

## The Greek Symposium in the Development of Early Christian Music

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A cursory glance at most introductory textbooks on the history of Western music reveals a general tendency to organize the narrative of Western music into the seemingly indisputable categories of “sacred” and “secular,” usually beginning with a chapter that surveys ancient Greek theatre music and musical philosophy (categories that are classified as “secular” in a modern context), followed by a chapter on early Christian music, which seeks to trace the origins of Western “sacred” music back to the music traditions of the Jewish Temple and the early synagogues. Because the Christian religion emerged from Judaism, so the thinking goes, Christian music must have also derived from the Jewish traditions around singing and worship. Douglass Seaton’s chapter on the early Christian period opens with an assertion that is typical of this trend: “The earliest Christians,” he states definitively, “inherited their worship and music practices from the Jewish tradition of the apostolic church of the first centuries, rather than from pagan Hellenism.”<sup>1</sup>

The scholarly discourse on early Christian music has tended to follow a similar trajectory, focusing heavily on the polemical statements against Greek theatre music found in the writings of influential fourth-century bishops, while attempting to locate the origins of Christian “liturgical” music within Jewish ritual practice. Unfortunately, this anachronistic attempt to superimpose “sacred” and “secular” spheres onto the cultural milieu and musical practices of the ancient Mediterranean world has resulted in significant gaps within musicological scholarship, and an incomplete (and arguably, inaccurate) portrayal of the origins of Western music.

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<sup>1</sup> Douglass Seaton, *Ideas and Styles in the Western Musical Tradition* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 14.

One of the most notable gaps in the historical narrative is the lack of appreciation for the significant influence that the Greek symposium had on the development of the Christian liturgy. Consequently, Greco-Roman singing traditions at the meals had a major influence on early Christian music, both in terms of musical practice and in terms of the attitudes and values that Christians developed over time about music and singing. While older scholarship mistakenly viewed the Hellenistic meals as existing apart from, and in contrast to, the “sacred” liturgical gatherings of the early church, a new generation of scholars – coming primarily from the fields of religious anthropology, historical sociology, Biblical scholarship, and early church history – show how the Greco-Roman meal tradition was foundational not only to Christian self-understanding and social organization in the first two centuries, but how it served as the basis for the Christian eucharist.

This paper seeks to apply the new scholarship concerning the history of Christian origins to musicology’s understanding of the development of early church music, in order to show the extent of Hellenistic influence on the Christian music traditions and practices of the first four centuries. While the Hebrew tradition certainly had a major influence on the music of the early churches, the Hellenistic meal (or “symposium”) tradition provided a much broader cultural foundation, which shaped the musical practices of the Christian churches prior to their social organization under Constantine in the fourth century. As we will see, the music of the early churches in this context served as a marker (and shaper) of an emerging Christian identity within the larger Hellenistic culture, rather than functioning as simply an accompaniment to formalized liturgical action.

There is no doubt that the traditions of Israel and the Hebrew people had an impact on Christian self-understanding in the first three centuries. Jesus himself was an Israelite who is

depicted throughout the Christian Gospels as fully and faithfully participating in all of the traditional Hebrew festivals during the Second Temple period. Due to the influence of supersessionist thinking, modern church historians have commonly tended to look for the origins of Christian worship in the rites and rituals of Rabbinic Judaism. More recently, however, scholarly perspectives have been updated to reflect a more accurate historical understanding of how these two cultures emerged and evolved over time. Christianity and Rabbinic Judaism are now understood to be two distinctly Hebrew movements that emerged *alongside* each other in the centuries after the destruction of the Second Temple in 70 CE, an event that marked the end of Jewish Temple religion. Christianity and Rabbinic Judaism were two (of many) movements that arose out of that traumatic context, offering two distinct “solutions” for how to move forward, based on two very different interpretations of their shared Hebrew tradition. The Rabbinic tradition sought to salvage whatever ancient practices and holiday observances they could for a people now living in a perpetual diaspora. Meanwhile, the Christians leaned heavily into the prophetic strands of the Hebrew tradition, reinterpreting them in light of recent apocalyptic events, which they believed to have been the fulfillment of those earlier texts.

