

1964

## Alleluia: A Word and Its Effect

Allen Cabaniss  
*University of Mississippi*

Follow this and additional works at: [https://egrove.olemiss.edu/ms\\_studies\\_eng](https://egrove.olemiss.edu/ms_studies_eng)



Part of the [History of Christianity Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

Cabaniss, Allen (1964) "Alleluia: A Word and Its Effect," *Studies in English*: Vol. 5 , Article 8.  
Available at: [https://egrove.olemiss.edu/ms\\_studies\\_eng/vol5/iss1/8](https://egrove.olemiss.edu/ms_studies_eng/vol5/iss1/8)

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the English at eGrove. It has been accepted for inclusion in *Studies in English* by an authorized editor of eGrove. For more information, please contact [egrove@olemiss.edu](mailto:egrove@olemiss.edu).

## ALLELUIA: A WORD AND ITS EFFECT

by Allen Cabaniss

“The iron of the heathen gleamed”<sup>1</sup> and the monastery of Jumièges went up in flame. As the brethren fled from the Northmen with whatever they could carry in their hands, one brother, a priest, put in his knapsack an antiphonary. Sometime later, still in the second half of the ninth century, the weary priest trudged up to the gate of the monastery of Saint Gall where he sought and received hospitality. And so after one brief, fleeting moment, the nameless brother disappeared from history, but not before he had left an indelible mark on Western literature. For it chanced that at Saint Gall there was a young brother named Notker, called “the Stammerer” (*Balbulus*), born about 840, who demonstrated interest in the antiphonary rescued by the monk of Jumièges.

Notker tells us that he had great difficulty trying to memorize the long ornate melodies in the Alleluia chant of the church’s liturgical music, for the invention of modern musical notation by Guido of Arezzo yet lay more than a century and a half in the future. Modestly attributing failure to his “fickle memory,” Notker had, therefore, while still quite young, attempted quietly and privately to devise a scheme by which he could retain the notes in his mind. But he was unsuccessful. It was then that he happened to examine the new brother’s antiphonary. He observed that some additional words had been clumsily interpolated at the end of the Alleluia (apparently to assist in memorizing the melody). He was delighted at the convenient method, but disappointed at its rudimentary quality.

Immediately Notker set about to imitate and improve what he had learned. The result was two sequences which he submitted to his teacher, Iso, for criticism. The latter was pleased with his

---

<sup>1</sup>A well known passage from the Annals of Xanten for the year 852; Reinhold Rau, ed., *Fontes ad historiam regni Francorum aevi Karolini illustrandam*, II (Berlin: Rütten und Loening, n. d., but ca. 158), p. 350.

student's zeal and sympathetic with his lack of skill. In order to help in polishing the work, he made a valuable suggestion. "Every note of the song," he said, "should have its separate syllable." With this important criticism Notker returned to his project for further development.

He discovered that he could easily improve the words inserted at the last syllable of Alleluia. Interpolations at the second and third syllables, however, were so difficult that at first he deemed them impossible, although he later succeeded. The process must have been an extended one of trial and error, for by the time he presented his next sequences to an instructor, it was no longer Iso but Marcellus who was supervising his study. Marcellus was so impressed that he caused them to be officially transcribed and to be sung by the several choirs of the monastic school.<sup>2</sup>

The particular form thus invented is called a *sequence* from the fact that, *following* the Alleluia before the Gospel at Mass, it is a prolongation of the final syllable. Initially it was, as we have seen, a mnemonic device to help singers remember the elaborate wordless melody of that final syllable. At the beginning also it was simply rhythmical prose. And also there was a primary tendency to end each major word (or musical phrase) with the letter *-a*. In time, however, its lines became measured poetry rhyming in *-a*. Later other rhymes were introduced, not only in other letters, but also in more than one syllable. In a still further development, the compositions became dissociated from the Alleluia melody and the poems became independent compositions, reaching a peak in the glorious sequences of the school of Saint Victor. Moreover the sequence had hardly been born when it gave rise to its secular counterpart. It is worth noting that the attachment of sequence to Alleluia is still attested by the trochaic rhythm of both.<sup>3</sup>

In such manner, according to the usual tradition,<sup>4</sup> it came to pass that rhythmical, rhyming lyric verse was launched in Western literature. The perceptive Notker rightly receives credit, but one

<sup>2</sup>Summarized from Notker, *Liber sequentiarum, praef.*; PL, cxxi, 1003C-1004C.

