



Music in the New Testament

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In the New Testament, there is a relatively small number of musical compositions and also a succinct number of references to music and music-making. This rather restricted treatment of such an important biblical subject reflects the specific Jewish context in which the New Testament writings evolved. In the first century C.E., many different Jewish religious groups had developed a very restrained attitude toward the use of lavish musical performance in both liturgical and secular settings. This attitude can be seen in the treatment of the subject in Philo, in the Dead Sea Scrolls, and especially in the Rabbinic teachings of the time.¹

In the first decades of the Common Era, the Temple of Jerusalem, with its rich ritual

and liturgy (in which an opulent musical performance by the Levite chorus and a number of musical instruments was common), was dominated by a very corrupt ruling class of Sadducees. The Jewish communities of the time also had to face the pressure and influence

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of the pagan religions with their orgiastic practices always present in private banquets, popular festivals, public holidays, and in the shows of the Roman circus and theaters. All this led many Jews at the time to adopt a quite strict approach to music and its usage, particularly in the religious context. In the syna-

gogues, the common religious Jewish men started to emphasize vocal over instrumental music in their liturgy and a more austere musical religious practice. This tendency consolidated itself after the destruction of the Temple of Jerusalem in 70 C.E. by the Romans, and the rabbinical ban on the usage of musical instruments in the synagogue, as an expression of mourning for the destruction of the temple.²

Early Christianity emerged, developed and organized itself mainly within the context of the synagogue.³ It was therefore natural to early Christians to maintain what they knew of the synagogue music in their own worship. This is apparently why Paul, himself a “Pharisee, the son of a Pharisee” (Acts 23:6), considered musical instruments as “lifeless” (1 Corinthians 14:7)

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and instead promoted worship in the form of "psalms, hymns and spiritual songs," singing and making "music in your heart to the Lord" (Ephesians 5:19).

Indeed, most of the New



Testament references to music betray its Jewish roots. In Matthew 26:30 and Mark 14:26, it is said that Jesus and his disciples "had sung a hymn" after finishing their Passover supper. We are here inside the context of the Jewish Seder of Passover, which is regularly concluded with the singing of the last part of the "Hallel" (Psalms 113-118) or Psalm 136. Singing, as part of worship and as a form of prayer, as it appears in 1 Corinthians 14:15, 26, Ephesians 5:19 and Colossians 3:16, was and still is the most common liturgical practice in Jewish worship. Both in Ephesians and in Colossians the verb "to sing" is related to other terms that belongs specifically to the Jewish worship context. The sequence "psalms, hymns and songs," that appears in both passages, is also found in the writings of Flavius Josephus (*The Antiquities of the*

Jews 7.12.3; 12.7.7), a Jewish writer contemporary with Paul. In Ephesians, the exhortation to sing "psalms, hymns and songs" is followed by the words "always giving thanks to God the Father for everything" (verse 20). *Berakhot* ("thanksgiving") is one of the most common practices in Jewish worship. In Colossians, this same connection appears (3:16-17), but here Paul added another fundamental Jewish concept (verse 5), that of "Peace" (*Shalom*). In 1 Corinthians 14:15-16, "to give thanks" (in Hebrew *levarekh*) is related to the fundamental Jewish worship term "Amen." James makes the same connection between prayer and the singing of psalms (James 5:13), reflecting thereby the common Jewish understanding that the



practice of these characterizes the life of a pious man.⁴

Other New Testament passages portray some usage of music in the daily Jewish life of the time. The passages in the Gospels that depict the mourn-

ing ceremony for the daughter of Jairus, a president of one of the synagogues in the region around the Lake of Galilee, present the traditional usage of flute



players and singers in funerals at the time (Matthew 9:23; Mark 5:38). Music and dancing were common in parties (Luke 15:25). Many New Testament passages testify to a variety of musical instruments common to the Jewish context of its time such as the flute (Matthew 9:23; 11:17), the cymbals (1 Corinthians 13:1), the *shofar* (Revelation 8:2, 6-12; 9:1-13), and the harp (Revelation 14:2-3), among others.

