

# The History of Gregorian chant

## PART 1

### From Jewish roots to the rise of the Medieval Theoreticians

If we wish to find the source of Gregorian chant, we have to turn to its Jewish roots. The first generation of Christians was Jewish and saw itself as the continuation of Israel. These Christians continued to pray as they and their forefathers had done, reading the Scriptures, singing the psalms and attending Temple worship as we see Peter and John doing in Acts 3. Although quickly excluded from the Temple and the Synagogue, their private and community prayer would have closely followed what they had been accustomed to, with one major novelty: they now reinterpreted the Scriptures in the light of the person of Jesus Christ. The only external practice which clearly distinguished them was the celebration of the Eucharist – the “breaking of the bread” as St Luke calls it - on Sundays. However even the Eucharist itself was steeped in Jewish custom and thought: the reading of Old Testament passages, the singing of psalms and doxologies, the concept of blessing at large, and the actual blessing of bread and wine. So strong are these roots that certain Jewish words - like Amen, Hosanna and Alleluia – have come down to us through twenty centuries of varied history. New creations came into being, like hymns and poems to Christ, but the bulk of the material that constituted the early Christians` prayer came directly from that Jewish religious patrimony.

In general this material was not passed on as speech, but was sung. One writer claims that “throughout the ancient history of the Jewish people, music and singing is mentioned with a frequency far exceeding its mention in the cultural history of any other people.” (Colin R. Shearing: Gregorian chant) It wasn’t just the psalms, but all of Scripture that was sung, rather than spoken, each book of the Bible having its own melody. Litanies and prayers were similarly sung. This was the case both in the Temple and in the later Synagogue liturgy.

So it would not be at all surprising to find that some of these melodies entered Christian liturgical practice and have been passed down to us through the ages. There is in fact abundant evidence that both synagogue and church required Sacred Scripture to be rendered musically, and we would reasonably expect to find melodies preserved from the temple or the synagogue in the most ancient strata of Church liturgy. This is indeed where scholars find melodies, or musical styles, which seem to show signs of great antiquity and of Jewish descent. Some of the synagogue cantors converted to Christianity and continued their art in the Christian community. So the technique of psalmody, structured around poetic parallelism and the coordination of syntactic and melodic accents, is derived from Jewish practice. Early Christian psalmody was, like synagogue psalmody, generally performed by a soloist, though sometimes it called for a response from the choir. Certain of our psalm tones are believed to be of direct Jewish descent. There is solid evidence for example that the Tonus Peregrinus sung to Ps 113 is an ancient Jewish tone. (In fact this psalm was sung on holidays by Jews, and on Sundays by early Christians). The simplest and oldest melody for the Our Father, in our Latin rite, included in the Graduale Romanum as Pater B, (which has come down to us via Hispanic chant) is thought to be probably of Jewish descent. There is a very similar and extremely ancient melody that was used by ancient isolated tribes of the Yemen for the singing of the Shemah (Deut 6: 4-9), the most sacred text in Jewish Scripture and the Jewish people’s credal formula. This melody has all the signs of antiquity and Middle-Eastern origin - a kind of recitatif in the Pentatonic scale of Re - and is also found used for the two most ancient Christian hymns used in the liturgy: Gloria 15 and the Tonus Antiquus of the Te Deum. (Both these hymns show strong semitic influence in their poetic structure.)

The solemn tone melody of the Oratio Ieremiæ is, according to some, based on an ancient Jewish melody used for the cantillation of this same text.

Tracts are among the oldest and best preserved strata of Gregorian chant (It is no coincidence that at the Easter Vigil – which belongs to the oldest strata of the Church's liturgy – Tracts, nor gradual psalms, are sung). These tracts, with their punctuated melismas, are not of Latin origin, but are believed to be derived from synagogue solo psalmody. In fact, it has been pointed out that they correspond to the synagogue tone used for prophetic lessons. Tracts are in fact generally taken from the prophetic books of the Old Testament. When Jesus read from the prophet Isaiah in the synagogue of Nazareth, he would probably have performed it in a way similar to our Tracts.

The Gradual Psalm is so called because it was sung on the step (`gradus`) of the ambo from which the Gospel was proclaimed. This probably corresponded to the synagogue *bema* or pulpit, which in turn was an imitation of Temple practice, in which Levites sang psalms while standing on the steps of the sanctuary. However the practice of singing a psalm as a follow-up to a Scripture lesson – one of the earliest and most generalized elements in all Christian liturgies – seems to be a specifically Christian innovation, as it was not practised in the early Synagogue liturgies. In fact the Synagogue borrowed this practice from the Church some time before the 8<sup>th</sup> century.

When the psalm was sung, it was performed (until about the 5<sup>th</sup> century) either as a *tractus* i.e. straight through by a soloist (as St. Augustine heard it done in the cathedral of Milan) or in responsorial form. In the first case it was chanted by a special cantor (or, in Rome, a deacon) appointed for this purpose. When it was sung in the responsorial manner, the people answered each clause or verse with an acclamation. Scholars see in this practice, which dates to the very early days of the Christianity, a remnant of synagogue tradition, or even earlier Temple worship.

In synagogue and temple liturgy, the Alleluia was used as a short response to texts. So the Easter Troparion with its Alleluia Response, revived in the latest edition of the Antiphonale Monasticum, is an example of the way the Alleluia would have been used in the Jewish liturgy.

The extensive ornate form of Alleluia with jubilus is a distinctly Western Christian creation. However it is probable that some of the shorter, simpler alleluia antiphons might have Jewish roots. The Sunday alleluia antiphons used at Lauds are in the archaic modes (C and D) and show signs of great antiquity.

The Great Alleluia of the Easter Vigil is of particular interest: while the verse which follows is a fully developed 8<sup>th</sup> mode, the Alleluia itself is much simpler and more primitive, its mode being an archaic Do. There are strong reasons to believe that the Alleluia is much older than the verse. Could this be something we have inherited from our Jewish roots?

Finally Jewish religious song has left to the Christian tradition a concept of the *Ars Musica* in which the word has total supremacy over the note, where syntax, punctuation, accentuation, pronunciation are all organically interwoven with the musical form.

At the end of this very cursive look at the relationship between Jewish and Christian chant, we might feel a certain sympathy with the 13<sup>th</sup> century Italian Jewish poet (Manuello La-Romi) who wrote:

“What says our music to the Christians? *Stolen, yea stolen was I from the land of the Hebrews.*” (Gen 40:15)

**For further reading:** *The Sacred Bridge* – Eric Werner

*Gregorian Chant* – Willi Apel

*L'Église à la conquête de sa musique* – Solange Corbin