On *Flexus*, ‘oleh we-yored, and the Murky World of Psalmody

Dan Shute, *The Presbyterian College*

Frederik Wisse’s *Christelijke Gereformeerde Kerken* community sang metrical Psalms. In fact few texts were so frequently memorized and so fervently held sacred as metrical Psalms. Little wonder then that Wisse looked with such a jaundiced eye on feeble attempts within Canadian Presbyterianism to introduce in its public worship the chanting of the Psalms.¹ On a number of occasions Wisse has been heard to remark, “I hate chanting.” How ironic, then, that one of the essays composed to honour his distinguished teaching career should have as its aim a contribution to the debates surrounding the advent and contemporary use of Psalm chanting. This essay will introduce the reader to Psalm chanting and its alternatives, offer some suggestions as to its origin, and be bold to encourage its use beyond high Anglican worship services.

To start aright, let us define our terms. Metrical Psalms are rhymes based more or less closely on the Psalms and set to music. Chanting of Psalms, by contrast, is the more or less melodic intoning of the actual text of the Psalter, whether in Hebrew or in translation. Psalm chanting is the heart of Basal Gregorian chant or Anglican plainsong and is often called psalmody, although psalmody, properly speaking, includes any melodic rendition of Psalms, including metrical Psalms. Psalm chanting is, according to a Jewish musicologist, “a simple two-wave melodic curve corresponding to the parallel-clause structure of the majority of the psalm verses (two hemistichs).”² That is, Psalm chanting is designed to intone the parallelism of Semitic poetry. For example, in the familiar words of the Twenty-Third Psalm according to the Authorized Version, “He maketh me to lie down in green pastures” is intoned in such a way as to correspond with “He leadeth me beside the still waters.”

The simplest form of Psalm chanting is Basal Gregorian chant, as reconstructed by musicologists from tenth-century Latin manuscripts.³ The first line of a Psalm opens with the *initium*, which is a two
note rise to the tenor, the main note on which much of the line is intoned; at the midpoint of the line there is a short lilt, the mediant; the second half of the line reverts to the tenor and ends with another lilt, the finalis. An example of basal Gregorian chant is Anglican Plainsong, of which the following is an example:

F G Bf C Bf G Bf-C Bf

LORD, HOW are they increased that trouble me: many are they that rise a-gainst me.

INITIUM tenor mediant: tenor finalis

The next simplest form of Jewish Psalm chanting is Yemenite psalmody. Yemen, being on the edge of the Jewish diaspora, preserved earlier forms. Yemenite psalmody is similar to basal Gregorian chant in form, and sometimes in actual melody. This similarity has led musicologists to posit a common origin for both, which is a clear indication of the Jewish origins of some aspects of Christian worship.

Gregorian chant became increasingly complex. By the time of the Reformation, the initium, tenor, mediant, tenor, finalis became buried in melismas (“a melodic ornamentation; one syllable sung on more than one tone of a melody”) and obscured in polyphony (“two or more independent but organically related voice parts sound[ing] against one another”). Similarly Jewish Psalm chanting at the centres of the Jewish diaspora is more complex than that of Yemen.

Psalm chanting has a witness, albeit an indirect one, in the received Hebrew text. In the early middle ages Jewish scholars, whom we know as the Masoretes, in order to preserve the traditional reading of the received consonantal text added an apparatus, part of which consists of dots and squiggles (graphemes) above and below the Hebrew Bible’s consonants. These marks are either vowel or cantillation points: the former preserve the text’s phonology, the latter its syntax and the intonation marking the syntax. Non-Jews will tend naturally to assume that these points regulate the chanting of the Psalms. This, in fact, is not the case. Cantillation points in the Hebrew Bible come in two forms: one for all the books except Psalms-Proverbs-Job, another for those three poetical books. For the former, each Jewish community “sings,” or rather chants/intones, the cantillation points. For the latter (Psalms-Proverbs-Job), cantillation points are fewer and differ slightly, and, nota bene, there exists no tradition of cantillation in the sense of assigning the signs various notes; rather the Psalms are
intoned (chanted). Attempts to cantillate the Psalms have not been received with enthusiasm.

