



## **MUSIC AS LITURGY: MODELS FROM ANCIENT SYRIAC CHRISTIANITY**

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The pervasive, even universal, presence of singing in early Christian worship can obscure a basic puzzle: why did ancient Christians find music and singing intrinsic to the act of worship? I approach this problem not as a musicologist, but rather as a scholar of religion and social history. From this perspective, the devotional habits of ordinary people provide clues to how religious practices carry meaning in their society and culture. My focus in this essay is the era of late antiquity, the fourth to the seventh century CE. This is the period when choirs, responsorial singing, and liturgical music burst forth into Christianity as a public religion, for the first time with vibrant, expansive forms.<sup>1</sup> I will treat liturgy in the broadest sense of the term, to signal the entire range of worship services, daily, weekly, festal, and occasional, celebrated in church, at home, at shrines, or in public gatherings.<sup>2</sup> And I will focus on Syriac Christianity, a tradition at the centre during orthodox Christianity's founding centuries. Syriac was part of the rich multicultural and multilingual society of the early Byzantine Empire (and beyond). It provided tremendous creative force, especially for the development of hymnography.<sup>3</sup> There is good reason why St Ephrem the Syrian is a universal saint throughout the Orthodox and Catholic Churches!

Syriac is a dialect of Aramaic, famed as "the language Jesus spoke", developed in the first century CE in the region of Edessa (now south-eastern Turkey). It spread quickly and widely throughout the Middle East and beyond. It remains a living language and especially a liturgical language to the present day, now heard in communities in North America, Europe, Scandinavia and Australia in addition to its homelands in Syria, Iraq, Iran, Lebanon, Israel and parts of India. In late antiquity, Syriac Christianity flourished at the interface between Byzantine and Persian cultures, strongly inflected by both, but with its own confident, sophisticated style. During the sixth and seventh centuries, Syriac missionaries made their way south into the

1 For an excellent overview of this historical development for Christianity, see Page, *The Christian West and Its Singers*, 9-242.

2 For an overview of the major Syriac liturgical traditions into the present, with convenient bibliography, see Varghese, "The Liturgies of the Syriac Churches."

3 The intense cultural vibrancy that characterized Syriac-Greek interaction during this period has gained considerable scholarly attention in recent years. See, for example, Butts, *Language and Change in the Wake of Empire*; Wickes, *Bible and Poetry*; Forness, *Preaching Christology*.

Arabian peninsula and deep into Nubia and Ethiopia, and travelled out along the Silk Road, settling as far as China, where Syriac Christianity flourished for many centuries in creative engagement with Buddhist and Daoist interlocutors. In the late antique Byzantine Empire, Syriac flourished in cosmopolitan cities with wide, colonnaded streets, elegant theatres, and stunning churches, exquisitely carved and embellished on large or small scale. Syriac Christians, then as now, were known for their remarkable skill as craftspersons in precious metals, adorning liturgical practice with their artistry. Syriac manuscripts are among our oldest surviving Christian witnesses, often centuries earlier than their Greek or Latin counterparts, and often beautifully illustrated. The emergence of Islam in the seventh century brought changing historical circumstances for Syriac Christians, but they continued to thrive, and continued both to engage their larger cultures and to express their own distinctive styles.<sup>4</sup>

During the era of late antiquity, Syriac Christians were part of the Byzantine and Persian Empires. They forged a vibrant liturgical tradition performed through a brilliant array of song, crafted by the likes of Ephrem the Syrian (d. 373), Narsai of Nisibis (d. 502), Jacob of Sarug (d. 521) and others. Singing – specifically, the singing of poetry – characterized every aspect of Syriac liturgy: its hymns, prayers, supplications, responses, and even its preaching. For these Christians, singing was the life of the Church. As an anonymous Nativity hymn of the fifth century extolled:

Today let all creation thunder out in praise,  
Let each mouth give a shout of 'glory',  
Let tongues be stirred with a song of praise.  
In heaven, praise to the Lord,  
And on earth, peace to all flesh,  
For a Saviour has shone forth for the world.<sup>5</sup>

The choir sang the verse, the entire gathering joined in the refrain, and sure enough, every voice praised the Lord in song.

