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Which Came First, the Music or the Words? (A Greek Text and Coptic Melody: Musical Transcription and Analysis of the Setting)

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Prelude

I am happy and honored to write this article as a tribute to Dr. Hugh W. Nibley, my longtime friend and teacher. As the only courageous soul enrolled in Advanced Greek at Brigham Young University (1946-1948), I was privileged to sit at his feet for a lesson thrice-weekly — time which he readily granted to me alone even though he usually carried a teaching load of much more than thirty hours per quarter. For these very special classes, we often went outdoors, and as I chanted aloud mighty lines, carefully prepared, from Homer, Hesiod, Aeschylus, Sophocles, and many, many others, we both would gaze northward to imperial Mount Timpanogos, or southwestward to hazy, distant Mount Nebo. These memories, the challenge of his genius, and his constant support have been, and will always be, important in my life. God bless you, Hugh and Phyllis.

Introduction

This article is an expansion of a paper presented at the Third International Congress of Coptic Studies (Warsaw, Poland, 1984), which dealt with a Coptic melody that is

performed at Easter time to two completely different texts.[1] It is hoped that the following discussion will provide a clue as to the antiquity of the music in question.

The dating of Coptic melodies is a difficult problem for musicologists, for no Coptic manuscripts have as yet been identified as definitely containing musical notation, and those texts that may perhaps show some rudimentary form of ekphonetic notation have not as yet been deciphered.[2] Consequently, deprived of manuscript documentation, scholars must at present rely on internal evidences gleaned from studies of the oral tradition and analyses of the texts and music at hand.[3] The transcription and analysis herewith presented are an example of the latter.

The melody is a short but subtle little tune that has remained essentially the same through the years, no matter what the language.[4] It is metrical and consists of eight measures broken into two phrases by a distinct caesura in the fourth measure.[5] On Maundy Thursday it is sung as a response during the Morning Office of Incense with a text in Greek and Arabic; during the Sixth Hour on Good Friday, it is heard again as a response, but with quite another text in Coptic and Greek. In both the Maundy Thursday and Good Friday settings, this brief melody is repeated many times over as the hymn text unfolds, line after line, verse after verse. It is the Maundy Thursday setting of the Greek text which will now be discussed.

Description of the Greek Text

The Greek text is comprised of seventeen verses, each having two lines of varying length.[6] It treats the betrayal of Christ by Judas Iscariot, and is identified by its opening lament, "Judas, Judas. . . ." Anton Baumstark has reconstructed the Greek from a liturgical text printed in Coptic letters, which he dates from the seventh or eighth century.[7] It may be translated as follows (each verse is indicated by a Roman numeral):[8]

I. Judas, Judas, Judas, Judas, Judas, Judas, the cruel traitor,[9]

II. Sold Christ to the unjust[10] Jews for a piece of silver.

III. Lo, those violent ones[11] seized Christ, and, with a cross,

IV. They drove [Him] towards Golgotha.[12]

V. *Refrain*: Judas, Judas, etc.

VI. They released Barabbas, the condemned [murderer],

VII. And crucified Him, [our] Judge and Lord.

IX.[13] Like a thief, they drove [Him] forward with a cross,[14]

VIII. And thrust a sword into His side, then placed [Him]

X. In a sepulcher,[15] Him, who called Lazarus forth[16] from the tomb.

XI. *Refrain*: Judas, Judas, etc.

XII. [And indeed], just as Jonah remained three days in the belly of the whale,

XIII. So did our Savior stay three days

XIV. Among the dead. They sealed the tomb.[17]

XV. Verily, He is risen, and the mob[18] did not know that

XVI. Thus the Savior of the world was raised [from the dead], He who suffered,

XVII. And was resurrected for mankind.[19] [O] Lord, glory unto Thee. Amen.

Transcription of the Music and Text[20]

Analysis of How the Text Is Set to the Music

The foregoing translation and transcription both show discrepancies in the setting of the text with the music, some of which are more disturbing than others. Throughout the hymn, the syllables do not always correspond to the notes of the melody, either as to quantity (long or short) or stress. Long syllables may fall on a short note,[21] or a short syllable may be lengthened, and even extended over many beats.[22] Likewise, a stressed syllable (i.e., one bearing an accent) may or may not fall on a strong beat.[23]

But the most surprising discrepancies are found in the various phrasings of the text and melody, which often do not correspond at all. There seems to be little feeling for the mutual needs of either the words or the melody, with the persistent demands of the music prevailing throughout. The above-mentioned caesura of the melody in measure four often separates words that belong together in a single phrase,[24] and on two occasions, words themselves are cut in two.[25] However, the most prominent breaks in the text occur at the end of the melody, i.e., at the final cadence of measure eight, where the words are separated not only in midsentence, but sometimes in midphrase.[26] Thus musically one verse ends and another begins, but if scanned apart from the music, the text continues unbroken. Especially with verses eight through ten, which comprise but one sentence, it is very difficult to reconcile the words with the definite breaks in the music.

