

Instilling the Word: Music at the Origins of Christian Worship

NECC 2019 Wednesday 13 February 2019

Margaret Daly-Denton

dalydenm@tcd.ie

SLIDE 1 Title

What can our earliest Christian writings tell us about the role that music played in the worship of the earliest believers in Jesus? At the outset, we have to say, very little! This is because these documents were never intended to be exhaustive descriptions of early Christian worship. They were written for people who were doing it anyway, so they take a lot for granted. In this session we are going to try to read between the lines of the New Testament, as it were, and see what we can learn. It will not be much, but I hope it will contribute to our reflection on ‘Cathedral Music: A Gateway to God’.

We begin with a passage familiar to us all.

SLIDE 2. A.

Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly; teach and admonish one another in all wisdom; and with gratitude in your hearts sing psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs to God. (Col 3:16 NRSV)

1.1. One of the reasons most biblical scholars suspect that a disciple of Paul wrote Colossians is its frequent long, convoluted sentences. This is a good example. Many translators break it up into more manageable units, as has happened here. So, this is what English-speaking Christians of many traditions who use the Revised Common Lectionary hear. Unfortunately, though, they are getting a false impression of three separate, and even possibly consecutive actions: hearing the word of Christ, then teaching, followed by some singing. A more literal translation would read as follows—

SLIDE 2.B.

Let the word of Christ dwell richly in you [who are] in all wisdom teaching and exhorting each other, [while you are] singing psalms, hymns and spiritual songs with gratitude in your hearts to God.

In this reading, ritual song emerges as one of the ways that Christians teach other to hear the ‘word of Christ’. So, the singing of Jesus’ followers gathered for worship is all about ‘instilling the word’. Of course, two questions remain. First, what did the author mean by ‘the word of Christ’? Second, what form did those psalms, hymns and spiritual songs take?

2. *The word of Christ*

We shouldn’t jump to the conclusion that this means actual sayings of Jesus familiar to us from the gospels. It probably means the word about Jesus (as in (Acts 4:4; 6:7, for example), the message, the good news, the fundamental kernel of the earliest Christian preaching (1 Cor 15:3-4; 1 Thess 3:13; 4:15; 5:23, etc). Elsewhere in the letter this author calls it the mystery, hidden for many ages but now revealed in Jesus Christ (Col. 1:26). He is writing to a Greco-Roman audience, culturally conditioned to expect from a religion that it would initiate them

into its esoteric mysteries. We know ‘the word of Christ’ best, perhaps in the liturgical formula:

SLIDE 3. The word of/about Christ

Christ has died

Christ is risen

Christ will come again

3. *Psalms, hymns and spiritual songs*

This brings us to the psalms, hymns and spiritual songs. Have we any way of finding out what these three different terms would have meant in terms of musical and textual genres?

SLIDE 4

psalmos a psalm – a song sung to the accompaniment of a stringed instrument,
not necessarily religious

verb *psallo* = to pluck, twitch LXX trans of *Tēhillā*

hymnos a hymn

ōdē a song / an ode;

3.1. *The Jewishness of early Christian worship*

The first thing we need to remember is that in the first century CE the Jesus movement was a renewal movement within Judaism. Gentiles who joined the movement regarded themselves as abandoning idol worship and coming to faith in the one God of Israel (1 Thess 1:9). Jews did not change their religion when they became followers of Jesus. So, we need to look not only at the New Testament use of these terms, but at their use in the Judaism of the time.

3.2. *How Jewish Studies have changed our perception*

Up to about forty years ago, we would have quite confidently argued that Christian psalm singing developed out of the first century CE synagogue service. That was until Jewish scholars challenged us about our over-reliance on Jewish documents that post-dated the New Testament writings by several centuries. They cautioned us against taking at face value the claims in these documents that certain traditions could be back-dated to first century rabbis. As we will see several times in this session, the ancients were quite relaxed about attributing their own writing to a famous figure from the past. We have only to think of the writer of Colossians writing what he thought Paul would have written several decades after Paul’s death.