The music of the ancient Syriac Church has not survived, although the titles of different melodies were sometimes mentioned (as for the biblical Psalms), and the poetry continues to echo in liturgies to the present day.<sup>6</sup> Nor are there any surviving Syriac treatises about music until mediaeval times.<sup>7</sup> But for Ephrem and others, music in the form of sung poetry offered the most fitting, and indeed, the best expression of human worship. My question is: Why?

For the first part of this essay, I consider the ancient Syriac view that music was *useful* for liturgy because it was effective as a tool for education. In the second part,

4 King, *The Syriac World*, provides a rich assortment of essays covering history, language, literature, culture, and geographical spread, including into modernity.

5 Refrain: "In both height and depth have You resided,/ in the womb of Your Begetter, in hidden fashion, and [in] Mary's bosom, made manifest." Anonymous, "Hymns on Mary." 15.4, trans. Brock, *Bride of Light*, 70.

6 Ibrahim and Kiraz, "Ephrem's *Madrashé* and the Syriac Orthodox Beth Gazzoz," Gribomont, "La tradition liturgique des hymnes pascales de s. Ephrem."

7 Thomas of Edessa (sixth century) wrote a work titled "On *Qale* [= melodies or tones]", which does not survive; see Becker, *Fear of God and the Beginning of Wisdom*, 91. Anton of Tagrit (ninth century), *Rhetoric* 5, canon 10, has a discussion on music and metre in which he viewed sacred music as a concession to humanity's sinful nature. Bar Hebraeus (fourteenth century), *Ethicon*, Memra I, ch. 5, offered a discussion of the liturgical system of tones often cited by modern musicologists. For the introduction of an eight tone system into certain of the West Syriac liturgical families, see Cody, "The Early History of the Octoechos in Syria," and Jeffrey, "The Earliest Oktoechoi." In her ground-breaking study of contemporary and traditional Syriac chant of Aleppo, *Sense and Sadness: Syriac Chant in Aleppo*, Tala Jarjour has argued for the inadequacy of terminology that appears to organize Syriac chant according to the Byzantine Octoechos system, since it does not in fact fit such categorization.

I ask what qualities made music *effective* in this way. I will suggest that music was effective pedagogically because it was *affective*: it had impact on singer and listener, alike. Dangerous music could lead astray. But singing truth in an ordered way could be a source of harmony and unison, both for the individual and for the larger church community. In the view of ancient Syriac Church leaders, musical worship brought order, purpose and value for every voice lifted in song.

## 1 MUSIC AS PEDAGOGY

We must begin by asking: what was late antique Syriac liturgy like, and what were its needs?

The fourth century was a turbulent time for Christians in the Byzantine Empire. At the century's start, Christianity was a small minority religion, newly legalized in 312 under the Emperor Constantine. Seventy years later, in 382, under the Emperor Theodosius I, it was declared the Empire's state religion. As the political fortunes of Christians improved, converts poured in. But many came without knowledge of the Bible and, as converts from polytheistic religions, without awareness of doctrine. In this context, liturgy expanded dramatically: first, to present a splendour worthy and reflective of imperial favour, and second, to provide instruction for the entering masses.<sup>8</sup> In an era when only the wealthy had books and few people could read, other modes of instruction were needed. The liturgy, quite literally, became the church's school.

To a degree far greater than at any other time of history, liturgy in late antiquity focused on teaching the Bible and teaching doctrine.<sup>9</sup> In Syriac liturgies, for example, the lectionaries of this period assign as many as ten or twelve, or even fifteen (!) biblical readings per service, drawn from both the Old and New Testaments.<sup>10</sup> Biblical stories from both the Old and New Testaments also filled hymns and sermons, where they were retold with great relish and vivid imagination.<sup>11</sup> And although little church decoration survives to us from the time, we know that biblical scenes were an important part of church décor in frescoes or tapestries, or the ornamentation of liturgical vessels.<sup>12</sup> Every aspect of worship served to teach the Bible, and also to interpret it rightly, to present sound theological understanding.<sup>13</sup> Given the needs and circumstances of the time, what would be effective methods for education?

