
THE JEHOVAH'S WITNESSES' CHANGING HYMNODY

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[This article is research in progress, which will form part of a wider study of the Watch Tower Society, to be entitled *Jehovah's Witnesses: Continuity and Change*, to be published by Ashgate (UK) in 2014. The author is particularly grateful to Miquel Angel Plaza Navas, who has recently completed a doctoral thesis at the University of Barcelona on the development of religious song books within the Watch Tower organisation. Biblical quotations are from the New World Translation (1961), which is the Jehovah's Witnesses' own version.]

Music is a much neglected topic among scholars of religion, no doubt for various reasons. Some scholars may feel that they are unqualified to comment on the subject, or are unable to read music. However, music plays an important role in most religious communities, for a variety of reasons. It enables congregational participation, it helps to set the mood for the style of service or season of the liturgical calendar, it acts as a transmitter of the organisation's beliefs and practices, and it provides an archive of a religious community's history. Material that may be difficult to remember in words is much easier to commit to memory when it is set to music.

Hymns or songs lie at the interface between a religion's hierarchy and the laity. Most members of the religion are unfamiliar with its erudite scholarship, and – at least in mainstream denominations – often express dislike when it features in sermons. Music enables theological ideas that are often quite sophisticated to be channelled down to the laity. This does not mean, of course, that the laity understands everything that they sing, but it does give them important insights into the theological foundations of their faith. Related to this, music often provides a legitimisation of the community's practices. If by any chance a Jehovah's Witness should have doubts about the need to attend the Memorial, or to undertake house-to-house evangelism, he or she will find both these practices explicitly addressed in songs

(‘From house-to-house, from door to door’: no.103; ‘The Lord’s Evening Meal’ no.8). In the current edition, each song is prefaced with a biblical proof-text, demonstrating that its ideas are biblically derived.

Music serves as a library of the church’s history. In mainstream Christianity it is commonplace to find words and music that span the ancient psalms, the theology of the church fathers, monastic plainsong, the contributions of the reformers, and currents of thought like the nineteenth-century Oxford Movement. Music also serves as a means of religious creativity. In most forms of Christianity it is acceptable for members of the congregation with musical ability to make their own musical offerings. Someone may get out a guitar and share a melody that he or she has written and set to words, which can then be taken up by others. It is not uncommon in a congregation’s music library to find a Mass setting that has been composed by a previous organist and used in the church’s worship.

The aim of this article is to examine the role of music in the Watch Tower organisation, how it has developed over time, and how it reflects continuing developments in the Society’s doctrines. Jehovah’s Witnesses hold two congregational meetings each week. The Sunday meeting usually opens with a song. (Jehovah’s Witnesses prefer the term ‘song’ to ‘hymn’.) It then continues with a short prayer, a Bible talk – which is the main component of the first half – followed by another song. A second part, which until recently was a separate service, continues with a Bible study based on a designated *Watchtower* article, a song, and finally a short prayer. It is customary for the speaker to select the opening song, while the remaining two are indicated in the Study Edition of the *Watchtower* magazine, together with the passage to be studied, and are not chosen by the congregation. In most Kingdom Halls in the West a pre-recorded piano accompaniment is played on a CD provided by the Society, although live accompaniments may be used in congregations lacking the technology or in some congregations where the custom of using live music has been retained.

Singing is invariably congregational in the Watch Tower Society. The song books are the sole means of expressing Watch Tower theology musically, and each item is designed for congregational use. Not even the major Assemblies include choirs singing anthems, or soloists displaying their talents and attracting applause. Until recently in the West small orchestras could be used for Assemblies, although a 1977 *Watchtower* article expressed some reservations about this (Watch Tower 1977: 343), and the use of pre-recorded music is now the norm, at least in the UK. To acknowledge musicians would be to glorify humans, rather than Jehovah. The Society has its own orchestra and chorus of singers, but neither perform to

audiences, and in line with Society policy their names are undisclosed. The Watch Tower volunteer orchestra, which currently consists of around 65 musicians, meets twice yearly in Patterson, New York (some ten members come from abroad, and are willing to travel at their own expense for this purpose). Additionally, the chorus of singers sang and recorded each item in the new song book, and these items are all now available online. Before the advent of the Internet, use was made of gramophone records, audio-cassettes, and CDs. Congregations are encouraged to listen to these in order to gain familiarity with the new repertoire. (Watch Tower 2010: 19).