3.3. There is also the fact that we Christians tended to think that going to the synagogue on the Sabbath was the Jewish ‘equivalent’ of Christians going to church on Sundays. In fact, there is no evidence that ordinary Jews at the time of Jesus regarded weekly public worship

as an essential part of their religious commitments. Rest was the mark of the Sabbath, not community worship! What happened on the Sabbath in the first century synagogue was the reading of the Scriptures and debate about the issues that arose for Jewish communities striving to maintain their identity in a Hellenized world. Philo, for example, describes Diaspora Jews meeting in the synagogue ‘to study the philosophy of their fathers’ (*Mos.* 215-16; *Spec. Leg.* 2. 60-62).

SLIDE 5. Theodotus Inscription

We are fortunate in having the Theodotus Inscription, a dedicatory plaque, written in Greek, dating from Roman times. It states that Theodotus built the synagogue ‘for the reading of the Torah and the study of the Commandments’

We can speak of elements of ritual song in the synagogue. It is likely that blessings were sung as the scrolls were taken out of the ark and replaced after the reading. The reading itself was done in some form of cantillation, because the reverence due to the Scriptures forbade subjecting them to the banality of everyday speech. We have some ancient Hebrew scrolls where a symbol in the text of the narratives about King David in 1-2-Samuel seems to indicate the insertion of a psalm into the reading. This would be part of the same development whereby ‘historical titles were added to some psalms, e.g. Psalm 51: ‘A Psalm of David, when the prophet Nathan came to him, after he had gone in to Bathsheba’. Apart from that we know very little and we certainly see now that the idea that the Psalter was the ‘Hymnbook’ of Second Temple Judaism is anachronistic. The earliest clear evidence we have for psalm-singing as part of Jewish liturgy is from the 7th century.

This raises the question, how come psalm singing in worship developed first in Christianity and even to this day is far more developed in Christian liturgy than it is in Jewish liturgy. The short answer is, because the psalms were honorifically attributed to David who was believed to have spoken prophetically about his son, Jesus. So, for Christians, the psalms that found their full meaning on Jesus’ lips were the ideal prayers for his followers.

4. So were the psalms well known / sung etc in Second temple Judaism?

The gospel writers find it plausible that people would spontaneously start singing a phrase from a psalm, ‘Hosanna, Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord’ at Jesus’ entry into Jerusalem. Ordinary people would have known refrains from the psalms like ‘God’s love endures for ever.’ The Hallel psalms sung at table during Passover were presumably more widely known, and perhaps some of the pilgrimage ‘Songs of Ascents’, but familiarity with the whole Psalter would have been the preserve of a scholarly elite.

SLIDE 7. Herod’s Temple

SLIDE 8 Herod’s Temple

The psalms were sung by the professionals in the Temple choir. Whether pilgrims could actually hear them is a question when we consider the size of the temple, as extended in Graeco-Roman style by Herod the Great (ruled 40 to 4 BCE). And, of course, by the time of Jesus, ordinary people no longer understood the Hebrew language.

4.1. When we are thinking about the question of people’s familiarity with the psalms, we need to remember that the Hebrew Scriptures were divided into three sections, the Law, the

Prophets and the Writings. The psalms were part of the third category, the Writings, which would have been studied by scholars and scribes but less familiar to ordinary Jews. We know, from copies of the psalms found among the Dead Sea Scrolls, that in the first century CE the Psalter had not yet stabilized into the 150 psalms that we have in our Bibles today.

4.2. However, when we look at the profusion of psalm-style hymns, canticles and poetic prayers found in the literature from the late Second Temple period, we find that the psalms were a model from which poets could take inspiration, and also a source from which they could take actual phrases. ‘Sing a new song’ is a line that crops up frequently in the ever-evolving collection that we know as the Psalter. In different historical settings poets were continually creating ‘new songs’ in the psalm genre, full of psalm phraseology, but with a contemporary edge to them.

