Eric Werner, *The Sacred Bridge* [London: Dennis Dobson, New York: Columbia University Press, 1959], 106

⁴ ZeiGezint, "Cantor Yaakov Stark (Anainu)," <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dPeZp4LJMHU> [accessed December 5, 2008]

liturgical music employs different modes to distinguish books of the Bible; therefore, music is used to clarify the syntax of the Bible and the Talmud and to delineate parts of the service in both traditions.

The method of presenting music in the service is very similar in both early Jewish and Christian traditions. Both traditions use plainchant and almost all of the service is sung. Neither the Christian nor the Jewish traditions use instruments in their service because the use of instruments or dancing was considered pagan. Women are not allowed to take part in the early Jewish and Christian traditions.

Responsorial singing is another important method of presentation common to both traditions. In the early Jewish tradition, a cantor sings the first line of the Psalm. The congregation sings the second line. A.1 is a modern notation of Jewish responsorial singing in the Sephardic tradition. In the Christian tradition, sometimes the soloist sings the entire verse. In response, the congregation sings a refrain that comments on the verse. An example of responsorial Sephardic cantillation with melismas can be found on youtube.com, search for Sephardic Selichot services.⁵

The method and purpose of notating traditional early Christian and Jewish liturgical music is very similar. Early liturgical music was essentially improvised using a series of commonly known motives. In Jewish traditional music, symbols are drawn above and below the words of the Talmud and Biblical verses to remind the singer which motives to use with which words. These symbols do not indicate specific pitches. They simply remind the singer of melodies and motives with which he is already familiar. These symbols are referred to as ecphonetic notation. Ecphonetic notation is “Notation

⁵ DavidJasse, “Sephardic Selichot services,” http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-5kFGvox_dQ [accessed December 5, 2008]

intended to guide the recitation or cantillation of liturgical texts, especially those from the Bible; also lectionary notation. Such notation, of which there are various systems, occurs in Latin, Greek, Hebrew, Syriac, Armenian, and Coptic manuscripts, among others.”⁶ In the Jewish tradition they are called te’amim. Ecphonetic notation or te’amim is a written version of an even more ancient system of hand gestures called chironomy. Ecphonetic notation symbolizes the ancient hand movements of chironomy. Jewish te’amim probably descended from chironomy. The definition of Chironomy is

...the use of movements of the hand to indicate approximate pitch or melodic contour to singers. The practice is evidently of great antiquity and is widely distributed (e.g., in ancient Egypt, Israel, and Greece, in Byzantine culture from about the 8th century, in India, and in Coptic and Jewish communities of the near and Middle East to the present day), especially, it would seem, in cultures lacking musical notation.⁷

John Stainer says, “Ison is the keynote or tonic, a movable Doh. The other signs represent the vocalization of various intervals above; namely, the second, third, fourth, fifth, and sixth.”⁸ These te’amim symbols are similar to the hand gestures of chironomy. They not only represent a pitch, they represent a melodic motive to sing after that pitch. Even to a layperson, it is easy to imagine a hand gesture that corresponds to these te’amim symbols (A.2) and how you could follow this shape with an ascending or descending melodic motive. To a Jewish cantor, these te’amim symbols were an invaluable reminder of what pitch to sing and the melodic motive that should follow it. Over time, Jewish te’amim symbols were expanded and interpreted in many different ways according to culture and tradition. A.3 is an expansion of these first six te’amim symbols.

⁶ Randel, *The New Harvard Dictionary of Music*, 264

⁷ Randel, *The New Harvard Dictionary of Music*, 157

⁸ John Stainer, *The Music of The Bible* [New Jersey: Tomas Yoseloff Ltd], 197

A.4 is a copy of a ninth century Christian manuscript from the St. Gall monastery.

Yudkin states,

This is a facsimile of a page from one of the earliest notated [Christian] manuscripts from the ninth century. The individual notes and the neumes and melismas are clearly drawn above each syllable, and the shape of each neume graphically indicates the direction of that portion of the melody. What is not shown by the notation is the absolute pitch of the notes (there is no clef) and the change of pitch from one neume to the next...⁹

But for someone who had already heard the melody, the system was invaluable. Many of the symbols from the expanded Jewish te'amim list in A.3 are very similar, if not identical, to the graphically represented neumes in Yudkin's ninth century Christian manuscript, A.4. The neumes in Yudkin's example appear to be a cross between te'amim and neumes. In some cases, they appear to be more like te'amim than neumes. For ease of reference, symbols in the examples that appear to be identical are circled in the same color.