In Syriac liturgies, sung poetry was the method of choice. This poetry falls into two broad categories, *madrashé* and *memre*.<sup>14</sup> *Madrashé* (s. *madrasha*) were poems in a variety of metres and melodies, arranged in stanzas punctuated by a refrain (Ephrem the Syrian wrote in more than 50 different metres, but the vast majority were in simple metrical patterns, easy to sing). The chanter or choir sang the verses, and the choir led the congregation in the refrains: a sung dialogue took place. Significantly, the singing of these doctrinal hymns was assigned to women's choirs, comprising consecrated virgins called Daughters of the Covenant. Syriac canon law in both the Byzantine and Persian Empires mandated that every village, town, and city church must have a women's choir to sing the *madrashé*, the doctrinal hymns,

8 E.g., Page, *The Christian West and its Singers*, 131-71.

9 Harvey, *Song and Memory*, 18-25; eadem, "Bearing Witness."

10 F.C. Burkitt, "The Early Syriac Lectionary System."

11 Harvey, *Song and Memory*.

12 E.g., Spier, *Picturing the Bible*.

13 Krueger, "Christian Piety and Practice in the Sixth Century."

14 See Brock, "Poetry and Hymnography (iii): Syriac."

in the liturgy (daily, weekly, festal, and otherwise) to teach their congregations.<sup>15</sup> Women's liturgical choirs continue to sing in Syriac churches at the present time.<sup>16</sup>

The other form of poetry was the *memra* (pl. *memre*), the metrical "homily", comprised of isosyllabic lines, that is: syllables of equal length, in simple couplets of 5+ 5, 7+7, or 12+12 syllables per line.<sup>17</sup> These were chanted or intoned by a male liturgical agent, usually a priest or bishop. Occasionally, these, too, were punctuated by refrains from choir and congregation. Both the hymns and the metrical homilies treated a wide variety of subjects on the life of faith, biblical storytelling, exegesis and basic doctrinal instruction. Both were described in ancient sources as musically performed by singing. Both are called the same terms: "sweet songs," "wonderful melodies", "sweet tones", "pleasant antiphons".<sup>18</sup>

Syriac liturgical rubrics tell us that the scripture lections were "read".<sup>19</sup> But I think we can assume this means chanted cantillation or melodic recitation. Often, Syriac hymns and homilies refer to biblical prophets, apostles and saints as "singing" their words or teachings. For example, Jacob of Sarug described the Canaanite Woman from Matthew 15 as "shouting" and "singing" her plea to Jesus to heal her daughter. Jacob's phrase echoed the sound of the women's choir who sang in between the lectionary readings immediately before he sang his homily.<sup>20</sup> Also, Narsai of Nisibis preached on the marriage between the Church as Bride and Christ the Bridegroom as a wedding banquet of song, "loud", "delightful", "an indescribable joy", in which the biblical prophets and kings, and the saints of the Church, each in turn sang their prophecies and praise, in a musical extravaganza.<sup>21</sup> Since Narsai's homily included a refrain, its performance included the voices of the living congregation, musically joining the biblical past with the liturgical present for the story the homily told.<sup>22</sup> I think these words for "singing" in Narsai's sermon correlate to the singing that was the liturgical performance of the lections, the hymns and responses in between, and the sermon itself. Jacob of Sarug often refers to his own homilies as "songs", and to his preaching as "singing".<sup>23</sup> I think such passages are clues to performance: the melodic chanting or intonation of *memre* as sung poetry. To the ancient Syriac ear, this was as musical as the performance of hymns.

I spoke of liturgy as the Church's school. In fact, Syriac schools of this era used melodic recitation and sung responses for their lessons, exactly these same pedagogical methods I describe for liturgy. *Madrashe* and *memre*, the same forms of sung poetry, provided form and content for much of the Syriac religious education for boys and girls training to become liturgical agents: deacons, deaconesses, Sons and Daughters of the Covenant, and other clergy as early as Ephrem the Syrian in the fourth century. Ephrem's extraordinary corpus of hymns is one of the greatest

15 Harvey, "Performance as Exegesis."

16 See Bakker, "Fragments of a Liturgical World;" Bakker Kellogg, "Perforating Kinship;" Bakker Kellogg, "Ritual Sounds, Political Echoes."