SLIDE 8. CAPTIVE MUSICIANS

This is actually how the Psalter as we know it took shape. We can see this happening in Psalm 137, ‘By the rivers of Babylon’ where exiled Temple musicians pour out their grief over the Babylonian destruction of Jerusalem in the sixth century 587 BCE. ‘How could we sing the Lord’s song in a foreign land?’ But then we can go beyond the 150 psalms to discover other psalm-style compositions, remembering, of course, that the ‘final cut’ of the Bible, the closure of the biblical canon, did not happen until the fourth century of our era. Some examples would be the canticles added into the Greek version of Book of Daniel, including the *Benedicite*. Psalm 151, found in the Greek Bible, is a song of David, composed a good thousand years after his life! In his literary afterlife he became more and more autobiographical!

SLIDE 9. Psalm 151 (found only in Greek and Syriac)

I was the smallest among my brothers,
and the youngest among the sons of my father;
and he made me shepherd of his flocks,
and the ruler over his kids.
My hands made a flute,
and my fingers a lyre:
and I shall render glory to the Lord,
I thought within myself...

The Psalms of Solomon composed in Greek were included in some early manuscripts of the Bible. They can be dated to the first century BCE because they contain so many clear references to the Roman destruction of Jerusalem perpetrated by Pompey in 63 BCE. Clearly this disaster called for new songs that would cry out to God to send the Messiah:

SLIDE 10. PsSol 17 / Arch of Titus

To purge Jerusalem from Gentiles

Who trample her to destruction;
... to smash the arrogance of sinners
Like a potter's jar

Here we can clearly hear echoes of Psalm 2.

We find too that copyists of the psalms were quite relaxed about tweaking them to make them speak more pointedly to their contemporary situation.

SLIDE 11. 11Q Psalms Scroll

One of the exciting finds among the Dead Sea Scrolls is a scroll copied around the time of Jesus, full of psalms, most of them biblical but some completely new to us. The community that produced these scrolls had withdrawn from what they saw as the utter corruption of the Temple in Jerusalem to set up an alternative 'spiritual temple', a community where prayer Torah study and ascetism would be a spiritual sacrifice, 'an offering of the lips' (Hos 14:2). Here is just one example of their copyists' freedom with psalm texts

SLIDE 12. Qumran tweaking

Biblical Ps 26:12

My foot stands on level ground

In the great congregation I will bless the Lord.

11QPs version

But my foot remains upon level ground

Apart from their assembly I will bless your Name

4. 4. It is a short step from these to all the hymns, canticles and psalm-like compositions we find in the New Testament. Again, these are full of the language of the psalms, the Magnificat, for example, Luke's composition put on the lips of Mary.

SLIDE 13. Ps allusions in the Magnificat

But the Magnificat is also one of those new songs with strong references to current events. When Mary sings that her spirit rejoices in God her Saviour, she is using the Roman Emperor's title, *Soter*, making the point that the God of Israel provides protection and security, not Rome! The subversion continues when Luke has her sing of the mighty being put down and the humble raised up, a reversal of the injustices of the imperial world and a glimpse of the kind of world that Jesus will usher in. This would have had a powerful contemporary resonance for ordinary people living under the heel of Rome: small farmers, craftspeople, traders, many working in what amounted to enforced servitude, once the Romans and their local client rulers had exacted tribute and taxes.

The portrayal of the heavenly liturgy in the Book of Revelation features many hymns that must surely reflect the worship experience of the author and intended audience. Again, they are clearly in a psalm style and their diction mines the Psalter extensively, but they would also have been immediately recognized as a ‘send-up’ of the hymns commissioned for the imperial cult. Take for example, Rev 11:17-18.

SLIDE 14. Revelation hymn and *Pantokrator*

We give you thanks, O Lord God
The Sovereign over all (*Pantokratōr*)
who are and who were,
That you have taken your great power
and begun to reign. (Rev 11:17).