Jewish cantillation and te'amim symbols predate Christian neumes. This means that neumes were derived from and influenced by te'amim symbols. The first historical reference to cantillation is in the first century CE. Eric Werner states,

The first unequivocal statements about chanting occur in the Talmudic literature, some of them in its oldest strata (first- second century A. D.). In view of the fact that these testimonies reflect practices and customs of at least two or three earlier centuries, we are on safe ground in concluding that regular cantillation of Scripture was a well-established custom long before the Christian era.¹⁰

Since Jewish cantillation predates the Christian era, it is logical to conclude that Jewish notation influenced Christian notation because cantors would need some type of notation to remind them how to sing all of the scriptures and Talmud, but there are no examples of te'amim symbols in copies of the Talmud or Bible that predate the ninth

⁹ Yudkin, *Music in Medieval Europe*, 77

¹⁰ Werner, *The Sacred Bridge*, 110

century St. Gall manuscript. The Jewish system of te'amim was codified in the 10th century by Solomon ben Bouya'a, according to New Harvard page 419. The lack of examples that predate the ninth century St. Gall manuscript is due to the fact that cantors were forbidden to write directly in the original scriptures or Talmud or to use te'amim in the service. Even though te'amim were codified in the 10th century, they must have existed well before they were codified and well before the ninth century St. Gall Manuscript; therefore, Jewish te'amim probably influenced the way neumes were written in the ninth century St. Gall manuscript.

The notation of Christian liturgical music evolved as Christianity grew. The St. Gall manuscript has no lines and, like Jewish te'amim, does not represent specific pitches. As a consequence, early neumes and te'amim would only be helpful to someone who was already familiar with the appropriate melodic motives. As Christianity grew over time, Christians were less and less familiar with Jewish musical tradition. It became increasingly difficult for Christians to convert the te'amim -like notation of neumes into the appropriate melodic motives. In order to standardize the process, and save the faithful from committing heresy, a more specific notation system that indicated exact pitches was needed, this led to the development of staff lines.

Staff lines made it much easier for Christians to sing the proper melodies because they indicate exact pitches. Staff lines standardized plainchant melodies and reduced the possibility for error. It was possible to go into any church in the Christian world and hear the same familiar melodies. The downside to staff lines is they put a stop to the further development of improvised melodic motives in Christian liturgical music. The upside to

staff lines is they preserved many of the melodies and stylistic characteristics of early Jewish liturgical music.

As a result, it is possible to find parts of Christian plainchant melodies that are almost identical to the melodies found in Jewish liturgical music. The similarities between these melodic fragments are striking. A.5 is a table from Eric Werner's The Sacred Bridge. It contains melodic phrases from Jewish and Christian liturgical music. There are six examples. In each of the six examples, a. is the Jewish phrase and b. is the corresponding Christian phrase. Each phrase has brackets that indicate virtually identical motivic fragments. A close inspection of these melodic fragments shows that they occur in practically the same places at the beginning and end of phrases. This is significant because this is where melismas traditionally occur in Jewish liturgical music. Te'amim symbols are usually placed at the beginning and ending of phrases to clarify the syntax of the text. They remind the cantor of the melodic motives that will best begin and end the sentence. Since the Jewish tradition of cantillation predates the Christian era, it is likely that the placement of melismas in the Christian examples was influenced by, if not copied from, the Jewish phrases in A.5.

A close look at the notes within the brackets of A.5 shows that they are virtually identical. It is unlikely that this is a coincidence because they are so similar. It is also apparent that notes have been added to the Christian examples. It is as if the Jewish examples have been embellished or paraphrased. Embellishment is stylistic in the medieval period. It is likely that Christians borrowed these melodies from the Jewish musical tradition. They were passed down by ear until they were preserved with neumes

and staff lines. There are eleven pages of examples with motives that are virtually identical in Eric Werner's book.

These melodic fragments are examples of the preservation of Jewish melodic "DNA" within the Christian musical tradition. This DNA was preserved by the precision of staff lines and neumes, and it likely influenced the stylistic characteristics of newly composed medieval Christian plainchant. Since composers of early polyphonic music often borrowed phrases from medieval Christian plainchant, Jewish liturgical music could be considered the grandfather of early medieval and renaissance polyphony. Like splicing DNA to genetically engineer new foods, early composers of polyphonic music spliced plainchant that contained stylistic characteristics of early Jewish liturgical music in the form of cantus firmus into their compositions. The stylistic characteristics of the cantus firmus naturally influenced the composition of additional melodic lines.

