

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.”¹

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.

¹ 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 practices 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 served as the basis not only for Christian self-understanding and social organization in the first two centuries, but as the framework for the development of 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 cultural foundation that fundamentally shaped the musical practices of the Christian churches prior to their social organization under Constantine in the fourth century. As we will see, rather than functioning primarily as an accompaniment to formalized liturgical action, the music of the early churches served as a marker (and shaper) of an emerging Christian identity within the larger Hellenistic culture.

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

an Israelite, who is depicted throughout the Christian Gospels as participating fully and faithfully in all of the traditional Hebrew festivals. Due to the influence of Christian supersessionist thinking, it has been common in Western culture to think of Christianity as arising out of Judaism. More recently, however, the historical narrative has been updated to reflect a more scholarly perspective, which understands *both* Christianity and Rabbinic Judaism as two distinct post-Temple religious movements that emerged out of a shared Hebrew inheritance. It is important to remember that when the Second Temple was destroyed by the Roman Empire in 70CE, the ancient religion of the Hebrew people was no longer possible. Christianity and Rabbinic Judaism, then, were two (of many) movements in the first century that arose out of that trauma, offering two distinct interpretations of the ancient Hebrew traditions in light of that context, and presenting two different solutions for how to move forward.

Accordingly, the early Christians drew heavily on certain aspects of Hebrew tradition—particularly the psalms and the prophets—reinterpreting them in light of the apocalyptic events of the first century, which they believed to be the fulfillment of that tradition. Of particular interest to Christian music in this regard was the ancient Jewish Temple practice of singing of 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.² This is, indeed, 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 psalms were said to be “appropriate to the chalice,” which represented the blood of Jesus, the sacrificial lamb.³

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

³ *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

Nevertheless, the assumed link between 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.⁴

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.⁵ However, there is no basis for this assumption within the literature. 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.”⁶ 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 (Philo being of particular significance given his lengthy description of singing in the Therapeutae community).⁷ “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

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.”

⁴ 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.

⁵ 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).

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

⁷ 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.

myth fostered by a curious coalition of Anglican liturgists and Jewish musicologists.”⁸

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.⁹

Moreover, Biblical scholar Hal Taussig writes 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.”¹⁰ Of course, Jews *were* known to have gathered for “synagogue” in Greco-Roman times, but according to Taussig it is not entirely clear what the Jews *did* at these gatherings. Unlike the early Christian gatherings, which always included a meal and the singing of songs in addition to readings, preaching, and prayer, the purpose of early synagogue meetings appears to have been limited to Scripture reading, prayer, and religious instruction.¹¹

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.”¹² Rather, scholars are increasingly coming to see the Christian Eucharist as having emerged within the context of the Greco-Roman banquet tradition. After all, “Jewish and

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

⁹ McKinnon, “The Exclusion of Instruments from the Ancient Synagogue,” 85.

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

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

¹² Alikin, *The Earliest History of the Christian Gathering*, 5.

Christian groups themselves,” Alikin points out, “were part of Hellenistic culture as a whole.”¹³

Dennis Smith likewise asserts 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.”¹⁴

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 that influenced nearly every facet of Greco-Roman society. Philosophical schools, pagan mystery cults, Jewish communities, Christian churches, Greek burial societies, trade guilds, 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.

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 methods of questioning, disrupting, or experimenting with established social rules and customs within the “play” of the meal ritual (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

¹³ Alikin, *The Earliest History of the Christian Gathering*, 5.

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

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.”¹⁵

Matthias Klinghardt’s scholarship on Hellenistic meals has also revealed striking similarities across social, ethnic, and religious lines, not just from a liturgical perspective, but in terms of the social “values of the meals.”¹⁶ 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, including *koinonia* (communitas), *philia* (friendship or “brotherly love”), *isonomia* (equality), and *charis* (grace).¹⁷ Accordingly, it was also a relatively common practice for groups to criticize the meal practices of others, creating rhetorical “straw men” out of other groups, while idealizing their own as exemplary embodiments of commonly-shared values.

Seeing the early Christian eucharistic gatherings as part of this larger Hellenistic meal tradition provides an important paradigm shift and cultural 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 the banquet and symposium. “When you come together,” he writes, “each one has a hymn, a lesson, a revelation, a tongue, or an interpretation.”¹⁸ Smith points out that this instruction is very similar

¹⁵ Dennis Smith, *From Symposium to Eucharist*, 2, 8.