Of particular interest to Christian music in this regard is the ancient Hebrew Temple practice of singing the *Hallel* (Psalms 113-118) at the Passover. With “Alleluia” as its refrain, the *Hallel* was traditionally repeated in a great crescendo at the Temple, as the paschal lambs were being slaughtered by the priests.<sup>2</sup> This is, indeed, the most likely the symbolic context for the third-century Christian singing practices described in *Apostolic Tradition*, where only the psalms with “Alleluia” were to be sung during the offering of the chalice at the symposium. Such

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<sup>2</sup> James McKinnon, “The Exclusion of Instruments from the Ancient Synagogue,” *Proceedings of the Royal Musical Association* 106, 77-78.

psalms were said to be “appropriate to the chalice” because they represented the blood of Jesus, who was understood to be the great and final sacrificial lamb for all of humanity.<sup>3</sup>

However, the assumed link between ancient Judaic ritual and the Christian “liturgy” has generally been overstated, and is not very well-supported in the historical literature. Valeriy

Alikin explains:

For a long time, it had been customary to trace back the origins of the Christian ceremony to a combination of Jewish customs: the synagogue meeting on the Sabbath and one or other of the various types of Jewish ritual meals. This policy was based on a view of the Mediterranean world in which the Greco-Roman period which divided that world into two rival or opposite cultures: Hellenistic and Jewish.<sup>4</sup>

Following suit, most sacred music scholars of the twentieth century have also assumed a direct link between the psalmody of Christianity and that of the Jewish synagogue.<sup>5</sup> However, there is no basis for this assumption within the literature either. J.A. Smith writes that “no contemporary sources or early rabbinical documents make any mention of singing in the ancient synagogue during the first and second centuries.”<sup>6</sup> Jane Weimer points out that there are no references to singing in the Mishnah and the Talmud, or in the writings of Philo or Josephus (with Philo’s writings being of particular significance, given his lengthy description of singing in

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<sup>3</sup> *Apostolic Tradition* 25, Botte, 64-66. “And let them arise therefore after supper and pray; let the boys sing psalms, the virgins also. And afterwards let the deacon, as he takes the mingled chalice of oblation, say a psalm from those in which Alleluia is written. And afterwards, if the presbyter so orders, again from these psalms. And after the bishop has offered the chalice, let him say a psalm from those appropriate to the chalice – always one with Alleluia, which all say. When they recite the psalms, let all say Alleluia, which means, ‘We praise him who is God; glory and praise to him who created the entire world though his work alone.’ And when the psalm is finished let him bless the chalice and give of its fragments to all the faithful.”

<sup>4</sup> Valeriy A. Alikin, *The Earliest History of the Christian Gathering: Origin, Development, and Content of the Christian Gathering in the First to Third Centuries* (Boston: Brill, 2010), 4.

<sup>5</sup> For a more traditional understanding of the origins of Christian sacred music, see Johannes Quasten, *Musik und Gesang in den Kulturen der Heidnischen Antike und Christlichen Frühzeit* (Münster in Westfalen: Aschendorffsche, 1930), Gregory Dix, *The Shape of the Liturgy* (London: Westminster Dacre Press, 1945), and Egon Wellesz, *A History of Byzantine Music and Hymnography* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1961).

<sup>6</sup> J.A. Smith, “The Ancient Synagogue, the Early Church, and Singing,” *Music and Letters* 65, 1 (Jan. 1984), 4.

the Therapeutae community).<sup>7</sup> “To state it as simply as possible,” writes music historian James McKinnon, “there was no singing of psalms in the ancient synagogue; the psalmody of the early synagogue is a myth fostered by a curious coalition of Anglican liturgists and Jewish musicologists.”<sup>8</sup> McKinnon goes on to say that regular psalmody did not develop in either Jewish or Christian practice until the fourth century, or possibly later. “Both Jewish and Christian psalmody,” he writes,

were comparatively late developments which took place without benefit of mutual influence. They had in common that each stemmed in some fashion from scriptural cantillation, but each developed at a time which makes the conventional wisdom of a common origin in Jewish psalmody a chronological absurdity.<sup>9</sup>

Moreover, Biblical historian Hal Taussig points out that, “upon closer historical investigation, it is not at all clear what a ‘synagogue’ was during the first century. The word itself is a Greek word, which simply meant ‘meeting,’ ‘assembly,’ ‘meeting place,’ or most liberally, ‘coming together.’ Most usages have nothing to do with a religious gathering, much less a Jewish one.”<sup>10</sup> Of course, Jews in the first century *were* known to have gathered for “synagogue” in this Greco-Roman context. But according to Taussig it is not entirely clear what the Jews *did* at these gatherings. Unlike the early Christian gatherings, which are described in a variety of ancient texts as always including a meal and the singing of songs, in addition to readings, preaching, and prayer, the scant references to Jewish synagogue meetings in the

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<sup>7</sup> Jane Weimer, “Musical Assemblies: How Early Christian Music Functioned as a Rhetorical *Topos*, a Mechanism of Recruitment, and a Fundamental Marker of an Emerging Christian Identity” (PhD diss., University of Toronto, 2016), 63-64, ProQuest Dissertations and Theses Global.