<sup>3</sup>F. Brittain, *The Medieval Latin and Romance Lyric to A. D. 1300*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1951), pp. 10-20.

<sup>4</sup>Emphatically denied by many; P. S. Allen, *Medieval Latin Lyrics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1931), p. 51.

should not forget that many persons preceded him in the experiment, in particular the nameless brothers of the sacked abbey of Jumièges. Nor should one forget the invaluable suggestion by Master Iso which set Notker on the right track. Neither should one forget the vital encouragement of Master Marcellus who gave it to the public by arranging professional performances. But, above all, one must not forget that back of it all lay one word, the word *Alleluia*.

Etymologically Alleluia is composed of two Hebrew words meaning "praise ye" (*hal'lu*) "the Lord" (*Jah*). It is employed frequently in the book of Psalms,<sup>5</sup> where it is a liturgical chant of jubilation or a joyful response to such a chant used on festival occasions. It would appear that even so early the word was more an expression of vigorous, though formal, exultation than as a devout literal statement. Elsewhere in the Old Testament it occurs only in Tobit 13:18, "All her [Jerusalem's] lanes will cry, 'Alleluia!' and will give praise, saying, 'Blessed is God who has exalted you for ever.'"<sup>6</sup> Another quasi-Biblical reference is III Maccabees 7:13, "Then they applauded his [Ptolemy Philopator's] words, as was proper, their priests and all the people; and they departed with joy, shouting the Alleluia."<sup>7</sup> It is obvious here, too, that, although the word might retain its etymological significance, it had been detached from Psalmody and had possibly embarked on an independent existence in which it was an ecstatic, joyous cry, perhaps spontaneous rather than liturgical. In this respect it is noteworthy that the early Greek and Latin versions generally retained the Hebrew expression by transliteration rather than translation, thus preserving the ambivalence.

Despite the importance of Alleluia in pre-Christian Judaism, its use in Christian circles is strangely attested no earlier than the book of Revelation (Apocalypse).<sup>8</sup> This book was the channel by

<sup>5</sup>The fifteen so-called Alleluistic Psalms are 104-106, 111-113, 115-117, 135, 146-150 (according to the RSV enumeration).

<sup>6</sup>Cited as in the RSV, except substitution of the spelling "Alleluia" for "Hallelujah."

<sup>7</sup>Cited as translated by Moses Hadas, *The Third and Fourth Books of Maccabees* (New York: Harper and Bros. for The Dropsie College for Hebrew and Cognate Learning, 1953), p. 83, except again "Alleluia" instead of "Hallelujah."

<sup>8</sup>Rev. 19:1, 3, 4, 6. In verses 1 and 6 Alleluia is part of a song; in verse 3 it is a shout of victory; and in verse 4 it is associated with another Hebrew word, the "Amen."

which the word entered Christian usage, or rather it is presumably evidence that the word was employed in the primitive Christian liturgy. In the Revelation the word is used as it was in Judaism: as a part of (or antiphon on) Psalmody or hymnody and as a detached exclamation. About a century or more later Tertullian witnessed to much the same practice.<sup>9</sup>

So Alleluia began its journey through the centuries under Christian auspices to carry on the glorious tradition of Judaism along with the older religion. To both faiths it was equally a song of angels and men. Both tended to elaborate musically the last syllable until it became a pure, wordless chant of joy, perhaps related to the curious phenomenon called "speaking with tongues" (or technically, "glossolalia").<sup>10</sup> In both religions there were occasions on which the word virtually disappeared, became disembodied, spiritualized, and only its vowels were sung.<sup>11</sup> On the other hand, there appeared an opposing tendency to multiply the word, as in the case of the hundred twenty-three Alleluias in the chanting of Hallel (Psalms 113-118, RSV). In any case it had entered the Western tradition where it had its greatest development.