There are several 4th and 5th century sources that provide first hand accounts of early Christian liturgical music. One very important source is Aurelius Augustine's (354-430 C.E.) *Confessions*. Augustine speaks of the "old usage of singing in the church... Alleluja was chanted according to the old tradition."¹¹ Augustine says, "hymns and psalms should be sung according to the Oriental custom."¹² During Augustine's time, the near-east and far-east were referred to as "Oriental." This "oriental" cultural influence in Jewish liturgical music can be heard in the Jewish Sephardic video on youtube.com, Sephardic Selichot services.¹³

¹¹ Alfred Sendrey, *Music in Ancient Israel* [New York: Philosophical Library], 196

¹² Sendrey, *Music in Ancient Israel*, 197

¹³ DavidJasse, "Sephardic Selichot services," http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-5kFGvox_dQ [accessed December 5, 2008]

Another important 4th century source is Eusebius Pamphilius of Caesarea (260-ca. 330 C.E.). He says, “the divine mission of the apostolic men of his [Philo’s] day, who were, it appears, of Hebrew origin, and thus still preserved most of the ancient customs in a strictly Jewish manner.”¹⁴

According to several 2nd, 3rd, and 4th century sources, the church fathers felt that any new songs that didn’t conform to ancient Jewish tradition were heresy. Epiphanius (ca. 315-403 C.E.) “condemns the heretic psalms composed by Hierakas, which do not conform to the ancient tradition.”¹⁵ Athanasius (ca. 298-373 C.E.) “disapproves of Arius’ exquisite heretical songs.”¹⁶ Tertullian (ca. 150-ca. 230 C.E) says “the apostates Marcion and Valentinus spread heretical psalms (different from those composed by David).”¹⁷ It is said that King David (c.1037 - 967 BC) sang psalms in the first temple of Jerusalem and accompanied himself with a lyre. Paulus Samosatenus (third century) “abolished (in his congregation) the singing of hymns... which had been written recently by composers of the day.”¹⁸

These 2nd through 5th, century sources are tantalizing evidence of the influence of an “ancient” or “old” tradition on early Christian liturgical music. These sources show that newly composed music that did not conform to the “ancient” tradition was considered heresy. It is difficult to know for sure if these sources are referring to the Jewish musical tradition when they use the terms “ancient” or “old.” Since Christianity was only two to four centuries old by this point, it could hardly be considered “ancient.” It is possible that these sources considered the earliest days of the church “ancient” times,

¹⁴ Sendrey, *Music in Ancient Israel*, 196

¹⁵ Sendrey, *Music in Ancient Israel*, 200

¹⁶ Sendrey, *Music in Ancient Israel*, 200

¹⁷ Sendrey, *Music in Ancient Israel*, 200

¹⁸ Sendrey, *Music in Ancient Israel*, 200

but it is more likely that they refer to the Jewish liturgical tradition, especially in the light of the stylistic similarities between the two traditions.

In the 2nd through 5th centuries, there was a great deal of antagonism between Christianity and Judaism. This could be one reason none of the previously cited Christian sources refer to the “Jewish” musical tradition. It was probably not “kosher” to admit to any connection with Judaism; therefore, they preferred to use the generic term “ancient” instead of “Jewish.”

These historical sources are a good example of the difficulty in conclusively proving that the origins of Christian liturgical music are in the Jewish musical tradition. There is a lot of evidence, in manuscripts of this period, that hints at the origins of early Christian liturgical music, but there is no document by the founders of the early church that says let’s model our music after Jewish liturgical music. There is no single plainchant melody that is an exact duplicate of any Jewish liturgical melody. The systems of musical notation are similar, but they are not exactly the same. In light of all the circumstantial evidence, early Christians must have borrowed from Jewish musical tradition, especially since there are no other viable explanations for the similarities in their stylistic characteristics.

It makes sense that early Christians borrowed from Jewish musical tradition because they were Jews themselves. Jesus was a Jew and so were his disciples. They were naturally influenced by the culture that they grew up in.

Also it is very smart to borrow from an established musical tradition because it makes a new religion, like Christianity, more palatable for the people you are trying to convert. In the beginning of the church, Jesus’ disciples were trying to directly convert

Jews. They went to the synagogues, took part in the services, and debated with the people to try and win converts. Jesus actually read from the scriptures in the Temple of Jerusalem. He may have even chanted some of the scriptures because the majority of a Jewish service is sung, not recited. This would have made it more than acceptable for Jesus' disciples to borrow from Jewish musical tradition.

Jesus said, "I am not come to destroy, but to fulfill...(Matthew 5:17)." Jesus' philosophy can be seen in the tendency of the church to assimilate, not destroy, the rituals and music of the people they are trying to convert. For example, the pagan winter solstice became Christmas. Halloween became Dia de Los Muertos. In the 21st century, the Baptist church has abandoned traditional hymns for Rock-based "Praise Songs." This new Christian music has reached millions of young converts; therefore, Rock music and paganism, two former enemies of the church, are now part of 21st century Christianity.

The similarities between Jewish and Christian music make it clear that the founders of the early Christian church, consciously or unconsciously, borrowed from Jewish liturgical music. The circumstantial evidence for this lies in the similarities in musical notation, melodic motives, how the music was used and presented in the service, and the writings of early church historians. Once all of the evidence is examined, a strong case can be made that the origins of early Christian liturgical music or in the Jewish musical tradition.

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