

THE CONFLICT OF EARLY CHRISTIANITY WITH THE JEWISH TEMPLE WORSHIP

THE DEPENDENCE OF THE LITURGY OF ISRAEL UPON
THE WORSHIP OF THE GODS OF THE EGYPTIANS
ACCORDING TO THEODORET AND
CHRYSOSTOM

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THE more Christianity spread among the pagans, the more difficult became the adherence to the "adoration in spirit" as Christ had demanded it. It was no longer enough to offer the people a valuable substitute for pagan sacrifices and pagan liturgical music in the Christian sacrifice and in the singing of psalms and hymns, but the Apologists, by preaching and by writing, had to counteract the tendency of the people toward customs which had become dear to them. Clement of Alexandria sees himself constrained to take up the struggle against "the music of the idols" with the greatest vigor. In "The Instructor" he says: "For if people occupy their time with pipes, and psalteries, and choirs, and dances, and Egyptian clapping of hands, and such disorderly frivolities, they become quite immodest and intractable, beat on cymbals and drums, and make a noise on instruments of delusion. . . . Let the pipe be resigned to the shepherds, and the flute to the superstitious who are engrossed in idolatry. For, in truth, such instruments are to be banished from the temperate banquet."¹

The editor of the *Recognitions* offers his readers an explanation of the wide diffusion of paganism, which could only have been possible through the immense drawing power which the heathen liturgical music exercised over men. The passage reads: After the deluge unbelieving and wicked men "introduced perverse and erratic religions, to which the greater part of men gave themselves up, by occasion of holidays and solemnities, instituting drinkings and banquets, following pipes, and flutes,

¹Clement of Alexandria, *Paedagogus* 2, 4 (GCS Clem. I, 181, 21 Stählin).

and harps, and diverse kinds of musical instruments. . . . Hence every kind of error took rise."²

Even the ecclesiastical authorities of that time had only too often to become acquainted with this art of seduction by music which still attracted many Christians to the pagan festivals. The incompatibility of the purposes which the pagans connected with the music they used in the worship of the gods with the true idea of God provides Arnobius with a starting point for a dispute. He says to the heathens "You are persuaded that, by the crash of cymbals and the sound of pipes, by horse-races and theatrical plays, the gods are both delighted and affected, and that their resentful feelings conceived before are mollified by the satisfaction which these things give; we hold it to be out of place, nay more, we judge it incredible, that those who have surpassed by a thousand degrees every kind of excellence in the height of their perfection, should be pleased and delighted with those things which a wise man laughs at, and which do not seem to have any charm except to little children, coarsely and vulgarly educated."³ He finds it ridiculous that the gods, according to the belief of the pagans, allow themselves to be moved by the jingling of bells and the shaking of cymbals, by timbrels and symphonious pipes, that they feel themselves honored by the clattering of castanets, that they must be sung to sleep and awakened by the playing of flutes.⁴

Whereas Arnobius concedes a certain recognition to music in general, and numbers the lyre and the flute, together with silver, bronze and books, among the equipment by which the life of man is surrounded and maintained,⁵ all music becomes detestable to him because it is used in pagan worship as something sacred: "Was it for this He sent souls (upon the earth), that they should practice things pertaining to music and flute-playing as sacred and most honorable, that they should swell out their cheeks in blowing upon pipes?"⁶ But despite the bitterness of

²*Recognitiones* 4, 13 (120 Gersdorf).

³Arnobius, *Adversus nationes*, 7, 36 (CSEL 4, 270, 11 Reifferscheid).

⁴*Ibid.* 7, 32 (CSEL 4, 265, 18ff. Reifferscheid).

⁵*Ibid.* 2, 23 (CSEL 4, 67, 6 Reifferscheid).

⁶*Ibid.* 2, 43 (CSEL 4, 82, 9 Reifferscheid).

Arnobius' attack here, the struggle against the instrumental music of the pagans was far from an end. Gregory of Nazianzus has to impress upon his Christians again and again that in the Christian worship the singing of hymns has replaced the playing of the tympanum, and that the psalms have replaced songs. At the same time he contrasts the flashing light, the flute playing, the handclapping in the heathen liturgy to the spiritual joyfulness and purity of soul of those who participate in the worship of the true God.⁷

The whole campaign against instrumental music was rendered more difficult by the fact that even the Jews, the chosen people of God, made extensive use of this art in divine worship. Through the singing of the Psalms the Christian people were again and again encouraged to praise God with cymbals and timbrels and other instruments. Indeed, the Christians even had to read in the Old Testament that the use of music was founded upon divine disposition. "And this shall be an ordinance for ever in your generations: If at any time you shall have a banquet, and on your festival days, and on the first days of your months, you shall sound the trumpets over the holocausts, and the sacrifices of peace offerings, that they may be to you for a remembrance of your God." (Numbers 10, 8-10)