Which came first, cantillation or Psalm chanting? Or better, which is more original, the cantillation points in the Psalter or the Psalter intoned? There is commonsensical evidence for the originality of the latter. First, at the margins of the Jewish Diaspora, Yemen, for example, the cantillation tends to ignore the finer distinction dictated by the cantillation points and follow the simpler chant resembling psalmody. Similarly, Ethiopia, on the outer fringes of Christendom, preserved an earlier psalmody. The Ethiopian church differed from other Christian churches in that, while the liturgy was sung, the scriptures were read. The Psalms were chanted, however, and Ethiopian chant is heavily influenced by Jewish models. The Falashas, who embrace a heterodox form of Judaism, are a case unto themselves. Scholars have not been able to trace their origins beyond the middle ages. An examination of Falasha liturgy, and more specifically Falasha psalmody, while fascinating in itself, does not lead us to remote Jewish psalmody, for the simple reason that Falasha liturgy is derivative of Ethiopian Christian liturgy.

Secondly, we have evidence of psalmody’s priority from the Psalms-Proverbs-Job cantillation points themselves, since there is, I would argue, an evident connection between the Gregorian psalm tones and the mid-verse markers (the two major disjunctive accents) of Masoretic cantillation. The mediant is usually sung at the mid-verse marker, and the shape of the mid-verse marker is similar to the “music” of Gregorian chant. In most of the books of the Hebrew Bible, the ’etnah (“rest”) is the mid-verse marker; it looks like a wishbone, single end up (as ^ ). If the ’etnah were sung according to its shape, the tone would rise and return, rather like the mediant in Gregorian chant rises only to return to the tenor. In Psalms-Proverbs-Job there is another major disjunctive accent called ‘oleh וּ-yored, which means “rises and falls.” This latter mark usually occurs in longer verses, often when the line has three parts not two, and is usually in addition to the ’etnah. The ‘oleh וּ-yored looks as if it points downward (as_ <); the top most mark starts the descent and the bottom left most mark ends it—Hebrew being read from right to left. If the ‘oleh וּ-yored were sung, the tone would dip. Gregorian chant, besides having a mediant to divide the verse also has by times a flexus, a note or a half-note dip intended to break up an otherwise
too long line. The ‘oleh ω-yored mimics the descent of the flexus. Thus, the ‘oleh ω-yored and the 'etnah seem to reflect a time of psalmody, before the more elaborate cantillation, as if these musical signs were taken over as syntactical markers. This is further confirmed by a similarity between some of the terms marking correct chanting in Ethiopian liturgy and the cantillation points.

Reference has already been made to that signature of ancient Semitic poetry, parallelism ("He maketh me to lie down in green pastures" / "He leadeth me beside the still waters"). No surviving Indo-European poetry has this feature but rather depends on metre and often on rhyme. The Hebrew poets also loved the poetical devices so familiar in traditional English verse: metaphor, simile, assonance, alliteration, rhyme (though not usually at the ends of lines), to name only the most familiar. Although there is some evidence that Hebrew poets had a sense of the number of syllables that a poetic line should have, the poetry as we find it in Scripture does not seem to be tied to metre and syllables in nearly the same way as traditional Greek, Latin, German, or English verse. Parallelism is the thing, not metre and not syllable count and not regular strophes.

The origin of Psalm chanting has eluded musicologists thus far. Does it have its genesis in the singing of Psalms in the Temple? While we may desire to be transported to a Second Temple service and hear the Psalms sung by the Levites, as recorded in the Talmud, this cannot happen in this life and would be, we may devoutly believe, irrelevant in that to come. Bathya speaks for most Jewish musicologists when she assumes that the Second Temple Levitical music was totally destroyed with the Temple cultus, but not all Jewish musicologists are in agreement. Sendrey supposed that psalmody originated with the Levitical singing of the Temple. Ullendorff pointed out tantalizing parallels between Second Temple Judaism and Ethiopian Christianity, which observations include the realm of music. Correspondences have led to the overly optimistic assertion that only in Ethiopian liturgy can we find traces of the lost music of the Temple.