The Watch Tower Society believes that high importance should be attached to singing, which is always a component at Kingdom Hall meetings, and at Assemblies. Basing their teachings firmly on the Bible, Jehovah's Witnesses note that God's people used music throughout their history. The first biblical reference to music is to Jubal, who was 'the founder of all those who handle the harp and the pipe' (Genesis 4:21), and the first account of singing is Miriam's song, which celebrates the Israelites' victory in crossing the Red Sea (Exodus 15:1-21). King David is portrayed as a musician, and the Bible records that he appointed 4,000 Levites to praise Jehovah with musical instruments, 288 of whom had been trained in song (1 Chronicles 23:3, 25:7), and who – together with 120 priest-trumpeters – provided a musical offering at the dedication of Solomon's Temple (2 Chronicles 5:12). Jesus' last evening meal with his disciples ended with singing, before their departure to the Garden of Gethsemane (Mark 14:26). Paul and Silas sang hymns in prison before their miraculous release (Acts 16:25), and the book of Ephesians enjoins: 'keep getting filled with spirit, speaking to yourselves with psalms and praises to God and spiritual songs, singing and accompanying yourselves with music in YOUR hearts to Jehovah' (Ephesians 5:18-19). The Book of Revelation depicts the 144,000 singing a song to God's praise that no one else could master (Revelation 4:1-3). The Watch Tower Society also notes that in 1869 it was the sound of singing in a basement that attracted founder-leader Charles Taze Russell to a small group of Second Adventists to whom Jonas Wendell preached (Watch Tower, 1970:220-222; 1987:25-27; 1993:43; 2010:23).

It should not be surprising, therefore, that the Watch Tower Society has regularly produced books for congregational singing. By my reckoning there have been 17 different song books in widespread use since the Watch Tower organisation was founded, with different editions. It would therefore not be feasible to do anything approaching a comprehensive survey of these, so I shall confine myself to a few landmarks in the

organisation's history. In the most mainstream denominations, hymnals contain an explanatory preface, outlining the book's purpose and the rationale behind it. This is no longer done in the Watch Tower organisation: the 1928 song book *Songs of Praise to Jehovah* was the last to contain such a preface. For subsequent books, explanation of their purpose and reasons for change have been given in *Watchtower* magazine articles, and in Yearbooks.

The Society's earliest official song book was entitled *Songs of the Bride* (1879). It was so-called, as *Zion's Watch Tower* explains, because of the expectation of the imminent coming of Christ, 'the heavenly Bridegroom', to whom the 'Chaste Virgin Church' was betrothed (Watch Tower 1879:19; 1879:6). The Bible Students (as they were then called) were only in their very early stages at that time: Zion's Watch Tower Tract Society was not organised until 1881, and legally incorporated in 1884 (Chryssides 2008:xxii). It was therefore inevitable that the editors had to draw exclusively on external sources. It included many traditional hymns like 'All hail the power of Jesus' name' and 'Blest be the tie that binds', with traditional tunes that were used in mainstream churches, some of which continue to be sung there. It was not long, however, before Bible Students composed their own material. In 1896, an entire edition of *Zion's Watch Tower* was devoted to the publication of several songs, which were written by Bible students. Most of the lyrics were written by F. G. Burroughs, who appears to have been one of the early sisters in the Society, and most of the tunes were composed by M. L. McPhail (1854-1931), who became involved with the Society in the early 1890s, and became its only full-time pioneer, travelling widely to many U.S. cities to spread the Bible Students' teachings (Watch Tower, 1894:1746). (McPhail later left the Society to start his own schismatical New Covenant group.) The 1879 song book was fairly swiftly replaced by *Poems and Hymns of Millennial Dawn* (1890), and subsequently *Hymns of Millennial Dawn* (1905).

One early musical project that is particularly worthy of mention is Angelophone, which appeared in 1916. This was a set of 50 gramophone records, entitled 'Old Fireside Hymns', sung by the celebrated baritone Henry Burr, with any accompanying companion song book. Sound recording was in its infancy at that time, and the gramophone records were recorded and played mechanically, rather than by electrical means. The right-hand pages of the Angelophone book contained the words and music, while the left hand pages were devoted to the text of a short talk by Charles Taze Russell, giving reflections prompted by each hymn. The book was for personal rather than congregational use. One side of each record contained