17 See now Griffith, "The Poetics of Scriptural Reasoning."

18 The point is emphasized in Griffith, "The Poetics of Scriptural Reasoning;" see also Harvey, "Holy Sound."

19 The Syriac root *q-r-*, used to designate both the agents as well as the ritual actions of the reading of scripture in liturgical contexts, connotes reading (aloud), reciting, proclaiming. Payne Smith, *Thesaurus Syriacus*, 2: cols. 3712-3718.

20 Jacob of Sarug, "On the Canaanite Woman", ll. 36, 47-8, 111, 127. Jacob's treatment of her voice, both as singing and as shouting, is quite arresting, albeit a shared tradition with Ephrem and also Narsai. See especially Walsh, "Holy Boldness;" Harvey et al., *Jacob of Sarug's Homilies on Women Whom Jesus Met*, 4-6.

21 Narsai, "On the Sanctification of the Church."

22 The refrain: "O Church of the Nations pay homage to Christ, for he planted you on earth and registered you in heaven, my bothers!" Narsai, "On the Sanctification of the Church," Harrak, p. 10 and n. 2.

23 Harvey, "Holy Sound;" Harvey, "The Poet's Prayer."



poetic achievements of Christian history. But Ephrem's extant corpus also includes *madrashé* and *memre* he composed as instructional texts for his students, both women and men.<sup>24</sup> Some of these texts served in Syriac schools for centuries afterwards.<sup>25</sup> There were famous schools such as those of Edessa or Nisibis, and small schools in the villages. Surviving curricular documents and descriptions tell us that learning liturgy in late antiquity required learning the music, and also learning correct ("orthodox") biblical interpretation and doctrinal instruction.<sup>26</sup> One did not only study music; music was how one learned. When the Catholicos Mar Isho'-Yahb III in the seventh century established a new liturgical school near the monastery of Beth ʿAbhe in Iraq, the monks complained of "the sound of the chanting of the psalms and the singing of the hymns and the offices, and by the noise of the voices of the school boys and of those who keep vigil [by night]".<sup>27</sup> Music was used in the schools to teach liturgy, the Bible and doctrine. And, in churches, music was used to teach the Bible and doctrine in the liturgy itself.

An anonymous sixth century hagiography presented the liturgical work of St Ephrem the Syrian (fourth century) in exactly this way.<sup>28</sup> The story goes that Edessa was filled with competing religions, fuelled by popular hymns. Ephrem saw that hymns were an effective and efficient way to teach religion. So, he composed a variety of orthodox hymns, and he decided to train choirs of women to perform them:

Seeing that all the people [of Edessa] were attracted to singing and that (human) nature was drawn (to it), blessed Ephrem ... assembled and organized the Daughters of the Covenant and taught them hymns (*madrashé*) and songs (*seblatha*) and antiphons (*ʿonyatha*) and intercessions (*baʿwatha*). He arranged songs (*qinyatha*) and verses (*mushhatha*) in rhythmic measures and transmitted his wisdom to all the learned and wise women. And he mixed in the hymns and chants sweet melodies which were pleasing and delightful to their hearers. He put in the hymns words of subtle meaning and spiritual knowledge.<sup>29</sup>

In other words, these were not just pleasant songs; they were songs filled with meaning, with truth, offered in a musically attractive form. The passage continues with a description of Ephrem's rehearsal method for the women's choir. Not only did the women master an entire range of hymnography (as we see listed here), but they did so through an instructional method of musical dialogue. In turn, the women's singing attracted the laity, in effect rehearsing the entire congregation.

Every day the Daughters of the Covenant would gather in the churches on the feasts of the Lord and on Sundays and for the commemoration of the martyrs. And [Ephrem], like a father, would stand among them (as) a harpist of the Spirit, arranging various songs for them and demonstrating and teaching and alternating melodies until the entire city gathered around him.<sup>30</sup>

24 Wickes, *Bible and Poetry*; Wickes, "Between Liturgy and School."

25 To be sure, Ephrem also composed in prose for his students. Excellent examples are collected in Ephrem, *Selected Prose Works*; or, Ephrem, *Prose Refutations*. His *Commentary on the Diatessaron* shows evidence of repeated use and revision in a school context for many generations after: see Lange, *The Portrayal of Christ*. For the reconstruction of this commentary, see McCarthy, *Saint Ephrem's Commentary on Tatian's Diatessaron*.