A brief note should be made about the influence of Arabic upon the pronunciation of the text. Whereas in Greek many syllables begin with two or more consonants, in Classical Arabic a syllable may begin with only one consonant. Therefore, it is natural for the present-day Copts—whose language is Arabic—to insert an extra vowel between consonants,[27] either (1) within a word,[28] (2) between words,[29] or (3) at the beginning of a phrase.[30] Some-

times this inserted vowel is even prolonged as a sort of vocalise over several notes.[31]

Comments and Conclusions

In view of the foregoing data, the following statements may be made: The distortions of the language caused by the music show that the melody was certainly not composed for this particular text. Indeed, the situation was somewhat reversed in that the melody must have already been in existence and was simply "borrowed" by whoever set the text to it. One may even speculate that this haunting tune was probably already well known and familiar to the people when these words were put with it.[32] When one also considers the Good Friday setting, which is simpler both as to the music (less ornamentation) and text (fewer verses, shorter phrases), it is tempting to propose that this melody had already become an established part of the Good Friday services, and that the more extended "Judas, Judas . . . " was a later addition to the Maundy Thursday rites.

In conclusion, it does seem logical to postulate that the music is at least as old as the text, which would date it from the seventh or eighth century if one accepts Baumstark's dating (see above). Likely it is much older.[33] Admittedly, the ultimate origin of this melody yet remains a mystery, but there can be no doubt that it is sung and heard today as a living remnant from the distant past.

Notes

1. Marian Robertson, "A Coptic Melody Sung Interchangeably in Different Languages: Comparisons Thereof and Proposed Dating Therefor," to be published in the *Proceedings of the Third International Congress of Coptic Studies*, Warsaw, Poland. Henceforth referred to as "Coptic Melody."

2. See the Coptic manuscripts in the John Rylands Library and the Copto-Greek liturgical and biblical manuscripts in the Insinger Collection at the Museum of Antiquities in Leiden.

3. See Robertson, "Coptic Melody," 6-7. For comparative stud-

ies indicating the antiquity of certain Coptic melodies, see Marian Robertson, "The Reliability of the Oral Tradition in Preserving Coptic Music . . . , Parts I and II," *Bulletin de la Societe d'Archeologie Copte* 26 (1984): 83-93, and 27 (1985): 73-85. For a general historical discussion, see Ilona Borsai, "Die musikhistorische Bedeutung der orientalischen christlichen Riten," *Studia Musicologica Academiae Scientarum Hungaricae* 16 (1974): 3-14.

4. Robertson, "Coptic Melody," 3-5.

5. See transcription below.

6. These verses are followed by an Arabic translation of the Greek which is condensed into fourteen verses, thus making a total of some thirty-one verses for the entire piece.

7. Anton Baumstark, "Drei griechische Passionsgesange ägyptischer Liturgie," *Oriens Christianus* 3 (1929): 69-77. Baumstark took this text from *Kitāb Dalāl wa-Tartīb Jumʿat al-Ālam wa-ʿĪd al-Fash al-Majīd . . . (Book of the Order [of Services] for Good Friday and Holy Week . . .)* (Cairo: n.p., 1920), 111ff. It contains some Greek grammatical and spelling errors which, however, reflect the Coptic pronunciation. This text is also found in *Epgom ente pipaskha ethouab (The Book of Holy Easter)* (Cairo: The Patriarchate, 1981), 303.

8. Because of inherent differences in Greek and English, the author has adapted the text, rather than translate it verbatim, in order to have a smooth, comprehensible English reading. Thus some words (mentioned in footnotes) have been paraphrased; some words (enclosed in brackets) have been added; certain Greek participles have been rendered as verbs; and the order of verses eight and nine has been reversed. Every effort has been made to keep the original meaning intact.

9. ὁ παράνομος (*ho paranomos,* "contrary to law and custom, unjust, violent, cruel").

10. παρανόμοις (*paranomois;* see n. 9).

11. παράνομοι (*paranomoi;* see n. 9).

12. ἐν τῶ κρανίω τόπω (*en to kranio topo,* "the place of a skull," which is the Greek rendering of the Hebrew *Golgotha*). In this phrase, the genitive κρανίου (*kraniou,* "skull") is usually used instead of the dative κρανίω (*kranio*). Cf. B. F. Westcott and F. J. A. Hort, eds., *The New Testament in Greek* (New York: Macmillan, 1943), 68, 111, 234.

13. Cf. n. 8.

14. ξύλω (*xulo,* "cudgel" or "cross").

15. μνημείω (*mnemeiō,* "monument").

16. ἐγείρας (*egeiras,* "awakened" or "raised from the dead").