In the Temple at Jerusalem during the presentation of the Paschal sacrifice the Levites sang to the accompaniment of flutes, played even by some who were not themselves Levites. Very clear in this regard is the description in the Talmud of the Feast of Tabernacles. At the celebration of divine worship on the seven mornings of the Feast of Tabernacles, the visitors to the feast recited Psalm 117, 25, as they surrounded the altar of holocaust and inclined toward it the *lulab* which they held in their hands; likewise, as they retired from the altar at the signal of the trumpet blast, they called out repeatedly: "Beauty be thine, O altar!" As evening drew on, the foremost of the people gathered together. Pious men, torches in hand, danced before the people and sang songs and hymns, accompanied by the

⁷Gregory of Nazianzus, *Oratio* 5, 25 (PG 35, 708/9).

Levites playing upon harps, lyres and countless other instruments, as they stood upon the fifteen steps leading from the Court of the Men to the Court of the Women corresponding to the fifteen gradual psalms. Two priests with trumpets stood near the upper gate between the Court of the Men and that of the Women. At the first crow of the cock they trumpeted and continued to trumpet until they had reached the east exit which led out of the Court of the Women.⁸

A more elaborate musical embellishment of the divine worship is difficult to imagine. And when the ecclesiastical writers frequently took the opportunity to contrast pagan dances with the dance of David before the Ark of the Covenant, a dance pleasing to God,⁹ the Christians rightly observed that also in this dance the zither, lyre, timbrel, and cymbals had played their part.¹⁰ Yes, the Christians learned in the Old Testament that instrumental music at the sacrifice was ordained by God. In the Second Book of Paralipomenon it says: "And then the priests immolated them (he-goats) and sprinkled their blood before the altar for an expiation of all Israel: for the king had commanded that the holocaust and the sin offering should be made for all Israel. And he set the Levites in the house of the Lord with cymbals, and psalteries, and harps according to the regulation of David the King, and of Gad the seer, and of Nathan the prophet; for it was the commandment of the Lord by the hand of his prophets. And the Levites stood, with the instruments of David, and the priests with trumpets. And Ezechias commanded that they should offer holocausts upon the altar: and when the holocausts were offered, they began to sing praises to the Lord, and to sound with trumpets, and divers instruments which David the king of Israel had prepared. And all the multitude adored, and the singers, and the trumpeters were in their office till the holocaust was finished." (II Paralipomenon 29, 24-28) The rite upon which this text is based was very similar to the pagan sacrificial rite with its usage of

⁸Cf. F. J. Dölger, *Sol Salutis* (Münster 1925) 19 A. 2.

⁹Gregory of Nazianzus, *Oratio* 5, 25 (PG 35, 709).

¹⁰Pseudo-Cyprian, *De spectaculis* 3 (CSEL 3, 5, 8 Hartel).

music during the sacrificial act. As a matter of fact, the prophets endeavored to counteract the menacing alienation in the sacrificial worship and in the music used in divine services. Amos 5, 23, for instance, says: "Take away from me the tumult of thy songs: and I will not hear the canticles of thy harp."

The Fathers of the Church now made use of such passages to prove to their Christians that instrumental music was not pleasing to God. For Theodoret of Cyrus these words are a proof that God permitted the Israelites a lesser evil in order to prevent a greater one. During their long sojourn in Egypt the Jews had learned and adopted the base customs and morals of the Egyptians. In order, however, to divert the Jews from the worship of idols, God had permitted them to offer to Him alone, as the true God, the sacrifices and festivals with instrumental music which hitherto they had carried out in honor of the false gods of the Egyptians. He had admitted the musical instruments not because He was pleased by their sounds, but in order to displace gradually the madness of worshipping idols.¹¹ Similarly, Theodoret says in another place: "The Levites in ages past made use of these instruments in the Temple to praise God not because God enjoyed their sound, but because He took into consideration the intention with which they were used. That God takes no pleasure in songs and music we hear from Him, as He speaks to the Jews: 'Take away from me the tumult of thy songs, and the sound of thy instruments I will not hear.' (Amos 5, 23) When this took place nonetheless, He permitted it because he wanted to free them from the delusion of idol-worship. Since there were many lovers of sport and laughter, all of which took place in the temples of the idols, He countenanced this in order thus to draw them to Himself and through a lesser evil prevent a greater one."¹²

Chrysostom, too, finds in the whole of the instrumental music of Jewish worship simply a concession of God to the weakness of the Jews. God wished thereby to stir up their spirit to do

¹¹Theodoretus, *Graecarum affectionum curatio* 7 (*De sacrificiis*) §16 (185, 1 Raeder), §21 (186, 9 Raeder), §34 (190, 3 Raeder).