In the West the employment of Alleluia has been manifold. Not only did it enter the liturgy (both Eucharist and Divine Office), but also popular usage. Near the middle of the fifth century Saint Germanus of Auxerre entered the island of Britain to combat the Pelagian heresy. Having been a soldier before he was a priest, he promptly joined the Britons in their struggle against the Saxons and Picts. Outnumbered he led his troops into a location to prepare an ambush for the enemy. Ordering the priests and others to shout as and when he shouted, at an appropriate moment he raised the cry, "Alleluia!" The resounding noise of the ancient Hebrew word reverberating from the surrounding hills so frightened the foes that they fled.<sup>12</sup> In the second half of the same century the aristocratic bishop of Clermont, Sidonius Apollinaris, tells us about the hurly-burly of traffic on the Rhone and on the

<sup>9</sup>Tertullian, *De oratione*, 27; PL, i, 1301B.

<sup>10</sup>Eric Werner, *The Sacred Bridge* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1959), pp. 155, 168.

<sup>11</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 303.

<sup>12</sup>Bede, *Historia ecclesiastica*, I, 20; *Baedæ Historia ecclesiastica gentis Anglorum*, ed. and trans. J. E. King, I (Loeb Classical Library; G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1930), p. 92.

highways paralleling it: creaking carriages, weary travelers on foot, and straining longshoremen. Amid all the noise of busy commercial life could be heard the voices of bargemen rhythmically shouting, "Alleluia!" and the river banks echoing the same refrain.<sup>13</sup>

About a half-century or more later the man who would become Pope Gregory I the Great was so fascinated by the information reaching him from the British Isles that he wrote: "Lo, the tongue of Britain which had known how to do nothing but utter barbarous gutturals has already begun to sing the Hebrew Alleluia in divine praises."<sup>14</sup> His famous pun, perhaps the best known in Western literature, is seldom cited beyond its first part ("Not Angles, but angels"). As a matter of fact there were two further parts of it, the third being his query about the Angle king. When Gregory was told that he was Aella, he immediately punned on the name, "Alleluia, the praise of God the Creator must be sung in those lands."<sup>15</sup> Quite properly, therefore, Saint Augustine, his missionary, entered Kent chanting a litany having an antiphon with the Alleluia.<sup>16</sup>

By the ninth century, its place fixed in the liturgy and its joyful expression on many tongues, Alleluia was the subject of exegesis and exposition. The great liturgical scholar, Amalarius, explained that Alleluia before the Gospel at Mass affected inwardly every one who sang it, causing him to meditate how he ought to praise God and how he ought to rejoice in Him. The final note of wordless jubilation reminded one of that ultimate condition when the speaking of words would not be necessary, when the mind by meditation alone would be able to communicate its faith.<sup>17</sup> Alleluia was also a foretaste of the elect's eternal gladness as well as a praise of God. In singing it, therefore, the music should not be somber but exultant, anticipating the joy of the life to

<sup>13</sup>Sidonius, *Letters*, II, 10, 4; Sidonius, *Poems and Letters*, trans. W. B. Anderson, I (Loeb Classical Library; Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1936), p. 466.

<sup>14</sup>Bede, *op. cit.*, II, 1; *Baedae Historia*, p. 196.

<sup>15</sup>*Ibid.*; *Baedae Historia*, p. 202.

<sup>16</sup>*Ibid.*, I, 25; *Baedae Historia*, p. 112.

<sup>17</sup>Amalarius, *Liber Officialis*, III, 16, 3; J. M. Hanssens, *Amalarii episcopi opera liturgica omnia*, II (*studi e Testi*, 139; Città del Vaticano: Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana, 1948), p. 304.

come, Alleluia being the harvest of all our worship.<sup>18</sup> Amalarius accepted and transmitted the tradition that Alleluia was celestial in origin, a song of angelic beings. He believed that, regardless of the great beauty and sweetness of the Tract (substituted for Alleluia in Lent), Alleluia was far more beautiful, being of a richer and nobler language, namely, Hebrew.<sup>19</sup>

Amalarius is also witness to suppression of Alleluia in the liturgy during the period from Septuagesima to Easter.<sup>20</sup> This particular practice gave rise in a somewhat later time to a formal "farewell to Alleluia" in some of the Western liturgies, usually at Vespers on Saturday before Septuagesima. The tendency was to multiply repetition of Alleluia on that occasion, after which it would not be used again until the first Mass of Easter. For that service the hymn, "Alleluia dulce carmen," was written probably in the eleventh century. Two stanzas (in modern translation from a recently published breviary) illustrate the practice:

Alleluia cannot always  
 Be our song while here below;  
 Alleluia our transgressions  
 Make us for a while forego;  
 For the solemn time is coming  
 When our tears for sin must flow.

