

The Hebrew Jewish Background

In the evening, in the morning, and at noonday, I will complain and lament, and the Lord will hear my voice. (Psalm 55:18, PCP)

Daniel continued...to get down on his knees three times a day to pray to his God and praise him. (Daniel 6:10, NRSV)

- As in many cultures, Jews desired to recognize the holiness of time by praying at specific times, alone or in community.
- We do not know precisely what such prayer consisted of in Jesus's time, but it is clear that such prayers were practiced (in addition to Temple sacrifices) and likely consisted of some combination of psalms, scripture, and prayers.
- Later rabbinic Judaism required men to pray three times a day, morning, afternoon, and evening, preferably with enough other men to make a quorum ("minyan"). Women were required to pray daily, but it was felt too much of a burden to specify times.

We don't have a written record of what Jewish sacred music sounded like in the pre-Christian era, but we do know that God's people were expected to sing their praises, their thanks, and their lamentations. The fourth century Talmud suggests that a bad fate will befall "anyone who reads from the Torah without a pleasant melody," and posits that such melodies were conveyed to Moses on Mt. Sinai along with the written and oral Torah. Biblical Hebrew in its original written form had no vowels nor punctuation, but in the Middle Ages, symbols were added to indicate vowels, punctuation, and chant melody.

Musical example: Genesis 1:1-4 chanted in Hebrew

The Very Early Church

They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to the prayers. (Acts 2:42, NRSV)

About noon...Peter went up on the roof to pray....Cornelius replied, "Four days ago...at three o'clock, I was praying in my house...." (Acts 10:9, 30)

About midnight Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns to God.... (Acts 16:25)

- The Eucharist was the main community worship, originally including a meal, but was celebrated only on Sunday, the Lord's Day.

- Christians gathered to pray at other times, originally influenced by Jewish customs.
- The *Didache* (a Christian compilation, about 90 C.E., which narrowly missed being incorporated into the New Testament) calls for saying the Lord’s Prayer three times a day.
- Roman practice of ringing a bell in the city Forum to mark the passage of the business day—at the first hour (about 6 AM), the third, the sixth, and the ninth hours—may have influenced the timing of Christian prayers. Several early Christian writers mention praying three or seven times a day.

The Hebrew psalms and canticles are assumed to have been part of worship in the early church. It’s likely that music for worship in the early church sounded much like music for worship in the Jewish tradition, but we don’t know for sure because the advent of written music was still centuries away. The chants used in worship in an ancient church in Syria can give us a hint of what early church chant may have sounded like.

Musical example: Live recording of a priest in Aleppo chanting ancient chant melodies which originated in Edessa, Turkey, as far back as the third century. From Jason Hamacher’s Lost Origins project, <http://lostorigins.com/about-lost-origins-productions/>

The Later Church and the Monastic Influence

Seven times a day do I praise you, because of your righteous judgments. (Psalm 119:164, PCP)

At midnight I will rise to give you thanks, because of your righteous judgments. (Psalm 119:62, PCP)

Pray without ceasing. (1 Thess. 5:17)

- Christian asceticism developed into the beginnings of monastic life; the former hermits began to band together to form relays to “pray without ceasing” by reciting the psalms, which were usually memorized.
- St. Benedict of Nursia (about 500 CE) systemized the monastic life by an integration of the mental, physical, and spiritual; the day was divided into roughly eight hours each of prayer, sleep, and other work (study, labor, charitable acts, etc.)
- The eight hours of prayer were split up into seven parts during the day and one at night; they were meant to recognize the holiness of every part of the day. The whole system was called the *opus dei*, God’s work, and the individual parts were usually called *Offices* or

Hours (daily or divine). Psalms remained a major part of the offices, and the entire psalter was sung every week. Scripture and prayer were also present. In the West, all was in Latin.

- While the details could vary, this is typical
 - Matins “morning,” but usually about 2 AM (aka Vigil)
 - Lauds “Praise” at dawn
 - Prime at the “first” hour, about 6 AM
 - Terce at the “third” hour, about 9 AM
 - Sext at the “sixth” hour, about noon
 - None at the “ninth” hour, about 3 PM
 - Vespers the “evening” service, when the lamps were lit, about 6 PM
 - Compline the “completion” of the day, before bed, about 7 PM

There was also by this time a daily Mass, but the Sunday Mass was still the primary act of communal worship for everyone.

In monasteries, these offices were sung. Even when a plague devastated St. Bede’s monastery, two monks, one of whom may have been Bede himself, managed to continue singing all the daily offices so that the *opus dei* would not be interrupted.

- Matins, Lauds, Vespers and sometimes Compline were the major services, and were usually required of all clergy; the “Little Hours” were often not required of monastics working outside the monasteries or of secular clergy.

Roman-style plainchant came to England along with Augustine of Canterbury in the 6th century, still an aural tradition. By the 8th century, rudimentary markings, similar to the Mazorete’s tropes, had begun to appear over the words of chant texts. By the 11th century, notation moved onto a four-line musical staff, with the notes, or neumes, indicating both pitch and rhythm. A set of 8 modes, or melodies has been established, with formulae for singing hymn, psalm, and canticle texts of any length.

Musical example: The 7th tone, to which sung the opening verse of the Venite in Latin and in English, (from the Hymnal 1982)

As time went on the offices became more complex, and the continuity and completeness of Psalms and Scripture was lost.

- Saints’ Days and other observances increased, with a few selected psalms replacing the former continuity; saints’ stories and other inspirational literature replaced Scripture readings, and decorative “novelties” were imported.

- Surviving lists show that some eight to thirteen books were required (for all services in a big church, not just the offices), when books were handwritten, rare, and expensive).
- In a monastery which observed the full *opus dei*, there were two classes of monks and nuns: the “choir” monastics who carried out the elaborate offices, had some Latin, and did lighter work, and the “lay” monastics who had no Latin and were excused from much of the daily office; they did the heavy work. Even in a small monastery, the monastics main “job” was prayer.
- Lay people who attended Mass or the daily offices did not pray the same prayers as the professionals; for one thing, most had no Latin. They were expected to learn the *Paternoster* and the *Ave Maria* (preferably in Latin) and pray other prayers such as the Rosary while attending church. They were also encouraged to pray the prayers they knew several times during the day wherever they were.
- Rich and literate lay people might commission a “Book of Hours,” daily offices at certain hours, but simpler than the monastic hours.
- Late in this period, there was a move to simplification; the Breviary, a one-volume daily office book was developed and popularized by the Franciscans. It concentrated on the major offices, and could be carried around and used by, for example, itinerant preachers.