If Levitical Psalm music was, in fact, destroyed with the Temple, what might it have been like? Avenary theorizes that Temple music was “directed at the heavens and not at human audience. It must have striven for objective and transcendental beauty and have been ‘art music’.” Are we to suppose that the Levites performed a sort of recitative, composed anew for the subject and mood of each Psalm? (A
recitative is “a rhythmically free declamatory vocal style for delivering a narrative text.” For example, “There were shepherds abiding in the fields” in Handel’s Messiah.) Indeed, are we allowed to speculate on the matter, even if we are neither Jewish musicologist nor Christian paleoliturgiologist? The present essayist would make bold to propose two points in favor of psalmody’s continuity with the Temple’s Psalm singing. First, it is difficult to conceive of what sort of music the Psalms could generate apart from Psalm chanting. Attempts to adapt metrical music to the Psalms meet with only limited success. The common synagogue tune for Psalm 23, for example, ends up repeating the final line to make it fit with the metre of the tune. The chorus, “Come bless the Lord”, follows the KJV Psalm 134:1–2, with only one repetition of 2b, but one cannot see this technique, common enough in contemporary chorus culture, applied to more than a couple of verses. However initially jarring Psalm chanting may be to occidental ears, it fits exactly the nature of Hebrew psalms—even more so the Psalms in Hebrew. It is a pleasure to read aloud in Hebrew the narrative parts of the Old Testament: the language flows as if it were meant to be read aloud. Reading the Psalms is another matter: they limp and falter. Nor do they sing well; even the most regular, such as Psalm 113, are ill-adapted to music that depends on metre. But when intoned in psalmody they come alive. Psalm chanting is designed for psalms. This is of course an aesthetic judgment. And this is the second point in favor of musical continuity from Temple to Synagogue: the ethereal nature of Psalm chanting. According to Avenary,

Psalmody and melodic reading are common traits of all “peoples of the Bible.” Repeated attempts to find an archetype of it in pagan antiquity have not succeeded. Melodic enunciation has been connected with Bible recitation from the very beginning and has accompanied the Holy Scriptures through their translation into every tongue. In contrast to sensualist tendencies in art, which take the Bible text as a mere opportunity for writing a beautiful piece of music, Bible chant is the genuine expression of a spiritual concept and, as such, is opposed to the general trend of the Hellenistic period. Its restriction to a small range of notes and limited ornamentation is intentional, not “primitive,” with the purpose of ensuring that the melody will never interfere with the perception of the words and the apprehension of their meaning and spiritual message.
This claim for Jewish psalmody is very similar to the one made by apologists for early Christian music, ancestor to Gregorian and other chant traditions. The mental, ethereal music of Christian worship was compared favourably with sensual Hellenistic music, associated with debauchery.28

If the question of continuity of Temple with synagogue music is vexed, the question as to how and more particularly when Christian worshipping communities took Psalm chanting over from the Jews is equally so. Here at least we have a “smoking gun.” As previously mentioned, even those with little formal musical training can clearly see the correspondences in form—and even occasionally in actual musical note sequences—between Jewish psalmody and the various traditions of Psalm chanting stemming from the early church. To give just one example, in the sound recording The Sacred Bridge, the Gregorian “Tonus Peregrinus” for Psalm 114 obviously shares a common ancestor with a Yemenite chant of the same Psalm.29 Herzog remarks:

Since the practice of psalm singing was taken over by Christianity from the synagogues of the surrounding Jewish communities in the Near East (and not from the art music of the Second Temple), many fruitful—and often problematic—attempts have been made to discover the “common heritage” by comparative methods.30

Herzog would appear to be alluding to the vast edifice of Eric Werner’s The Sacred Bridge.31 An acerbic reaction to Werner comes from James McKinnon, one of today’s most knowledgeable researchers in the history of Christian music. He comes close to espousing a revisionist view of the synagogue such that this Jewish institution was no place of worship until sometime after the fall of the Temple.32 It would appear that this revisionist view is part of a wider tendency in the study of Judaism to make later normative rabbinic Judaism merely one movement among many in first-century C.E. The debate over normative Judaism, as well as the genesis and nature of the synagogue, will continue apace. Surely there will be a reaction against the revisionists. In the meantime we must note that McKinnon and others do not deny the common ancestry of Jewish and Christian psalmody. The question is the conduit. McKinnon likes the suggestion that communal meals (Passover, Eucharistic) were one such point of contact rather than formal synagogue service.33
Another assumption that McKinnon questions is Psalm chanting as a regular feature of Christian worship in the first three centuries of the Church’s existence. He argues that Psalms came into general use only after “that great wave of enthusiasm for the Old Testament psalms which swept east to west in the second half of the fourth century.” Jewish musicologists have noted a similar silence for the regular chanting of Psalms in the synagogue until after the Talmudic era. These are arguments from silence. Psalm chanting might, of course, have been so engrained in worship that it invited no specific comment. As things stand, we have direct evidence for Psalms in Christian worship at the same time or even before we have such evidence in synagogues. Surely it could not be imagined that Psalm chanting was introduced first in Christian church services and then spread to the synagogue service. As noted above, Psalm chanting is a Semitic phenomenon.