¹²Theodoretus, *In psalm.* 150 (PG 80, 1996).

gladly what was useful to them.¹³ In order to avoid giving their hearers grounds for objection to the ecclesiastical aversion to instrumental music, most of the Fathers in their homiletical explanations of the Psalms made use of allegory. Clement of Alexandria, for instance, understands the psaltery as the tongue, the zither as the mouth of man,¹⁴ an exegesis which subsequently many schools followed.¹⁵ In contrast to such attempts at allegorical meaning, Chrysostom presents the real reason for instrumental music in Jewish worship: "Some say, indeed, that the timbrel represents the mortality of our flesh, the psaltery, on the other hand, a looking toward heaven. For that instrument (the timbrel) is played from above, not from beneath as is the zither. I, however, should much rather say that they (the Jews) played thus from of old on account of the dullness of their understanding and in order that they might be drawn away from idols. Just as He (God) permitted them sacrifice, so did He allow them this also, inasmuch as He accommodated Himself to their weakness."¹⁶ Sacrifice and music are also for Isidore of Pelusium an expression of one and the same stupidity. "If God accepted sacrifice and blood on account of the stupidity of men at that time, why are you surprised that He also bore with the music of zither and psaltery?"¹⁷

The opinion of Theodoret that the Jews had brought the liturgical instrumental music with them from Egypt has much in its favor. Moses, as Philo reports, learned "rhythm, harmony and metrics and music in general through the use of instruments" from the Egyptians.¹⁸ Even at the defection to idol-worship on Mount Sinai there was a question, according to Philo, of mourning hymns which were sung in Egypt at the worship of the gods: "They made a golden bull, a reproduction

¹³John Chrysostom, *Homil. in Psalm*, 150 (PG 55, 497).

¹⁴Clement of Alexandria, *Paedagogus* 2, 4 (GCS Clem. I, 182, 19 Stählin).

¹⁵Cf. Eusebius, *In Psalm*. 91 (PG 23, 1172) ; Ambrose, *De Elia et ieiunio* 15 (PL 14, 716) ; *Expositio evangelii Lucae* 7, 237 (CSEL 32, 388 Schenkel) ; Cassiodorus, *Expositio in Psalm*. 97 (edit. Maur. 312).

¹⁶John Chrysostom, *In Psalm*. 149, 2 (PG 55, 494).

¹⁷Isidore Of Pelusium, *Epistula* II 176 (PG 78, 628).

¹⁸Philo, *De vita Moysis* I §23 (125, 5 Cohn).

of the animal considered the most sacred in that land; they offered unholy sacrifices, performed impious dances, sang hymns that did not differ from the pagan dirges.¹⁹ Apparently the songs mentioned here are from the cult of Osiris. In view of the high level of Egyptian music, which we have already treated, it is hardly to be contested that despite the diversity of Mosaic and Egyptian forms of worship there remained upon Israel's practice of music a certain considerable Egyptian influence. The timbrel, a hoop of bells over which a white skin was stretched, which Mary used as accompaniment to the dances and songs along the Red Sea (Exodus 15), had its origin in Egypt. The trumpet which was blown at the breaking up of camp, at the gathering of the people and upon different occasions during worship, especially at the sacrifice (II Paralipomenon 30, 21; 35, 15. Numbers 10, 2), was the signal instrument in the Egyptian army.²⁰ The *sistrum*, which, according to 2 Samuel 6, 5, the Israelites used, and which they called *Menaaneim*, is the Egyptian instrument which was used in the worship of Isis. The above mentioned solemnity on the occasion of the transferring of the Ark of the Covenant to Sion, as well as the dances of the daughters of Israel at the yearly solemnity of the Lord at Silo (Judges 21, 21), were very similar in their musical embellishment to Egyptian customs in temple worship and at parades. As Herodotus reports, during the exhibition of likenesses of the gods women sang the praises of Osiris, and at the celebration of the feast of Diana at Bubastis groups of men and women sang and danced to the beating of drums and the playing of flutes.²¹

The magnificent ceremonial of the pagan religions by which Israel was surrounded demanded, in order to avoid the danger of defection to this art of idol-worship which was more pleasing to eye and ear, some concessions to the sensuousness of the Jewish people. Thus the above-mentioned explanation of Theodoret and Chrysostom appear fully justified.

¹⁹Philo, *De specialibus legibus* III §125 (185, 12 Cohn).

²⁰Cf. J. Weiss, *Die musikalischen Instrumente des Alten Testaments* (Graz 1895) 94.

²¹Herodotus, *Historiae* 2, 48 (I, 134, 20 Stein).