<sup>8</sup> McKinnon, “The Exclusion of Instruments from the Ancient Synagogue,” 84-85.

<sup>9</sup> McKinnon, “The Exclusion of Instruments from the Ancient Synagogue,” 85.

<sup>10</sup> Hal Taussig, *In the Beginning Was the Meal* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2010), 95.

Hellenistic period seem to indicate that their purpose was limited to Scripture reading, prayer, and religious instruction.<sup>11</sup>

For all these reasons, Alikin writes that “many scholars now question or completely abandon the method of trying to find the origins of Christian liturgical practices only in Jewish traditions.”<sup>12</sup> Rather, scholars are increasingly coming to see the Christian Eucharist as having emerged much more within the context of the Greco-Roman banquet tradition. After all, “Jewish and Christian groups themselves,” Alikin points out, “were part of Hellenistic culture as a whole.”<sup>13</sup> Dennis Smith likewise points out that “certainly early Christianity cannot be defined as a culture in itself. At most, it is a movement within the culture, that uses the rules of culture to define itself.”<sup>14</sup>

Smith’s work, in particular, offers a rigorous and comprehensive literary analysis spanning several centuries, which shows how the symposium traditions of the classical Greek period developed into a widespread social institution during the Hellenistic era, which influenced nearly every facet of Greco-Roman society. Philosophical schools, pagan mystery cults, trade guilds, Christian churches, Greek burial societies, Jewish communities, and other voluntary associations of the first century *all* regularly participated in the widely-shared practice of gathering for a convivial household meal, usually taken while reclining, which was followed by ceremonial libations and a post-supper drinking party (or “symposium”) consisting of conversation, musical and theatrical performances, communal singing, games, orations, and other social activities that often lasted well into the morning hours.

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<sup>11</sup> J.A. Smith, “The Ancient Synagogue, the Early Church, and Singing,” *Music and Letters*, vol. 65, no. 1 (Jan. 1984), 4.

<sup>12</sup> Alikin, *The Earliest History of the Christian Gathering*, 5.

<sup>13</sup> Alikin, *The Earliest History of the Christian Gathering*, 5.

<sup>14</sup> Dennis Smith, *From Symposium to Eucharist: The Banquet in the Early Christian World* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2003), 8.

The meals of this era all followed a very similar order and sequence, along with similar food types, seating arrangements, ceremonial roles for guests, forms of entertainment, and creative methods for questioning, disrupting, or experimenting with established social norms and customs, all within the “play” of the ritual meal (for example, allowing women to recline with men, or having slaves act as “presidents” or presiders for the evening and letting them sit in the place of honor). “Although there were many minor differences in the meal customs as practiced in different regions and social groups,” Smith writes, “the evidence suggests that meals took similar forms and shared similar meanings and interpretations across a broad range of the ancient world... Even such varied sets of data as rules of conduct at club banquets and the order of the liturgy at the Jewish Passover exhibit the influence of the symposium form.”<sup>15</sup>

Matthias Klinghardt’s scholarship on Hellenistic meals has also revealed striking similarities across social, ethnic, and religious lines – not simply from a liturgical perspective, but in terms of the broader social “values of the meals.”<sup>16</sup> Hal Taussig explains that for Klinghardt, the Mediterranean-wide agreement about how a meal occurred, with its clearly articulated order of people and events, reflected a clear set of social values that were expressed and consolidated in the meal: *koinonia* (communitas), *philia* (friendship or “brotherly love”), *isonomia* (equality), and *charis* (grace).<sup>17</sup> Accordingly, it was a relatively common practice for groups within this cultural context to harshly criticize the meal practices of others, creating rhetorical “straw men” out of other groups, while idealizing their own as exemplary embodiments of commonly-shared cultural values.