¹⁶ 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.

¹⁷ Taussig, *In the Beginning Was the Meal*, 26-27.

¹⁸ 1 Corinthians 14:26 (New Revised Standard Version).

to those given at the philosophical banquets witnessed by Aulus Gellius, during which guests were invited to each bring a topic to the symposium for discussion.¹⁹ Public readings, lessons and teachings, visions and prophecies, and singing (whether communal and in unison, or impromptu solo performances) were not unique to the 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 Hellenistic meal tradition also helps to make sense of the *lack* of references to anything that might be considered 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 admits 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.”²⁰ Charles Cosgrove likewise laments 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.”²¹ Both scholars, however, stopped short of grasping the extent to which the dinner parties functioned *as* the Christian synaxis for at least the first two centuries of the church.

One source of misunderstanding has been the tendency to misinterpret Justin Martyr’s oft-quoted description of a second-century Roman Christian gathering as a “Sunday morning Eucharist,” which is how James McKinnon introduces this passage in his influential compendium of *Music in Early Christian Literature*.²² And yet, there is no indication from the text or elsewhere that the gathering outlined takes place *in the morning*. Justin simply states, “on

¹⁹ Smith, *From Symposium to Eucharist*, 201.

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

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

²² McKinnon, *Music in Early Christian Literature*, 20.

the day named for the sun, there is an assembly...²³ 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 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 standard Sunday morning liturgy. This is highly improbable, however, since the only morning 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, and then come back later for a meal.²⁴ 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.²⁵ 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 gathering. The morning Eucharist does not appear to emerge until the middle of the third century, and even then, the evening meal tradition continued for at least another century.²⁶

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

²⁴ 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."

²⁵ Alikin, *The Earliest History of the Christian Gathering*, 83

²⁶ Alikin, *The Earliest History of the Christian Gathering*, 81.

One stumbling block for liturgical history scholars has been the tendency to view the Hellenistic meals as “secular” gatherings that were purely for entertainment, whereas Christian gatherings were seen as inherently sacred, liturgical, and “religious.” This misunderstanding seems to have resulted from the earlier tendency to take the polemical writings of the early Christians at face value, rather than interpreting them rhetorically from 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 honor of their gods just like Christians did in honor of God and Christ.”²⁷ 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 or communities in question would recognize.²⁸ Dennis Smith therefore 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.”²⁹ Both early Christian meals and pagan banquets consisted of a complex mix of what we would consider to be religious and secular activities.³⁰

Because so many of the early Christian writings contained such strong rhetorical arguments against the instruments, *harmoniai*, and musical styles associated with pagan cultic banquets, it was assumed that the music of the early Christians could not possibly have derived from any Greek sources. A closer examination of these writings, however, reveals the extent to

²⁷ Alikin, *The Earliest History of the Christian Gathering*, 223.

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

²⁹ Smith, *From Symposium to Eucharist*, 6.

³⁰ Taussig, *In the Beginning Was the Meal*, 33.

which the early Christian writers were indebted to Greek philosophical thought and cultural trends, particularly those concerning music. 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.”³¹ But a more careful analysis of his writings by Charles Cosgrove shows how these critiques were developed precisely from within the context of classical Greek aesthetics and music theory. Following Plato’s teachings with regard to *harmoniai* and ethos, for example, Clement insists that the Davidic psalms must be sung in one of the “manly” modes (i.e. Dorian), because:

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.³²

Clement then seeks to compare the singing at Christian meals with the ancient Greek scolion, suggesting that the Greeks of old must have learned their venerable tradition of singing paeans at the symposium from the ancient Hebrews.³³ Cosgrove clarifies:

The Greek scolion 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.³⁴

³¹ Clement of Alexandria, *Paed.* 2.4.44

³² Clement of Alexandria, *Paed.* 2.4.44

³³ Clement of Alexandria, *Paed.* 2.4.44.5. “And among the ancient Greeks, at their drinking parties, a song called the scolion 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.”

³⁴ Cosgrove, “Clement of Alexandria,” 261-262.

Indeed, one of Clement's own contemporaries, a Greek physician and Skeptic philosopher named Sextus Empiricus, expressed a similar disdain for the musical styles of the Bacchus cults that Clement is criticizing, referring to the contemporary 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."³⁵

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 completely interchangeable during the early Christian period.³⁶ The first century, in particular, saw a massive proliferation of new Christian songs that were not based on any Biblical passages. Tertullian's description of singing practices in second-century Carthage portrays early Christian communities as encouraging the performance of newly composed (or even improvised) songs, which were just as welcome as psalms drawn from the 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.³⁷

The practice of having singing contests in order to demonstrate that one has not had too much to drink was also not a practice that was unique to Christian communities. This is a tradition that dates back even to the earliest classical symposium tradition. The

³⁵ 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.