A lavish musical picture, in the New Testament, appears only in the book of Revelation, in relation with John's apocalyptic visions of heaven and of the future establishment of God's eternal kingdom. In his visions, John reports aspects of the worship of God by heavenly being and by the chorus of angels (Revelation 5:8-14). The worship is done in the context of the heavenly sanctuary, in which Jesus officiates as Messiah and High Priest. The music is made with harps and a singing that involves the entire creation. In Revelation 7:9-12; 14:1-3; and 15:2-4, we see an eschatological presentation of the group of those who were redeemed now

worshiping God with songs of praise and the music of harps. They stand by the sea of glass, in heavenly Zion, and sing the Song of Moses and the Song of the Lamb. This eschatological picture reflects the Jewish hope of future salvation and the final eschatological redemption present in the synagogue's daily prayers (*Shirah Hadashah*) pronounced just before the *Amidah* (the central "Great Silent Prayer" of the synagogue worship) which says: "A new song will be sung by the redeemed, in praise of Your Great Name, by the shore of the Sea; together they will praise and recognize Your real power, and they said: 'The Eternal will reign forever.'" Indeed, the marvelous salvation and the eternal



redemption that God will bring to this world can only produce the most enthusiastic response

from the human counterpart, and John saw that in heaven, the great multitude of the creatures of God, like the psalmist of old, will be able to give only one response to their Heavenly Father, the response of praising and hallelujah, saying:

"Hallelujah! Salvation and glory and power belong to our God, for true and just are His judgment . . .

Amen, Hallelujah! . . .

Praise our God, all you His servants, you who fear Him, both small and great! . . .

Hallelujah! For our Lord God Almighty reigns.

Let us rejoice and be glad and give Him glory!" (Revelation 19:1-8)

¹For a study on the topic of music in the New Testament see E. Werner, "Music," *The Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible*, ed. George A. Buttrick et al. (Nashville: Abingdon, 1962), 3:466-469; and Victor H. Matthews, "Music in the Bible," *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*, ed. David N. Freedman (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 4:934.

²*Orech Chayim* 560:3. See also the Talmud, *Gittin* 7a: "An inquiry was once addressed to Mar 'Ukba: Where does Scripture tell us that it is forbidden [in these times] to sing [at carousals]? He sent back [the following quotation] written on lines: Rejoice not, O Israel, unto exultation like the peoples, for thou hast gone astray from thy God. Should he not rather have sent the following: They shall not drink wine with music, strong

drink shall be bitter to them that drink it?—From this verse I should conclude that only musical instruments are forbidden, but not song; this I learn [from the other verse]."

³See Acts 13:5, 14-16, 42-43; 14:1; 17:1-2, 10-12, 17; 18:4; 19:8. That the early Christian communities organized themselves within the context of the synagogue is clear from James's (Ya'aqov) letter where one finds the following words: "My brothers, as believers in our glorious Lord Jesus the Messiah, don't show favoritism. Suppose a man comes into your synagogues wearing a gold ring and fine clothes, and a poor man in shabby clothes also comes in. If you show special attention to the man wearing fine clothes and say, 'Here's a good seat for you,' but say to the poor man, 'You stand there' or 'Sit on the floor by my feet,' have you not discriminated among yourselves and become judges with evil thoughts?" (adapted from James 2:1-4, NIV).

⁴For the discussion on the Jewish background to this passage see James Adamson, *The Epistle of James*, The New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989), pp. 196-197. For the discussion on the passages of Paul see Gordon D. Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, The New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987), pp. 671-672; Andrew T. Lincoln, *Ephesians*, Word Biblical Commentary, vol. 42 (Dallas: Word, 1990), pp. 345-346; and Peter T. O'Brien, *Colossians, Philemon*, Word Biblical Commentary, vol. 44 (Waco: Word, 1982), pp. 208-210.

"How was Solomon, the wisest man in the world, misled by his wives to the worship of idols? By means of music ..."

(Bemidbar Rabbah, 10)