The Christians of the seven churches in the Roman province of Asia would have immediately recognized this as a parody of the acclamations of the divinized Roman Emperor sung at the imperial festivals that were a regular feature of life in their cities.¹

4.5. Adaptations of psalms

15. Luke’s Prayer based on Ps 2. Acts 4:24-31

Sovereign Lord (*Despota*),
who made the heaven and the earth, the sea, and everything in them,
it is you who said by the Holy Spirit through our ancestor David, your servant:
'Why did the Gentiles rage,
and the peoples imagine vain things?
The kings of the earth took their stand,
and the rulers have gathered together
against the Lord and against his Messiah.'

For in this city, in fact, both Herod and Pontius Pilate, with the Gentiles and the peoples of Israel, gathered together against your holy servant Jesus, whom you anointed,²⁸ to do whatever your hand and your plan had predestined to take place (Acts 4:24-28).

Whether Luke envisages this as sung we do not know. But it is a typical Christian adaptation (with tense changes). The kind of thing that we find all over the New Testament.

After all that, we really cannot precisely define a psalm, a hymn or an ode. As we have seen, the designation ‘psalm’ was not restricted to the 150 biblical psalms. Jewish authors regularly referred to the psalms as hymns, especially when writing for a non-Jewish readership.

¹ David Aune

Perhaps also they avoided the term ‘psalm’ because the community’s singing was unaccompanied.

SLIDE 16. Chludov Psalter Ps 69 applied to the iconoclasm

Context

So now we are going to approach our text from Colossians from a different angle, that of context. A good example of the way the context can clarify the meaning of a term such as psalm, hymn or ode is that verse from Mark’s account of the Last Supper:

SLIDE 17. Last Supper Picture

After hymn singing (*hymnēsantes*), they went out to the Mount of Olives

A verse that Church musicians have always treasured. Mark uses a past participle of the verb *hymneō*, so it means ‘having done some hymn-singing, they went out.’ Because Mark presents the Last Supper as a Passover celebration, we can safely assume that this is a reference to the biblical psalms, more precisely the Egyptian Hallel (Psalms 113-118) traditionally sung during the Passover meal.

SLIDE 18. Anaploga Villa

This archaeological reconstruction of a house in Corinth gives an idea of the locations for the earliest Christian assemblies. The small groups of Jesus-believers (possibly about 50 people when Paul wrote 1 Corinthians) would have been perceived as religious dining clubs. Meals were the primary mode of association for such societies in ancient Greco-Roman cities like Colossae, Corinth, Ephesus. So this is the context in which Jesus-believers would have ‘instilled the ‘word of Christ’ as they sang their psalms, hymns and odes.

SLIDE 19. Sepphoris Triclinium

SLIDE 20- Pompeii Triclinium

The N.T. is full of hints that the earliest Christian assemblies took place in and around the dining room. The fact that the *triclinium* (three couches) would typically accommodate nine diners and that the rest of the company would eat in the atrium and other nearby areas of an open-plan house explains that misbehaviour at ‘The Lord’s Supper’ that Paul criticises in 1 Cor 11:20-22) whereby the more privileged eat first, neglecting the others.

The passage in the Letter of James condemning discrimination between rich and poor at the Christian assembly is particularly instructive. James writes,

SLIDE 21. James 2:3 re footstool

... you take notice of the one wearing the fine clothes and say, "Have a seat here, please," while to the one who is poor you say, "Stand there," or, "Sit at my feet," (James 2:3)

Sit on my footstool. This item of dining room furniture identifies the location for the assembly.

SLIDES 22 Reconstruction in Met Museum of Art, New York

SLIDE 23. Krater image with footstool and flute-playing woman

Having looked at the spatial setting for the earliest Christian assemblies, we now turn to the actual proceedings. Since the Symposium was a literary genre, as well as an actual practice, we know quite a lot about its structure. The supper was followed by the drinking party (symposion = drinking together) with libations poured out to the gods, musical entertainment and discussion of philosophy, for example, with the guest of honour being invited to make a speech.