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<sup>15</sup> Dennis Smith, *From Symposium to Eucharist*, 2, 8.

<sup>16</sup> Matthias Klinghardt, *Gemeinschaftsmahl und Mahlgemeinschaft: Soziologie und Liturgie fruehchristlicher Mahlfeiern* (Tübingen: Francke Verlag, 1996), 153-173. Transl. Taussig, *In the Beginning Was the Meal*, 26.

<sup>17</sup> Taussig, *In the Beginning Was the Meal*, 26-27.

Seeing the early Christian eucharistic gatherings as part of this larger Hellenistic meal tradition provides an important paradigm shift and social context that allows us to make sense of the copious references to Christian meals throughout the writings of the New Testament, and in the extant literature from the first four centuries. Paul's first letter to the Corinthians, for example, contains a lengthy exhortation that advises the fledgling community about how to behave whenever they "come together as a church," which is clearly within the context of a banquet and symposium. "When you come together," he writes, "each one has a hymn, a lesson, a revelation, a tongue, or an interpretation."<sup>18</sup> Smith points out that this instruction is very similar to those given at the philosophical banquets witnessed by Aulus Gellius at the time, during which guests were invited to each bring a topic to the symposium for discussion.<sup>19</sup> In other words, the liturgy of public readings, lessons and teachings, visions and prophecies, and singing (whether communal and in unison or impromptu solo performances) was not unique to early church gatherings. These after-supper activities were common to nearly all meal associations in the Hellenistic era.

Understanding the development of the Christian "liturgy" within this larger context of the Greco-Roman meal tradition also helps to make sense of the apparent lack of *any* references in the extant literature to anything resembling an early Christian synaxis or "worship" ritual – something that has long been a stumbling block for liturgical historians and sacred music scholars alike. Musicologist James McKinnon admitted after his own quest for such writings that "if the category of most interest to music historians is that of references to liturgical chant, it remains the one where the least progress has been made."<sup>20</sup> Charles Cosgrove likewise laments

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<sup>18</sup> 1 Corinthians 14:26 (New Revised Standard Version).

<sup>19</sup> Smith, *From Symposium to Eucharist*, 201.

<sup>20</sup> James McKinnon, *Music in Early Christian Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), 7-8.



that in the early Christian writings “there is considerably more focus on music at the dinner party than on music in the Christian synaxis, a fact that is frustrating for historians of Christian liturgy.”<sup>21</sup> Both scholars, unfortunately, stopped short of realizing that for the first two or three centuries of the church, these dinner parties *were* the early Christian synaxis.

One source of misunderstanding has been the common tendency to assume that Justin Martyr’s oft-quoted second-century description of a Christian gathering in Rome describes a “Sunday morning Eucharist,” which is precisely how James McKinnon introduces the passage in his influential compendium of *Music in Early Christian Literature*.<sup>22</sup> And yet, there is no indication from the text or elsewhere that the gathering being outlined takes place *in the morning*. Justin simply states, “on the day named for the sun, there is an assembly...”<sup>23</sup> Indeed, based on the order of events he describes, the passage makes a great deal more sense when understood within the context of an evening meal and symposium, since Hellenistic meals commonly included many of the elements he mentions, including a presider, the mixing of wine and water for prayers and libations, and an equal distribution of food and drink among those present.

Similarly, scholars have often also misinterpreted Pliny the Younger’s first-century reference to a morning Christian gathering in his letter to the Emperor Trajan as evidence that there must have been some sort of standardized Sunday morning liturgy at this time. This is highly improbable, however, since the only activities cited in this passage are the singing of a hymn and making vows to good behavior, after which the Christians were said to have dispersed,

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<sup>21</sup> Charles H. Cosgrove, “Clement of Alexandria and Early Christian Music,” *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 14, 3 (2006), 256.

<sup>22</sup> McKinnon, *Music in Early Christian Literature*, 20.

<sup>23</sup> Justin Martyr, *Apology* 1.13, ed. James McKinnon, *Music in Early Christian Literature*, 20.

and then come back later for a meal.<sup>24</sup> Alikin points out that prayer meetings at dawn were not uncommon among Jewish and pagan groups alike in the Greco-Roman world, and since Sunday was a workday, engaging in a brief morning prayer meeting prior to the day's work would have been a practical necessity.<sup>25</sup> Based on this and other historical evidence, Dennis Smith, Andrew McGowan, and Paul Bradshaw all agree that there was virtually no separation between the Eucharist and the so-called "agape" meal during this period. They were, in fact, one in the same. A morning Eucharist does not appear to emerge until at least the middle of the third century, and even then, the evening meal tradition continues on for at least another century.<sup>26</sup> Indeed, it is precisely this period between the third and fourth centuries, when polemical references to the meals abound in the writings of the patristics, that the notion of the agape meal as separate from the Eucharist becomes solidified.

