



ST. PAUL CATHOLIC CHURCH

Sing to the Lord!

Weekly notes on the rich musical traditions of the Catholic Church

June 9, 2020

“When they had sung the hymn, they went out to the Mount of Olives” – Matthew 26:30

Oh, to have been there to hear it.

This passage from Matthew is the only time in Jesus’ life that he is recorded as having sung, though as an observant Jewish man, it is almost certain that he would have also participated in the musical life of the tradition to which he belonged. Singing and instrumental music were most certainly part of formal worship during the Second Temple period (516 BCE/BC to 70 CE/AD), but we must also remember that the function of song during this period of history when most people were illiterate, served to preserve and pass the stories, beliefs and traditions of the culture from one generation to the next. Music helped to serve the spiritual, emotional, practical, and educational needs of the people during this time.

There are numerous historical references to the complex musical traditions of the Levites which often included highly trained musicians in large instrumental forces of percussion, wind and stringed instruments such as harps and lyres, and large choirs of men and boys. Here is an interesting recording of musicologist Michael Levy playing a reproduction of a lyre from the Second Temple period:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=feYb8OTUEAU>

When we encounter Jesus and the disciples singing in the New Testament, they are celebrating the Passover. Up until the reign of Herod, the Passover was to be celebrated by all observant Jewish people within the walls of the temple. Due to the large numbers of people entering the city of Jerusalem around the time of Jesus, however, this requirement was relaxed to allow legitimate celebrations as long as they were within the walls of Jerusalem. This is the context within which we hear the hymn sung by Jesus and the disciples on Holy Thursday. We know the book of the Psalms were meant to be sung, and still are every Sunday. In Jewish tradition, the “Passover Psalms” were (and are) sung during the Passover meal. Psalms 113-114 were sung

during the meal, and Psalms 115-118 were sung at the close of the meal. The translation from the Greek word “hymn” was not understood as singular, so it is probable that these Psalms were what Jesus and the disciples sang at the very first celebration of the Eucharist. Today, we still sing Psalm 116 during the Holy Thursday liturgy, and Psalm 118 on Easter Sunday. Here is a recording of what one of these “Passover Psalms” could have sounded like- note the use of instruments and large choral forces. This would have been a formal Temple rendition of this music. Does it remind you of anything you have heard before?

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eDzsauDwTxY&list=RD41Fo-70Wiuw&index=9>

Here is where we begin our journey through the history of music in the Catholic Church- at the first Eucharist. What an amazing lineage! It stretches even beyond this moment in the Gospels of course, because Jesus was a Jewish man, firmly rooted in his cultural understanding of the role of music. This is also certainly not the first or last time that music is noted in the scriptures. Of course, we all remember King David dancing, singing and playing his harp in the Old Testament, and the Psalms are nothing if not a book of songs! In the New Testament, Zechariah, after being restored to speech, sings a song of praise to God, the “Benedictus.” Simeon sings his “Nunc Dimittis” after seeing the infant Jesus in the temple, and of course Mary sings the beautiful “Magnificat” upon accepting her role as the mother of Jesus. It should be noted that they all expressed themselves to God in an overwhelming urge to *sing* their praise. In fact, ebullient singing was not an uncommon way of marking all kinds of events, from the mundane to the ritualistic.

I love to imagine the “soundtrack” to Jesus’ life. Last week we listened to a wedding song from the first century, and this week we hear examples of ancient instruments and one of the Passover Psalms. In closing, here is one last recording. It is a rendition of the Our Father sung in the ancient Aramaic, the Judean dialect that Jesus and the disciples spoke. “Abwoon” has no direct English translation, but is gender-less, and has been understood by various sources as “Mother-Father,” “Thou From Whom All Breath Comes,” “O Birther, Divine Parent,” and “Breathing Life of All,” among others. I love how we try with all our might to find words to encompass the divine awesomeness of God- I think singing about God comes closer than just speaking about God. What do you think?

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=d2cyuHtDnUk>

Next week, join me as we travel out with the early Christian diaspora into pre-Constantinian Christian music.