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

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

practice is also hinted at 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."³⁸ 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 beneficiaries of his creation. For a psalm is a harmonious and reasonable blessing, and the Apostle calls a psalm a spiritual song.³⁹

Given the references to improvisational singing contests,⁴⁰ both in the context of the symposium and in the everyday lives of Christians,⁴¹ 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.⁴² Without sufficient musical notation, it is impossible to know what the music actually sounded like with any degree of real certainty. The famous Papyrus Oxyrhynchus 1786 is the only notated Christian music fragment prior to the fourth century, and while it does, indeed, show considerable

³⁸ Ephesians 5:18-19.

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

⁴⁰ 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."

⁴¹ 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."

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

Greek influence, it is difficult to speculate or draw meaningful conclusions about broader church tradition 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 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.”⁴³ McGuckin is likely referencing here several well-known instances of early Christians (most notably Ephrem and Ambrose) who “borrowed” melodies from popular religious songs that were considered “heretical,” 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.⁴⁴

Given the shift that scholars have made with regard to the history of the early Christian church – from a quest for liturgical origins, to an understanding of the emergence of a unique Christian identity within the context of Greco-Roman culture over a period of several centuries – it seems prudent to consider the Greek influence not only on the forms and styles of early church music, but on its function as well. Within the context of the banquet, for example, it becomes

⁴³ 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.

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

clear that music for the early Christians was not intended to serve primarily as an accompaniment to sacred ceremony or ritual, but as a marker (and shaper) of Christian identity and values.⁴⁵ This was true not only for Christians, but for all groups in the Greco-Roman world, a fact that can be seen through a closer examination of the banquet tradition of libations, a ritual that marked 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 paean or hymn. 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 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.⁴⁶

In Roman times, imperial concerns over meal groups as potential centers for sedition led to a series of laws that limited (and in some cases banned) voluntary gatherings that were deemed to be "in conflict with the public interest."⁴⁷ After Caesar Augustus' military victory in Egypt, *all* meals were required to offer a libation to the emperor as Lord.⁴⁸ Taussig argues that the hymns found in John 1:1-18, Colossians 1:15-20, and Revelation 4:11 (among others) are examples of paeans that would have been sung during the libation, highlighting that

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 resistance to Rome."⁴⁹

⁴⁵ Weimer, "Musical Assemblies," 114-132.

⁴⁶ Taussig, *In the Beginning Was the Meal*, 109.

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

⁴⁸ Taussig, *In the Beginning Was the Meal*, 75.

⁴⁹ Taussig, *In the Beginning Was the Meal*, 109.

Many of the ideas outlined in this paper are not new, but they have rarely been juxtaposed with musicology research in such a way that allows music history scholars to understand both Christianity and Rabbinic Judaism as being part of a larger cultural and musical milieu. This shift is crucial to understanding how the music of the early churches functioned in the formation of Christian identity and self-understanding. These traditions laid the foundation for the sentiments and liturgical developments of the post-Constantinian patristic era, many of which are in reaction to earlier 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.”⁵⁰ 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.⁵¹

While Taussig, Alikin, and Smith have each offered some minor suggestions as to what this new scholarship of Christian origins may mean for the study of early Christian music and singing, more work is needed to address how this contextual shift will impact 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 that why scholarship on early Christian music seems to have remained 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.

⁵⁰ Smith, *From Symposium to Eucharist*, 2.

⁵¹ Taussig, *In The Beginning Was the Meal*, 55.

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.⁵²

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 the mythology of Western music and its origins. The need to identify the sociocultural context for “sacred” music remains, as does the need to better contextualize earlier opinions expressed by early Christian writers about music. These opinions, taken out of context, continue to influence discourses about the characteristics that are proper to “sacred” music, as well as the supposed transgressions of “popular” music-making. By taking a more comprehensive look at the origins of Christian music, we will not only be able to demonstrate precedent for a diversity of styles and approaches to musical practice within Christian communities, but we may also develop a much more nuanced and accurate understanding of the place of music and ritual in Western culture in general.

⁵² Weimer, “Musical Assemblies,” 9.

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