Another stumbling block for liturgical history scholars has been a tendency to view the "pagan" Hellenistic meals as largely "secular" gatherings that were purely for entertainment, whereas the Christian gatherings were to be treated as sacred, liturgical, and "religious" gatherings. This misunderstanding seems to have resulted from an earlier tendency to take the polemical writings of the early Christians at face value, rather than interpreting them rhetorically within their social and literary context. "In a polemical context," writes Alikin, "Clement of Alexandria states that the purpose of singing at pagan banquets was for the participants' entertainment; however, the evidence testifies to the contrary: pagans sang at their banquets in

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<sup>24</sup> Pliny the Younger, Letter 10.96, ed McKinnon, *Music in Early Christian Literature*, 27. "They were wont to assemble on a set day before dawn and to sing a hymn among themselves to the Christ, as to a god, and that they pledged themselves by vow not to some crime, but that they would commit neither fraud, nor theft, nor adultery, nor betray their word, nor deny a trust when summoned; after which it was their custom to separate and to come together again to take food – ordinary and harmless food, however."

<sup>25</sup> Alikin, *The Earliest History of the Christian Gathering*, 83

<sup>26</sup> Alikin, *The Earliest History of the Christian Gathering*, 81.

honor of their gods, just like Christians did in honor of God and Christ.”<sup>27</sup> In light of this, Philip Harlan warns, “we need to realize that in employing terms such as ‘religious’ and ‘religion’ we are dealing with abstractions that allow us to conceptualize our subject,” *not* objective realities that the people on the ground at the time would have recognized.<sup>28</sup> In short, applying modern notions of “sacred” and “secular” to the ancient world is anachronistic. Dennis Smith insists that “the sacred versus secular model is not appropriate for ancient meals,” since “in ancient Mediterranean culture in general, sacred and secular are interwoven and tend to be indistinct.”<sup>29</sup> In reality, the early Christian meals and pagan banquets *both* consisted of a complex mix of what we would now consider to be religious and secular activities.<sup>30</sup>

Because so many of the early Christian writings contained such strong rhetorical arguments against the instruments, *harmoniai* (genres), and musical styles associated with pagan cultic banquets, music scholars tended to assume that the music of the early Christians could not have *possibly* derived from any Greek sources. A closer examination of these writings, however, reveals the extent to which the early Christians were indebted to Greek philosophical thought in their opinions about certain aesthetic trends. Clement of Alexandria is especially well-known for his scathing critiques of his pagan contemporaries, citing their use of “irregular movements of the auloi, psalteries, choruses, dances, Egyptian clappers, and other such playthings,” which he considered “altogether indecent and uncouth.”<sup>31</sup> But a more careful analysis of his writings by Charles Cosgrove shows how these critiques reflect classical Greek aesthetics and music theory. Clement is following Plato’s teachings with regard to *harmoniai* and ethos, for example, when he

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<sup>27</sup> Alikin, *The Earliest History of the Christian Gathering*, 223.

<sup>28</sup> Philip Harlan, *Associations, Synagogues, and Congregations: Claiming a Place in Ancient Mediterranean Society* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2003), 61.

<sup>29</sup> Smith, *From Symposium to Eucharist*, 6.

<sup>30</sup> Taussig, *In the Beginning Was the Meal*, 33.

<sup>31</sup> Clement of Alexandria, *Paed.* 2.4.44

insists that the Davidic psalms must be sung in one of the “manly” modes (i.e. Dorian), because, as he writes:

the undisciplined *harmoniai*, by the turns of their notes, debase the musical art to weakness and ribaldry. Let the grave and temperate songs have nothing to do with the revelries of drunkenness. One must leave behind, then, the chromatic *harmoniai* with their colorless drinking songs and their florid and meretricious music.<sup>32</sup>

These musical critiques are consistent with the wider Greek philosophical tradition.