26 Becker, *Fear of God and the Beginning of Wisdom*, 87-93, 163-6, and *passim*, stresses the musical form of pedagogy, both at the School of Nisibis and in the local schools of outlying villages and towns. Again, I am not suggesting that music was the only form of pedagogy used in these schools. Rather, I am noting its fundamental place both in the curriculum and as a mode of teaching. On the School of Nisibis, see also Possekel, "Go and Set Up for Yourself Beautiful Laws..."; and Possekel, "Selbstverständnis und Bildungsauftrag der Schule von Nisibis."

27 Thomas of Marga, *Book of Governors*, 2.8, Budge, 2:148.

28 Anonymous, *Life of Ephrem*, ch. 31.

29 Anonymous, *Life of Ephrem*, ch. 31, Amar, at CSCO 630/ Scr. Syr. 243, pp. 79-80 (V).

30 Anonymous, *Life of Ephrem*, ch. 31, Amar, at CSCO 630/ Scr. Syr. 243, pp. 79-80 (V). The terminology in this passage indicates variations on "song" or "hymn" or "melody". During Ephrem's lifetime, these words did not signify different hymnographical forms. If they are meant to correspond to particular hymn types, they are

The results were impressive. According to Jacob of Sarug, Ephrem taught the choirs and “the church resounded with the pure voices of pious women”.<sup>31</sup>

Hence the singing of poetry (both *madrashé* and *memre*, hymns and homilies) was more than a matter of artistic performance. Singing poetry had practical purpose, whether in the classroom or in the liturgy. Melodic strophes and intoned couplets were effective vehicles for the teacher; sung responses and recitation were effective strategies for the student. In schools, music was the tool to train liturgical leaders and agents; and in liturgy, music was the tool to disseminate that education to the larger church, with the congregation’s participation.

## 2 MUSIC AS THERAPY, MUSIC AS ORDER

Now we must ask: *why* was music useful in this way?

Music was an effective tool for teaching because music was *affective*: it made an impact on those who sang and those who heard. As such, music could be dangerous. Syriac writers, like others, feared the perils music could pose for the unwitting. Heretical hymns, songs from the theatre, or pagan or Jewish festivals, even the lure of an exceptionally beautiful voice could lead astray. Syriac church leaders admonished that such songs incited the passions, roused the emotions, and clouded one’s reason, lingering in the mind and turning one’s disposition towards sinful tendencies.

When Ephrem saw – or rather, *heard* – the popularity of the heretics’ songs, he fought fire with fire: he composed beautiful hymns of truth. Syriac tradition remembers a number of its greatest hymnographers for the same motivation, and the same strategy. Rabbula of Edessa, Narsai of Nisibis and Jacob of Sarug are also commemorated for the power of their sung poetry in opposition to dangerous songs.<sup>32</sup> The strategy was more than a battle plan in a religiously competitive society. It was also a therapy. Music could heal a divided self; it could unite a divided community.

The problem with dangerous music, for these authors, was its ability to distract and fragment a person, turning one’s attention away from truth – away from God. One became disordered in oneself. The larger result was a disordered, fragmented community: instead of one true religion, or one true Church, there was the disorder of many.

Isaac of Antioch described the music of a pagan festival in Antioch as messy and chaotic: “Everyone composed and learned melodies in every genre,/ so that every person is pleased by his own voice, and delights in his [own] singing”.<sup>33</sup> The noise disturbed him so he could not sleep. Isaac’s strategy in response was to chant psalms out loud. He describes the process as physical (using tongue and lips to chant the words), mental (using the mind to understand the words), and spiritual (as the meaning of the psalm had its impact on his soul). As the act of chanting calmed himself, Isaac marvelled, “There is no [other] grace such as this...there is no [other] music such as this”,<sup>34</sup> “how much more beautiful are our songs than [theirs]!”<sup>35</sup>

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the work of a later editor. The story that Ephrem’s compositions were prompted by the challenge of heretical hymns is also told by Sozomen, *Ecclesiastical History*, 3.16.