Symposia ranged from this rather restrained version to the more decadent version with the singing of bawdy songs, the telling of risqué jokes, with flute-playing women offering a little more than just music.

Slide 24. particularly attentive woman!

For Jews, the libations in honour of the gods were replaced by a blessing of God, the giver of the fruit of the vine. Some form of hymn singing is attested in several sources.² We have, for example, a work called *The Testament of Job*, dating from the 1st century CE. This is a re-telling in Greek of the story of Job. There Job describes his charitable works, including how he had thirty tables in his house for strangers in need of a meal, plus twelve tables for widows!

SLIDE 25. Testament of Job 14

And I used to have six psalms and a ten-stringed lyre. I would rouse myself daily after the feeding of the widows, take the lyre and play for them. And they would chant hymns. And with the psaltery I would remind them of God so that they might glorify the Lord.

Even if this dramatizes a Job who is utterly over-the-top in his piety, it is still instructive.

6.3. The New Testament Symposium

The well-known words, ‘After supper he took the cup’ indicate that the Last Supper is being presented as a symposium so that Christians can see the continuity between their assemblies and the memories of Jesus’ table fellowship. At the symposium, letters from Christian leaders like Paul, copied and passed around the various local churches, would have been read as well as what Justin, writing around 150 CE calls ‘the memoirs of the apostles’. The diners would recall Jesus’ sayings or re-tell his parables.³ Of course, these letters and memoirs were not yet ‘Scripture’, so they would have been read in conversational speech.

SLIDE 26. Chester Beatty Papyri

This will be impressed on us when we see the Chester Beatty papyri this evening. These copies of the gospels and epistles from the third century are plain, functional documents, written, not in calligraphy, as the Hebrew Scriptures or the Greek translation of them would

² Philo writes of a religious sect in Egypt called the therapeutae who sang in two choirs at the end of their community meals. Josephus has something similar to say about a sect that he calls the Essenes.

³ A document called The Gospel of Thomas which consists of nothing else but sayings of Jesus would be the kind of text that might be read at the symposium. Of

have been, but in the everyday documentary script that was used for invoices, receipts, and letters.

A passage in Ephesians that is quite similar to our Colossians text fits well into this symposium context.

SLIDE 27. Eph 5: 18-20

Do not get drunk with wine, for that is debauchery; but be filled with the Spirit, as you sing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs among yourselves, singing and making melody to the Lord in your hearts, giving thanks to God the Father at all times and for everything in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Here the Spirit-inspired music making is contrasted with the debauchery of the Greco-Roman symposium.

When explaining how each member of the body has a particular gift (*charisma*) to bring to the Christian assembly, Paul says,

SLIDE 28. 1 Cor 14:26

When you come together, each one has a psalm (*psalmos*), a lesson, a revelation, a tongue, or an interpretation. Let all things be done for building up (1 Cor 14:26).

In view of what we have seen about the haziness of the terminology, we really have no idea which of several possible things this *psalmos* might be:

- The singing of one of the 150 biblical psalms
- The presentation of a biblical psalm as David's prophecy about Jesus, e.g. Psalm 22 or Psalm 2, as reinterpreted in terms of Jesus by Luke. E.g. Here in this very city, the kings of the earth took their stand, and the rulers gathered together against the Lord and against his Messiah.
- The singing of a 'new song' in the style of the psalms

The symposium, though, is clearly the context in which this performance takes place.

7. Becoming eucharistic people

So now, let us have a final look again at the Colossians passage, this time taking note of what precedes it and what follows it. The author has been instructing the hearers on how they should behave lovingly towards each other. Then he continues:

SLIDE 29. Becoming a thankful people

And **be thankful** (*eucharistoi ginesthē*). Let the word of Christ dwell richly in you [who are] in all wisdom teaching and exhorting each other, [while you are] singing psalms, hymns and spiritual songs with gratitude in your hearts to God. And whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, **giving thanks** (*eucharistountes*) to God the Father through him.