Clement’s argument is essentially that the Christians are doing a better job than their Greek contemporary of carrying on the venerable tradition of the Greek scolon. He even goes so far as to suggest that perhaps the Greeks of classical times learned their tradition of singing paeans at the symposium from the ancient Hebrews.<sup>33</sup> Cosgrove clarifies:

The Greek scolon might seem like an odd precedent for Christian song, given Clement’s preceding attack on the music performed at Greek drinking parties. But here, Clement speaks of “*ancient* Greeks.” It was common in Clement’s time for Romans to distinguish the ancient Greeks from Greeks of their own day, revering the former while disparaging the latter as weak, corrupt, etc.<sup>34</sup>

Indeed, one of Clement’s own contemporaries, a Greek physician and Skeptic philosopher named Sextus Empiricus, expresses similar disdain for the musical styles of those same Bacchus cults that Clement is criticizing, referring to the contemporary Greek style as the “*enervating music of the present*” in his treatise *Against the Musicians*:

They say that one must not, of course, disparage the ancient music on the basis of the disreputable and enervating music of the present... Even if the music today weakens the mind with certain fractured mele and effeminate rhythms, this has nothing to do with the ancient and manly music.”<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> Clement of Alexandria, *Paed.* 2.4.44

<sup>33</sup> Clement of Alexandria, *Paed.* 2.4.44.5. “And among the ancient Greeks, at their drinking parties, a song called the scolon was sung over their brimming cups after the manner of the Hebrew psalms, as all together raised the paeon in one voice, and sometimes passed around in order the toasts of song, while the more musical among them sang to the lyre. But let erotic songs be far removed from here; let hymns to God be our songs.”

<sup>34</sup> Cosgrove, “Clement of Alexandria,” 261-262.

<sup>35</sup> Sextus Empiricus, *Against the Musicians* 7, 12, ed. Thomas J. Mathiesen, *Strunk’s Source Readings in Music History*, Rev. Ed., Volume 1: Greek Views of Music (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 1998), 97-99.

It is also important to note that references to the singing of “psalms” in early Christian literature do not necessarily signify the practice of singing *specifically* Davidic, or even Biblical, “psalms.” As McKinnon has shown, the words for “psalm” and “hymn” are interchangeable in the early Christian period.<sup>36</sup> The first century, in particular, saw a massive proliferation of new Christian songs that were not based on any existing Biblical passages. Tertullian’s description of singing practices in his second-century Carthage church shows that early Christian communities encouraged the composition and performance of new or even improvised songs, which were just as welcome as the ancient psalms drawn from Hebrew scriptures:

After the washing of hands and the lighting of lamps, each is urged to come into the middle and sing to God, either from the sacred scriptures or from his own invention. In this way is the manner of his drinking tested.<sup>37</sup>

This practice of having singing contests in order to demonstrate that one has not had too much wine to drink was also a common practice not unique to the Christian communities. This tradition dates back to the earliest symposiums of classical Greece. The practice is also referenced in Paul’s letter to the Ephesians: “Do not become drunk with wine, for that is debauchery, but be filled with the spirit as you sing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs among yourselves.”<sup>38</sup> It is sometimes suggested that perhaps the “psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs” mentioned here represent three distinct musical genres, however Clement himself later conflates “psalms” and “spiritual songs” as being one and the same in his own commentary on this passage:

Just as it is appropriate for us to praise the creator of all before partaking of food, so too is it proper while drinking to sing to him as the

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<sup>36</sup> James McKinnon, *The Advent Project* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000), 23.

<sup>37</sup> Tertullian, *Apologeticum* 39.16-18, ed. James McKinnon, *Music in Early Christian Literature*, 43.

<sup>38</sup> Ephesians 5:18-19.

beneficiaries of his creation. For a psalm is a harmonious and reasonable blessing, and the Apostle calls a psalm a spiritual song.<sup>39</sup>

Given the many references to improvisational singing contests,<sup>40</sup> both in the context of the symposium and in the everyday lives of Christians,<sup>41</sup> several scholars have concluded that the melodic content of early Christian music would have been heavily influenced by localized traditions of Hellenized-Syrian folk singing.<sup>42</sup> Without sufficient musical notation, it is impossible to know for certain what the music actually sounded like. The famous Papyrus Oxyrhynchus 1786 is the only notated Christian music fragment prior to the fourth century, and while it does, indeed, show considerable Greek influence, it is difficult to speculate or draw meaningful conclusions about broader or normative church traditions based on a single example.