31 Jacob of Sarug, “Homily on Ephrem”, vv. 98-101; Amar, 48-9. See now Harvey, “Training the Women’s Choir.”

32 Harvey, “Holy Sound.”

33 Isaac of Antioch, “On the Vigil which took place in Antioch,” ll. 13-14, Kitchen, 104.

34 Isaac of Antioch, “On the Vigil which took place in Antioch,” ll. 70, 75-6, Kitchen, 106.

35 Isaac of Antioch, “On the Vigil which took place in Antioch,” l. 93, Kitchen, 107.

What Isaac described at the individual level, Thomas of Marga described at the collective. When the churches in Iraq fell into what Thomas called a confusion of “tunes, melodies, and airs and songs” due to lax episcopal oversight, Thomas described it this way: “Every country, and town, and monastery, and school had its own hymns and songs of praise and tunes, and sang them in its own way, and if a teacher or a scholar happened to be away from his own school he was obliged to stand [silent] like an ignorant man.”<sup>36</sup> The situation led to dramatic liturgical reforms.<sup>37</sup> When everyone knew what to sing and how to sing, musical order was restored. So, too, was church order.

And this was Jacob of Sarug’s concern about the sounds of civic life. A vivid example was his description of songs from the theatre: “responses (or chorus, chants) which are not true; troublesome and confused sounds; melodies which attract children; ordered and cherished songs; skilful chants, lying canticles... [In the theatre] your ear is captivated by song.”<sup>38</sup> Not unlike the liturgy, the theatre told its stories with melodies and verses that lingered in one’s ears, whether young or old. Its songs were delightful, pleasing, and insidious.

Civic voices pulled people in all directions. As Jacob complained, they could seduce a person to come to church late or to leave church early, before the service ended; they distracted the mind so that one was restless in church, present in body but elsewhere in thoughts. The response, Jacob sang, should be the music of liturgy: “when [the soul] hears melody [*qal*] of liturgy in God’s house (*teshmeshta*), / she is moved spiritually with the love of God.”<sup>39</sup>

In his homily “On the Partaking of the Holy Mysteries”, Jacob extols liturgy as a school that offered a powerful therapy of song: “The church in the world is like a teacher to the human being, / teaching, educating, and treating the wounds of all who come to her.”<sup>40</sup> Its music, he chanted, made its impact on the soul both through the experience of listening and through singing: music received, and music offered. Jacob urged his congregation to listen to the melodic chants of Psalms, lections, and sermon. He exhorted them to attend closely to the women’s choir, “with glorious voices,” for these choirs were a gift of God’s infinite wisdom. The more one heard the hymns of the liturgy, Jacob assured his listeners, the more the soul became “pure, modest, and full of hope and discernment.”<sup>41</sup> But it was not enough to hear this music. Jacob exhorted that one must join in: sing loudly and clearly hymns, responses, creed and prayers. One must sing with the priest, cry out, shout forth, raise one’s voice in witness, supplication, petition, and prayer. Singing these “truthful songs” every day, Jacob urged, annoyed Satan and vanquished the dangers of the civic world.<sup>42</sup>

Chanting the Psalms with diligent attention restored serenity and order to Isaac of Antioch, just as the reform of liturgical music restored harmony and peace to the east Syriac churches of whom Thomas of Marga wrote. In turn, Jacob of Sarug exhorted that liturgical song restored peace and unity to the faithful participant; and it did more. The harmonious *and loud* music of liturgy, sung well, brought order to a disordered world. According to Jacob, the loud singing of the liturgy rang out victoriously, setting the world aright:

36 Thomas of Marga, *Book of Governors*, 3.1, Budge, 2: 293.

37 Discussed in Becker, *Fear of God and the Beginning of Wisdom*, 164-6.

38 Jacob of Sarug, “On the Spectacles”, Homily 3, Moss, 105.

39 Jacob of Sarug, “On the Partaking”, l. 165, Harrak, 22.

40 Jacob of Sarug, “On the Partaking”, ll. 179-180, Harrak, 24.

41 Jacob of Sarug, “On the Partaking”, ll. 175-6, Harrak, 22.

42 Jacob of Sarug, “On the Partaking”, l. 214, Harrak, 28.

The sound of Your praise [O Lord] thunders awesomely among the congregations,  
and through it the impudent song of idolatry was silenced.  
From Your hymns, Your sermons, and Your teachings  
the entire inhabited world shouted out and thundered to sing praise.<sup>43</sup>