Therefore in our hymns we pray thee,  
 Grant us, blessed Trinity,  
 At the last to keep thine Easter  
 In our home beyond the sky,  
 There to thee forever singing  
 Alleluia joyfully.<sup>21</sup>

This cessation of Alleluia gave rise to excesses including a ceremonial "deposition of Alleluia" which in turn contributed to

<sup>18</sup>*Ibid.*, III, 13; Hanssens, *op. cit.*, p. 301.

<sup>19</sup>*Ibid.*, I, 1, 16ff; Hanssens, *op. cit.*, pp. 32ff.

<sup>20</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>21</sup>*The Anglican Breviary* (Mount Sinai, L. I., N. Y.; Frank Gavin Liturgical Foundation, 1955), p. 400.

popular folkloristic customs.<sup>22</sup> Inevitably there also arose a corresponding "welcome to Alleluia" or "return of Alleluia." For instance, at a pontifical celebration of the first Mass of Easter the deacon chanted these words, "I announce to you a great joy which is Alleluia." No ceremonial, however, developed for the return comparable to that for the departure of Alleluia. And all of the excrescences were eliminated by the late sixteenth century.<sup>23</sup>

One of the strange uses of Alleluia occurred in the year 1233. In a time of great stress itinerant friars wandered through northern Italy crying incessantly, "Alleluia! Alleluia! Alleluia!" The masses followed them in a revivalistic orgy of penitence and preaching. Reputed miracles were performed to add to the excitement and numerous frauds were perpetrated, all recounted by that garrulous Minorite named Salimbene.<sup>24</sup> The year was called "the great Alleluia." From this point it is only a hop, skip, and jump to the fantastic phenomena of American frontier religion in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, and from there to the profane use of the word in the hobo song, "Hallelujah, I'm a bum! Hallelujah, bum again!"

In the present day Alleluia survives in all its splendor in the liturgy (for example, the glorious Alleluia of Mozart's Twelfth Mass) and in such sacred music as the Hallelujah Chorus of Handel's oratorio, "The Messiah." It lives also in its detached usage as ejaculatory prayers and shouts in Pentecostal services. It also continues to appear occasionally in purely secular situations. Down the centuries it has been not only an act of worship, but also a magic formula, a war cry, a signal, a joyous exclamation, a song of plowmen and boatmen, and perhaps a nursery song.<sup>25</sup> One scholar has deemed it the germinal cell of all hymn-singing.<sup>26</sup> And

---

<sup>22</sup>F. Cabrol, "Alleluia, Acclamation liturgique," *Dictionnaire d'archéologie chrétienne et de liturgie* (DACL), I (Paris: Letouzey et Ané, 1907), cols. 1229-1246, esp. cols. 1241, 1245; J. M. Neale, *Mediaeval Hymns and Sequences*, 2nd ed. (London: Joseph Masters, 1863), pp. 42, 182.

<sup>23</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>24</sup>G. G. Coulton, *From St. Francis to Dante*, 2nd ed. (London: Duckworth and Co., 1908), pp. 21-37; Ernst Kantorowicz, *Frederick the Second 1194-1250*, trans. E. O. Lorimer (New York: Frederick Ungar, 1957), pp. 396-398.

<sup>25</sup>See Werner, *op. cit.*, p. 311, notes 126, 129, 130; p. 312, notes 131, 132, 133; p. 548, note 93. Werner gives appropriate documentation.

<sup>26</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 301.



the great Cardinal J. B. F. Pitra has well said that the story of Alleluia is itself a poem.<sup>27</sup> The foregoing is only a fragment of that poem.

---

<sup>27</sup>*Ibid.* Werner himself has added greatly to both historical and musicological knowledge of Alleluia. Cabrol's article, cited above in Note 22, is a sound, scholarly presentation. Preceding Cabrol's treatment in *DACL*, Cols. 1226-1229, is P. Wagner's musicological essay, "Alleluia Chant."