Nevertheless, Byzantine scholar and Romanian Orthodox priest John A. McGuckin points out that since hymnic worship was already the bedrock of ancient Greek religion, hymn-singing itself did not belong to any particular segment of society, Christian or pagan. “Throughout Christian antiquity,” he writes, “the influence of popular (or secular) song, with its well-rehearsed themes of love, or valor, were certainly adapted by church hymnographers.”<sup>43</sup> McGuckin references several well-known instances of

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<sup>39</sup> Clement of Alexandria, *Paedagogus* 2.4, ed. James McKinnon, *Music in Early Christian Literature*, 32.

<sup>40</sup> Tertullian, *Ad uxorem* 2.8.8. “Psalms and hymns sound between the two of them and they challenge each other to see who better sings to the Lord.”

<sup>41</sup> John Chrysostom, *In Psalmum* 41.2, “Teach your children and wives also to sing such songs, not only while weaving or while engaged in other tasks, but especially at table. For since the devil generally lies wait at banquets, having as his allies drunkenness and gluttony, along with inordinate laughter and an unbridled spirit, it is necessary especially then, both before and after the meal, to construct defense against him from the psalms, and to arise from the symposium together with wife and children to sing sacred hymns to God...For where there is a psalm, prayer, the dance of prophets, and a pious attitude among the singers, one would not err in calling such a gathering a church.”

<sup>42</sup> Sadie Stanley, ed. “Christian Church, Music of the Early,” *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians* 4 (MacMillan Publishers: London, 1980), 364.

<sup>43</sup> John A. McGuckin, “Poetry and Hymnography (2): The Greek World,” *The Oxford Handbook of Early Christian Studies* Harvey & Hunter, eds. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 644-645.

early Christians (most notably Ephrem and Ambrose) who “borrowed” melodies from popular songs and changed their lyrics to reflect a more “orthodox” theology. Theodoret of Cyrus reports of Ephrem that,

although lacking experience in Hellenistic learning...[he] exposed the multifarious schemes of the Greeks, and lay bare the weakness of every heretical artifice. And since Harmonius, the son of Bardesanes, had composed some songs long ago, and by mixing the sweetness of melody with his impiety had beguiled his audience and led them to their destruction, Ephrem took the music for his song, mixed with his own piety, and thus presented his listeners with a remedy both exceedingly sweet and beneficial.<sup>44</sup>

Given the shift that Biblical and historical scholars have made with regard to the early Christian church – from a quest for liturgical origins, to an understanding of the slow emergence of a coherent “Christian” identity within the post-Temple context of Greco-Roman antiquity – it seems prudent to consider the Greek influence not only on the forms and styles of early church music, but on the function of music as well. Within the context of the banquet, for example, it becomes clear that early Christian singing was not intended to serve as an accompaniment to sacred ceremony or ritual, but as a marker (and shaper) of Christian identity and values.<sup>45</sup> Again, this attitude towards music was not only true for Christians, but for all groups in the Greco-Roman world.

The role of music in the formation of group identity becomes clear through a close examination of the banquet tradition of libations, a ritual marking the transition between the meal and the post-supper drinking party. In the classical and Hellenistic era, libations were always dedicated to a god or gods, and were always accompanied by the singing of a communal hymn (*paean*) to that god. Taussig writes that:

the choice of which god should be honored in the libation helped those at the meal to practice their own emerging social loyalties. That some [groups] came to raise

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<sup>44</sup> Theodoret of Cyrus, *Ecclesiastical History*, 4.29.1-3, ed. James McKinnon, *Music in Early Christian Literature*, 105.

<sup>45</sup> Weimer, “Musical Assemblies,” 114-132.

the cup only to a certain god helped them develop a certain social identity in the confusing Hellenistic polyglot... That early Christians raised the cup uniquely to Jesus or to Christ was done against the backdrop of other meals' experimentation with libation as an identity marker.<sup>46</sup>

In Roman times, imperial concerns over meal groups as potential centers for sedition led to a series of laws limiting (and in some cases banning) voluntary gatherings that were suspected of being "in conflict with the public interest."<sup>47</sup> After Caesar Augustus' military victory in Egypt in 47 BCE, a decree was passed that required *all* meals to offer a libation to the emperor as Lord.<sup>48</sup>