17. Baumstark includes an additional refrain at this point in the text. However, it is not sung in the recordings from which the transcriptions were made (see n. 20).

18. στρατιά (*stratia*, "army" or "band").

19. διὰ τὸ γένος ἡμῶν (*dia to genos hēmōn*, "for our [human] race").

20. This hymn was transcribed from cassette recordings of the Holy Week Services, edited by Ragheb Moftah (Cairo: Institute of Coptic Studies, 1972). The author is indebted to Mr. Moftah, who generously presented her with copies thereof, and to the late Dr. Aziz S. Atiya and Mme. Lola Atiya, who also lent her their recordings for comparison purposes.

The criteria of transcription are as follows: (1) "A" above "middle C" equals 440. (2) All notes actually sound one octave lower than notated (the singing is done by men only—the treble clef was used for convention's sake). (3) A minus sign (−) above a note indicates that the note is sounded one quarter-tone lower; conversely, a plus sign (+) above a note indicates that the note is sounded one quarter-tone higher. (4) Measures are indicated by bar lines, but close scrutiny reveals that the number of beats in a measure may vary (see verses one and two, measure four; verses eight and nine, measure seven, etc.); also, the number of eighth notes in a beat may vary (see verse ten, measure seven; verse seventeen, measure two, etc.). (5) Letters written in parentheses above the text indicate extra vowels that are inserted into the text by the singers.

21. For example, verse two, measure one, beat three; measure two, beat two, etc.

22. For example, verse one, measure seven; verse two, measures six to seven, etc.

23. For example, verse one in its entirety; verse two, measure one, beat two; or measure two, beat one; or measure three, beat three, etc.

24. See verse two, τοῖς / Ἰουδαίοις (*tois / Ioudaiois*, "to the / Jews"); verse four, ἐν τῷ / κρανίῳ τόπῳ (*en tō / kraniō topō*, "in the / place of a skull," see n. 12); verse fourteen, τὸν / τάφον (*ton / taphon*, "the / tomb"); verse sixteen, ὁ σωτήρ / τοῦ κόσμου (*ho sōtēr / tou kosmou*, "the Savior / of the world").

25. Verse three ἐπιλαβού / μενοι (*epilabou / menoi*, "seiz/ing"); verse six, τὸν κατά / κριτον (*ton kata / kriton*, "the con/demned").

26. Verse nine ends with the word ἔθηκαν (*ethēkan*, "they placed [Him]"), and verse ten begins with the phrase ἐν μνημείῳ (*en mnēmeiō*, "in a sepulcher"). In Baumstark's text the order of these

two phrases is reversed, which intensifies the problem. Verse fifteen ends with the words οὐκ ἔγνωσαν στρατιά, ὅτι (*ouk egnōsan stratia hoti,* ". . . the mob did not know that"), and verse sixteen continues the clause οὔντωσ ἐγέρθη ὁ σωτήρ . . . (*ountōs egerthē ho sōter . . . ,* "Thus the Savior . . . was raised . . .").

27. This vowel is usually pronounced as the "e" in "let"; however, in verse sixteen, measure two, it becomes a prolonged "a," pronounced as the "a" in "father."

28. For example, in verse fifteen, measures four through six, *stratia* becomes *s(e)t(e)ratia.* Other examples are found in verse nine, measure three; verse ten, measure one; verse twelve, measure one; verse fourteen, measure five; verse sixteen, measure three (cf. also n. 29).

29. In verse three, measures five to eight, *ton Christon staurō* becomes *ton(e) Christon (e) stavrō.* Other examples are found in verse eight, measure three; verse nine, measure three; verse ten, measure one; verse twelve, measures two and three; verse fifteen, measures two and three. In this last example, measure two becomes a syllabic chant, cf. transcription.

30. At the beginning of verse four, *prosēlōsan* becomes *(e)p(e)rosēlōsan.* Other examples are found in verse four, measure four; verse six, measures four to five; verse nine, measure three.

31. See verse three, measures six to seven; verse seven, measure three, etc.

These brief indications in nn. 27-31 as to the pronunciation are meant only as cursory remarks. A more exhaustive analysis could well be the subject of another article.

32. It is interesting to note that even today when a Copt is asked to sing something from the Holy Week Services (particularly those of Good Friday), this song is usually the first one to come to mind. In contemporary liturgical books, the Arabic rubrics specifying the use of this melody refer to it as *al-Laḥn al-Maʿrūf* ("The Familiar Melody"), e.g., *Khidmat al-Shammās (Services of the Deacon)* (Cairo: The Patriarchate, 1965), 296.

33. René Ménard has suggested that those melodies with Greek or Coptic texts predate the Arab conquest of Egypt (A.D. 642-43). Ménard, "Note sur la mémorisation et l'improvisation dans le chant copte," *Etudes grégoriennes* 3 (1959): 143.