The singing is an exercise in becoming people who give thanks. The author wants the hearers to enter a process of learning how to become followers of Jesus whose default mode, as it we might say today, is thanksgiving (*eucharistountes*), and whose thankfulness overflows into their daily lives.

SLIDE 30. Singing in all wisdom

The singing that instils the word to be done ‘in all wisdom’. What might this mean? Earlier in the letter Pseudo-Paul has spoken of his ‘teaching [the Colossians] in all wisdom’ (Col 1:28). He tells them that he constantly prays that ‘all spiritual wisdom and understanding’ may be theirs (1:9). The Bible is clear that wisdom belongs first and foremost to God, but that human beings can ask God for it. It also teaches that we catch a glimpse of Divine Wisdom whenever we admire the beauty and the finely-tuned perfection of the world that God has made and that God sustains in being (Wis 8:1). As cathedral musicians frequently find themselves singing:

O LORD, how manifold are your works!

In wisdom you have made them all;

It was a short step from this insight for biblical writers to personify Divine Wisdom, ‘the fashioner of all things’ (Wis 7:22) as the divine artist, the skilled designer, the architect mapping out the foundations of the earth (Prov 8:22-31), the craftswoman with her blueprint for the creation of the world. In the Scriptures people not only pray for wisdom, but they study. Sirach says that the wisdom of the scribe comes of ample leisure (Sir 38:24), i.e., the opportunity to study, to practice one’s craft. A scribe was a calligrapher, as well as a scholar of the Scriptures so this refers to long hours of practice. Against this background, singing ‘in all wisdom’ is suggestive of creativity, artistry, music well-crafted, well rehearsed and beautifully performed, an echo of God’s Wisdom.

If we go along with this interpretation of ‘singing in all wisdom’, there may well be a connection with another phrase in this author’s complicated sentence

SLIDE 31. Singing with grace (*en chariti*)

Let the word of Christ dwell richly in you [who are] in all wisdom teaching and exhorting each other, [while you are] singing psalms, hymns and spiritual songs **with gratitude** (*en tē chariti*) in your hearts to God.

The phrase translated here as ‘with gratitude’ is a difficult one. The singing is to be done *en tē chariti* or ‘in the grace’. Ancient copyists were just as mystified by this phrase as we are today. Many of them omitted the definite article, presuming that it was a scribal error, thus opening the possibility that ‘*en chariti*’ could mean in grace, in charm, or in beauty. The KJV seems to have followed that line of interpretation, since it refers to singing ‘with grace’. Some earnest commentators on Colossians resist this suggestion. ‘The songs are hardly to be evaluated according to the canons of aesthetics,’ warns one of them.⁴ But maybe cathedral musicians know better.

⁴ Eduard Lohse, *Hermeneia Commentary*, p. 152.

The contemporary British composer Francis Pott wrote in a letter to the dean of a cathedral where he had heard his liturgical music being performed, “It is a strange sensation to find one’s artistic efforts ‘staring back’ at one, somehow no longer one’s own, but proclaiming one merely the vessel or conduit for something given from elsewhere.” Liturgical music can have an effect out of all proportion to the capacities of its composers and performers. For believers, the rendition of the Scriptures in song is ultimately the gift of the Spirit.

Suggested Discussion topics

Implications for cathedral music today

1. Versions of the Bible / of the psalms sung in cathedrals—historic or contemporary?
2. Gender-inclusive language in sung texts?
3. Ensuring that texts sung in the liturgy are theologically sound?
4. Facilitating the choice of liturgically appropriate repertoire.
5. Appreciating / fostering the contribution of (organ) extemporization to instilling the word
6. The ecumenical influence of cathedrals through their use of music from other Christian traditions
7. Giving contemporary poetry / hymnody a voice in cathedral worship
8. Commissioning hymns that encourage awareness of today’s issues: climate change, migration, multiculturalism, persecution, religious conflict
9. Commissioning new wineskins for the new wine of the 20th century liturgical renewal