Such imagery of liturgy carried deep theological meaning. But there are social and political implications as well.<sup>44</sup> Here is Ephrem's description of liturgy as a choral garland of (musical) flowers:

Let the chief pastor [bishop] weave together his homilies like flowers,  
Let the priests make a garland of their ministry,  
The deacons of their reading,  
Strong young men of their jubilant shouts, children of their psalms,  
Chaste women of their songs, chief citizens of their benefactions,  
Ordinary folk of their manner of life.  
Refrain: Blessed is He who gave us so many opportunities for good!<sup>45</sup>

Here, liturgy is ordered; each part, each person, each voice, has a purpose and a contribution; each carries value and authority, an authority appropriate to its rank. These are not rival, competing authorities. Rather, liturgy presents an array of authorities, a mosaic, if you will: the metrical voices of bishop and priest, the intoned lections of the deacons and alleluias of the boys' choirs, the doctrinal hymns of the women's choir, the responses and sung refrains of the congregation. Each voice matters; none are extraneous. The music of liturgy, then, when sung well, maps society, or the world at large, in ideal form: differentiated, ordered and harmonious. The liturgies of the late antique churches involved much outdoor celebration; processions were common in villages and cities alike. These processions moved through civic streets and squares, ordered in liturgical ranks, adorned with censers and candles, in times of joy and times of sorrow.<sup>46</sup> As public events, processions also carried public meanings. The voices of the women's choirs, for example, resounded in the public square, often and loudly. Laity, children, slaves: their voices sounded forth with purpose and meaning.<sup>47</sup>

According to Jacob of Sarug, liturgy, like music and poetry, places words in their right order by metre, by melody, just as liturgy places all beings, of every nature, in heaven and on earth, in their right order, in relation to one another; and all in rightly ordered relation to God.<sup>48</sup> In this final passage I quote, the word I translate "voice" (*qal*) could also be translated melody or tune in every line. Here is Jacob's description of liturgy:

And voices upon voices crowd around [Christ] from every side,  
...  
The voices of the nations who clap their hands to give praise,  
and the voice of handmaids grouped in choirs to make a joyful noise.  
The voice of churches who sing praise with their harps,  
and the voice of monasteries who make a joyful noise to him [Christ] with their alleluias.  
The voice of priests who consecrate him with the gentle waving of their hands,  
and the voice of saints who bless him in every place.  
The voice of men who sing praise with their tongues,

43 Jacob of Sarug, "On Elisha" IV, ll. 21-30; Kaufman, 176. The passage continues with particular praise for the singing of the women's choir.

44 See Harvey, "Patristic Worlds."

45 Ephrem, "Hymns on Resurrection," 2.9, in Brock and Kiraz, *Ephrem the Syrian*, 176-7.

46 Harvey, "Patristic Worlds."

47 Harvey, "Women and Children in Syriac Christianity."

48 Harvey, "Holy Sound."



The voice of women who exalt him with their *madrashē* [doctrinal hymns].  
 The voice of children who repeat before him [...]  
 The voice of teachers who set their knowledge in array before him.  
 For praise of the Father, the Son wakens all creation.<sup>49</sup>

This is the best description of ancient Syriac liturgy that I know. It is, quite simply, a description of the church, entire and collective, in song.

In conclusion: Late antique Syriac Christians described and performed liturgy as music because they valued the functional, pragmatic capacities of music. Singing was an effective form of teaching and an effective form of learning. Further, singing was effective in the formation of faithful, ethical disposition – that is, a serene and unified self – whether for the individual believer or the larger church community. Finally, singing enabled the Church as one voice, in unison and in harmony, to know and bear witness to its God. The music of liturgy, rightly sung, was worship in its fullest expression: all of creation joined in right relation to one another and to the Creator, as words joined syllables in metrical melodies to sing forth the one resounding Word of truth.

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

### ABBREVIATIONS

CSCO = Corpus Scriptorum Christianorum Orientalium  
 FC = Fathers of the Church  
*J ECS* = *Journal of Early Christian Studies*  
 PO = *Patrologia Orientalis*  
 Scr. Syr. = *Scriptores Syri*  
 SLNPNF = Select Library of Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers  
 Sub. = *Subsidia*

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