

THE EARLY CHRISTIAN CHANTS

The Angelic Hymn

Glory be to God on high, and on earth peace, good will toward men. We praise Thee, we bless Thee, we worship Thee, we glorify Thee, we give thanks to Thee for Thy great glory, O Lord God, Heavenly King, God the Father Almighty.

O Lord, the Only-begotten Son, Jesus Christ; O Lord God, Lamb of God, Son of the Father, that takest away the sin of the world, have mercy upon us. Thou that takest away the sin of the world, receive our prayer. Thou that sittest at the right hand of God the Father, have mercy upon us.

For Thou only art holy; Thou only art the Lord; Thou only, O Christ, with the Holy Ghost, art most high in the glory of God the Father. Amen.

The first Christians sang hymns. The Saviour went to His passion with a song on His lips. Matthew and Mark agree that the last act of worship in the Upper Room was the singing of a hymn. "And when they had sung a hymn, they went out unto the Mount of Olives."

How we wish that the words of that hymn might have been preserved! Perhaps they have. Many Biblical scholars believe that they may be found in the so-called *Hallel* series in the Psalter, consisting of Psalms 113 to 118 inclusive. It was a practice among the Jews to chant these holy songs at the paschal table. Fraught as they were with Messianic hope, it was fitting that such a hymn should ascend to the skies in the hour when God's Paschal Lamb was about to be offered.

The Christian Church followed the example of Jesus and His disciples by singing from the Psalter at its worship. Paul admonished his converts not to neglect the gift of song. To the Ephesians he wrote: "Be filled with the Spirit; speaking one to another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody with your heart to the Lord." And his exhortation to the Colossians rings like an echo: "Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly; in all wisdom teaching and admonishing one another with psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing with grace in your hearts unto God."

The praying and singing of Paul and Silas in the midnight gloom of the Philippian dungeon, their feet being made "fast in the stocks," also is a revelation of the large place occupied by song in the lives of the early Christians.

The double reference of the Apostle to "psalms, hymns and spiritual songs" would indicate that the Christian Church very early began to use chants and hymns other than those taken from the Psalter. The younger Pliny, in 112 A.D., wrote to Emperor Trajan from Bithynia that the Christians came together before daylight and sang hymns alternately (*invicem*) "to Christ as God."

These distinctively Christian chants were the *Gloria in Excelsis*, or the "Angelic Hymn," so-called because its opening lines are taken from the song of the angels at Jesus' birth; the *Magnificat*, Mary's song of praise; the *Benedictus*, the song of Zacharias, father of John the Baptist; and the *Nunc Dimittis*, the prayer of the aged Simeon when he held the Christ-child in his arms. Other chants that were used very early in the Christian Church included the *Ter Sanctus*, based on the "thrice holy" of Isaiah 6:3 and Revelation 4:8; the *Gloria Patri*, or "Lesser Doxology;" the *Benedicite*, the "Song of the Three Hebrew Children," from the Apocrypha; and the *Te Deum Laudamus*, which is sometimes regarded as a later Latin chant, but which undoubtedly was derived from a very ancient hymn of praise.

Eminent Biblical scholars believe that fragments of other primitive Christian hymns have been preserved in the Epistles of Paul and in other portions of the New Testament. Such a fragment is believed to be recorded in 1 Timothy 3:16 :

He who was manifested in the flesh,
Justified in the spirit,
Seen of angels,
Preached among the nations,
Believed on in the world,
Received up in glory.

The "faithful saying" to which Paul refers in 2 Timothy 2:11 also is believed to be a quotation from one of these hymns so dear to the Christians:

If we died with Him,
We shall also live with Him:
If we endure,
We shall also reign with Him:
If we shall deny Him,
He will also deny us:
If we are faithless,
He abideth faithful;
For He cannot deny Himself.

It will be noted how well these passages adapt themselves to responsive, or antiphonal, chanting, which was the character of the ancient Christian songs. Other passages that are believed to be fragments of ancient hymns are Ephesians 5:14; 1 Timothy 6:15, 16; James 1:17,

and Revelation 1:5-7.

There are strong evidences to support the claim that responsive singing in the churches of Asia Minor was introduced during the latter part of the first century by Ignatius, bishop of Antioch, a pupil of the Apostle John. The *Gloria in Excelsis* was used in matin services about this time, while the *Magnificat* was sung at vespers. Ignatius suffered martyrdom about 107 A.D. by being torn to pieces by lions in the circus as a despiser of the gods.

Liturgies also were employed very early in the worship of the Christian Church. An ancient service known as the "Jerusalem" liturgy was ascribed to the Apostle James, while the so-called "Alexandrian" liturgy claimed as its author Mark, fellow laborer of Paul and companion of Peter. There is much uncertainty surrounding these claims, however.

Both Tertullian and Origen record the fact that there was a rich use of song in family life as well as in public worship.

The singing of the early Christians was simple and artless. Augustine describes the singing at Alexandria under Athanasius as "more like speaking than singing." Musical instruments were not used. The pipe, tabret, and harp were associated so intimately with the sensuous heathen cults, as well as with the wild revelries and shameless performances of the degenerate theatre and circus, that it is easy to understand the prejudice against their use in the Christian worship.

"A Christian maiden," says Jerome, "ought not even to know what a lyre or a flute is, or what it is used for." Clement of Alexandria writes: "Only one instrument do we use, viz., the word of peace wherewith we honor God, no longer the old psaltery, trumpet, drum, and flute." Chrysostom expresses himself in like vein: "David formerly sang in psalms, also we sing today with him; he had a lyre with lifeless strings, the Church has a lyre with living strings. Our tongues are the strings of the lyre, with a different tone, indeed, but with a more accordant piety."

The language of the first Christian hymns, like the language of the New Testament, was Greek. The Syriac tongue was also used in some regions, but Greek gradually attained ascendancy.

The hymns of the Eastern Church are rich in adoration and the spirit of worship. Because of their exalted character and Scriptural language they have found an imperishable place in the liturgical forms of the Christian Church. As types of true hymnody, they have never been surpassed.