However it came about, Psalm chanting was the backbone of Christian music until the Protestant revolt of the sixteenth century. Metrical Psalms make their first appearance during the Reformation. Calvin recognized the spiritual significance of the Psalms for Christian worship, but the Psalm chanting of his day was an intricate, often polyphonic descendant of the simpler chant of the early middle ages. The Psalms were chanted in Latin, of course, or sung by professional choirs. To restore the Psalms to the people Calvin commissioned poets to compose rhymes based as closely as possible on the Psalms, and musicians to provide suitable music. When Clément Marot was the poet and Louis Bourgeois the composer, the result was fine church music. We ought to respond with a hearty “Amen” to Emily Brink who without hesitation says that the Genevan Psalter was the highpoint of metrical psalmody. Without measures and with a one-syllable/one-note rule, the Genevan psalm-singing hovers between chant and hymn; their quiet joy and subdued majesty seem to fit the Psalms.

Psalters in English were aesthetically less successful. Much has been written on the just how bad the English Psalters were: the rhymes doggerel, the tunes few and dragging. The poetry, it is true, never was excellent. It is also true that, at its lowest point, the English Psalter had but twelve tunes, and those less than inspiring. However rude, these metrical Psalms nourished the spiritual life of both the English and for a longer period the Scottish churches. The looser paraphrases of Isaac Watts and Philip Sidney were far better poetry. Hymn writers in Scotland, England, and the United States are still produc-
ing metrical psalms, but none have caught on in the trendy North American market.\textsuperscript{41} More or less unadorned Psalm translation set to melodies is another venue, but the result is often banal.\textsuperscript{42}

Metrical psalmody tries to do too much: to be both a faithful translation and a translation in metre and rhyme. Translation of poetry in and of itself is a difficult enterprise. The Hebrew Psalms lack regular metre and end-of-line rhyme, to be sure (C. S. Lewis saw this as providential\textsuperscript{43}), but the major motor of Semitic poetry, parallelism (or "thought-rhyme"), can be translated rather successfully. Thus, although the endlessly clever sound plays in Hebrew remain \textit{per force} untranslatable, parallelism can be rendered into other languages. Psalm chanting preserves parallelism and, indeed, is designed for it. But we are left with a nagging question: Can Psalm chanting be used in the context of early twenty-first century public worship? Obviously it has currency in Jewish Orthodoxy, as well as in the Orthodox Eastern Church traditions, traditions in which past patterns of worship are creedal, or nearly so. The Roman Catholic Church has more flexibility built into its liturgical requirements. After Vatican Two, liturgy in the vulgar tongue was permitted. This led, in practice, to the near complete loss of the Latin mass. As congregational song, Gregorian chant has gone the way of the dodo.\textsuperscript{44} Plainsong persists as the backbone of worship in so-called high Anglican parishes, even if congregational participation is not as boisterous as one might wish. Within the ever-broadening confines of Protestantism, Psalm chanting has had but limited success. The expense of producing Psalters and the enthusiasm of those involved in liturgical renewal have not been rewarded with any great momentum. One may commend Bourgeault's proselytizing for the revival of Gregorian chant as a spiritual discipline, but this is unlikely to foster mass participation in an ecclesial culture in which gospel choruses are sweeping all before them.\textsuperscript{45}

Eric Werner, in what we may believe is more than simply a purple passage, dramatically describes the impact of Psalm chanting on the Gentiles:

\begin{quote}
According to historical records, the entrance of psalmody into the ancient Greek and Roman world came as something revolutionary. Persons unfamiliar with it found it astonishing. No uncertainty is left on that score by the \textit{Ecclesiastical History} of Socrates or by the writings of Diodorus of Tarsus, Clement of Alexandria, Pliny the
\end{quote}
Younger, even Jerome—those writers who were either pagans or Christians of gentile extraction.46

But today? Is it a boon to worship as its supporters claim? We have legitimate doubts. First, Psalm chanting is a habit of mind, quite alien to devotion nurtured on hymns, not to say choruses. For most worshippers, the tune of a hymn or chorus is inextricably linked to its lyrics. Thus steeple bells ringing out “O Little Town of Bethlehem” produce a radically different response to those pealing “O God our Help in Ages Past.” The different tunes, even if they do not convey the message in and of themselves, are an excellent mnemonic device and reinforce the message; they are also fun to sing. Secondly, some tunes convey the mood of the hymns more profoundly than could ever happen in the tones of Psalm chanting. The usual tune for “O Sacred Head Sore Wounded” evokes the suffering of Christ more than would that of “Let Us with a Gladsome Mind.”47 Thus hymns are both easier to memorize (having both rhyme and meter) and more expressive (being essentially sensual) than chanted Psalms, which are, after all, literally monotonous.