Taussig argues convincingly that the hymns found in John 1:1-18, Colossians 1:15-20, and Revelation 4:11 (among others) are all examples of *paean*s that would have been sung during the libation as a form of social, religious, and political resistance to the imperial decree. Taussig explains:

When songs about Christ ruling the universe were sung exactly at the point of the meal where identity ambivalence and contestation of authority were high, the drama of making libation and the content of the hymn's words worked together in dramatic fashion... The very act of raising the cup to Jesus had elements of resistance; doing so while singing of Jesus/Christ's universal rule ritually dramatized the profile of the emerging Christian identity, and its resistance to Rome.<sup>49</sup>

While many of the ideas outlined in this paper about the Greco-Roman symposium are not new, they have rarely been juxtaposed with musicology research in a way that would allow music history scholars to see both Christianity and Rabbinic Judaism as emerging out of a larger shared cultural milieu. This shift is crucial to understanding how the music of the early churches functioned in the formation of Christian self-understanding. These larger cultural traditions also laid the foundation for the sentiments and liturgical developments of the post-Constantinian

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<sup>46</sup> Taussig, *In the Beginning Was the Meal*, 109.

<sup>47</sup> Taussig, *In the Beginning Was the Meal*, 119. Incidentally, this may have been one reason for the eventual shift to a morning eucharistic gathering.

<sup>48</sup> Taussig, *In the Beginning Was the Meal*, 75.

<sup>49</sup> Taussig, *In the Beginning Was the Meal*, 109.



Patristic era, many of which are precisely in reaction to earlier Christian practices and attitudes.

As Dennis Smith laments, it remains “typical of studies of the Eucharist to assume that parallel types of meals from the ancient world should be analyzed as distinct entities.”<sup>50</sup> Hal Taussig puts the matter more bluntly:

Conventional pictures of the early Christian groups often portray those early churches as participating in some early form of the Christian mass, eucharist, or communion service. Even when most historians acknowledged that the early Christians gathered for meals, they carelessly superimposed an anachronistic medieval rite of eucharist onto a portion of those meals. It has only been the scholarly generation of Matthias Klinghardt, Dennis Smith, and Andrew McGowan that has substantially corrected this impression.<sup>51</sup>

While Taussig, Alikin, and Smith have each offered minor suggestions as to what this new scholarship of Christian origins might mean for the study of early Christian *music*, more work is needed to address how this contextual shift impacts our understanding of early Western church music. Unfortunately, this is an area of study that has continued to be overlooked in recent decades. In her dissertation on music as an identity marker in early Christianity, Jade Weimer explains at length why the scholarship on early Christian music seems to have remained so stagnant:

This is a broad area of inquiry, and one must gain specialized knowledge in several disciplines. Musicologists, for example, are interested in mapping theoretical and technical aspects of music including scale modes, rhythmic patterns, and the relationship between melodic lines and lyrical content. Historians, on the other hand, are more focused on developing a historical trajectory of practice and establishing a point of origin and a connection between the emergence of ritual practices within a specific group and the ritual practices of other contemporary religious groups. This type of study, however, requires a combination of these engagements in order to understand the technical components of such a study on music, but to make meaningful conclusions of the sociohistorical significance of music in early Christianity. Moreover, the study of early Christian music requires knowledge of musical practices employed by Jews and Greco-Romans, which go beyond a basic technical analysis.<sup>52</sup>

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<sup>50</sup> Smith, *From Symposium to Eucharist*, 2.

<sup>51</sup> Taussig, *In The Beginning Was the Meal*, 55.

<sup>52</sup> Weimer, “Musical Assemblies,” 9.

Despite these difficulties, the larger implications of this work are significant, particularly given the role that older depictions of early church music have played in constructing a mythology of Western sacred music and its origins. The need for a more accurate depiction of the sociocultural context for the emergence of “sacred” music remains, as does the need to better contextualize the opinions expressed by early Christian writers (especially the patristics) about music. These opinions, taken out of context, have led too many generations of scholars to formulate misguided assumptions about the characteristics proper to “sacred” music, while also needlessly perpetuating a false narrative about the supposed transgressions of “popular” music-making in the early Christian communities. By taking a more comprehensive look at the origins of Christian music, we can not only demonstrate precedent for a diversity of musical styles and approaches within the early Christian church, but we will also develop a much more nuanced and accurate understanding of the place of music and sacred ritual within the context of Western culture in general.

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