What can be said about hymns cannot be said with the same confidence of choruses. Here the tune and rhythm are constantly in danger of overwhelming the lyrics, which, in any case, consist of a few phrases, or a few words (“Let It Rain”), or even a single word (“Hallelujah”).48 The rhythm, sometimes nakedly disco, conveys an emotional impact unmediated by mere words. In seeker-friendly congregations a band is at the front and one of its aims, frankly, is to entertain. Thus the congregation qua audience claps both for the invisible Triune God as well as for the band—because they played well.

The chorus culture has produced an understandable reaction, however minoritaire; thus the appeal of the Orthodox Eastern Churches.49 This is one reason for looking again to Psalm chanting. Another reason is the Psalms themselves. Metrical Psalms in English were never an aesthetic tour de force and have been utterly inundated by catchy hymns and triumphal choruses. Their rhymes remove the singer so far from Psalms themselves that they cannot support the claim that they are Scripture set to music.

The central problem of contemporary Psalm chanting is its very monotony, at least in English translations of Psalms. Yet when the severely minimalist Gregorian psalmody is harnessed to chant the
Hebrew Psalter, the result is not monotonous. Hebrew is a very compact language, and the Psalms are exceedingly compact compositions. Rarely does the tenor last more than eight Masoretic syllables, often four or less. Latin is also a compact language, but less so than Hebrew; thus the tenor serves more syllables. In Anglican plainsong, it is not unusual for the tenor note to be held for twenty English syllables. Longer yet are tenor lines in contemporary imitations of Gregorian psalmody. It was the crisp formulations of Hebrew parallelism that Jewish psalmody served. As previously observed, Hebrew Psalms do not read well at all. They are not meant to be read. By the same token, good English translation of Psalms is meant to be read. Thus the success of the rolling cadences of William Tyndale, which the King James translators purloined and polished. “The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want” is a far cry from the Spartan Hebrew *a’doni ro’i; lo ehsar. Our translations should aim at either good spoken English, or more compact translations destined for Psalm chanting. Even when an English translation approximates the Hebrew syllable count, more can be done to decrease the monotony. Psalm chanting does not have to conform to the disincarnate ideal of Anglican plainsong, for it is a good deal more flexible than that. Though the musical expression is limited, the rhetorical need not be. The Psalms themselves lead the way. They do not tinkle like shattering icicles or glint like distant stars. They praise, complain, wonder, bless, and curse. Should we do less?

Notes


4. Subsequent lines of the Psalms do not repeat the *initium* but start with the *tenor.*
5. The top line indicates the musical notes governing the intonation, the middle line is the text of the Psalm, and the bottom line, which is coded to the Psalm text by font, indicates which words are the initium, tenor, mediant, and finalis. This line is from *The Canadian Psalter: Plainsong Edition*, ed. Healey Willan (Toronto: Anglican Church of Canada, c1963), 67. See also Orentin Douen, “Plain-chant,” *Encyclopédie des sciences religieuses*, 10:637-648.

6. trumpet.sdsu.edu/M345/Knowledge_Webs/3Early_MusicY/melisma.htm; *Webster’s New Collegiate Dictionary*, s.v. “polyphony”.


15. Psalm 1:1 is a long verse and is divided first by an ‘*oleh we-yored* and then by an ‘*etnah*; 1:2 is divided only by an ‘*oleh we-yored*; the long verse 3 by both again; verses 4, 5, and 6 are more typical in that they are divided only by an ‘*etnah*.


18. Hannoch Avenary, “Music,” *EncJud* 12:571: “Levitical music had been an integral part of the order of sacrifices (Er. 13:2; Ar. 11a; TJ, Pes. 4:1, 30c).”


39. Patrick, Four Centuries, 111.
44. R.G. Weakland, “Gregorian Chant,” NCE 6:761
45. Cynthia Bourgeault, Singing the Psalms, 3 sound cassettes: analog + 1 psalm booklet (Boulder, CO: Sounds True, 1997).
48. "Let It Rain" is by Michael W. Smith and recorded on his DVD Worship (2000); "Hallelujah" is in Scripture in Song, no. 180.