Russell's talk, and the other the song. Although innovative and ambitious, this project was unsuccessful. Russell's health was failing (he died in October 1916), and his voice was at times indecipherable. Henry Burr's performance has also been criticised: it was not regarded as one of his best accomplishments. The Society received numerous complaints about the recordings, and decided to re-issue them, this time with Harry E. Humphrey, a professional recording artist, reading the text in lieu of Russell. Humphrey was not himself a Bible Student, but he had already served as the voice in the multimedia presentation, *The Photo-Drama of Creation*, released in 1914. (Some of the Bible Students, however, having a sentimental attachment to Russell, preferred to hear his own voice, however inaudible, rather than the new version.) The Angelico record company was having its own problems too, and went out of business around 1917, although the Society continued to offer the remaining stock of the recordings until 1919, when it was decided to withdraw the project (Watch Tower History, 2011; Watch Tower 1916:5914; 1917a:6064; 1917b:6069).

In 1928, the song book *Songs of Praise to Jehovah* was released. This had a substantial overlap with the previous 1905 song book, and still mainly consisted of external material, but it is claimed that it made a special attempt to eliminate 'Babylonian sentimentality and creature worship' (Watch Tower 1966b: 313). The phrase 'creature worship' presumably refers to the practice, found in certain hymns, of extolling religious heroes of the past. One example of a verse in the 1908 book which may have troubled the Society is the following:

We shall feast with the heroes of faith,
Who are true to the call of the Lord;
They who love not their lives and to death,
Leaving all for the crown of reward. ('At the Banquet': *Zion's Glad Songs*, 247)

Veneration of the dead could even be construed as verging on occultism – hence the need to remove such material. This song did not appear in the 1928 volume.

The use of singing in congregational worship fell under a cloud in 1938, when congregational meetings largely abandoned the practice of using songs (Watch Tower 1997: 27). There appear to have been a variety of reasons for this. The words of various songs were thought to be inimical to Watch Tower teaching, and J. F. Rutherford – Russell's successor, who was then in office – believed that the time assigned to singing would be better employed in teaching. A *Watchtower* article, probably penned by Rutherford, emphasised that the

purpose of meetings was to proclaim God's truth and to enable the listeners to worship and obey him. The article continued:

A few words like the above pronounced at the beginning of the study would be far more beneficial than to occupy the same time in singing songs, which often express much that is out of harmony with the truth of and concerning God's kingdom. (Watch Tower 1938: 139)

Rutherford had previously expressed the view that singing was reminiscent of Roman Catholicism, being one of many attributes which he had come to loathe. In his *Enemies* (1937), a chapter entitled 'Song of the Harlot' he writes:

In the prophecies the 'harlot' or religious organization is pictured as bedecking herself in gaudy and showy clothes, peculiar hats, lace and silk skirts, and other gaudy apparel, and she is represented as sauntering forth and indulging in singing seductive songs to inveigle others into her trap, that she might have personal adulation and praise of men and at the same time reap also pecuniary gain. (Rutherford 1937: 199-200).

Singing was once again restored shortly after the Society's third president Nathan H. Knorr succeeded Rutherford. In 1944, at a major assembly at Buffalo, New York, Knorr handed the microphone to Frederick W. Franz (who was later to become his successor), who spoke on the theme of 'Song of Kingdom Service', and introduced the new *Kingdom Service Song Book*, which was greeted with enthusiastic applause (Watch Tower 1944: 285). On assuming office, Nathan H. Knorr had swiftly initiated the policy of complete anonymity in all the Society's publications (Chryssides 2008: 85). This not only meant that work was unattributed in the new song book: it also dictated some of the content. Some songs had required copyright clearance, and hence, if their continued use required an acknowledgement that identified the author or composer, the new policy entailed that they could not be used (Watch Tower 1966b: 313).

The 1944 book had a short lifespan, for the year 1950 saw a further development, when *Songs to Jehovah's Praise* appeared. This was significant for a number of reasons. First, it dispensed with archaic language: words like 'thee', 'thou' and 'unto' disappeared, in favour

of more authentic modern speech. Second, it appeared at the time when work on the New World Translation of the Bible was about to commence, and words of songs were adapted in a quest for greater biblical accuracy. For example, the opening words of the song, ‘Seek ye first the Kingdom’, became ‘Keep on seeking first the Kingdom’, in recognition that the Greek biblical text on which the song was based used a present rather than an aorist imperative (*Songs to Jehovah’s Praise*, 1950: no.49).

The 1966 song book, ‘*Singing and Accompanying Yourselves with Music in Your Hearts*’ (Watch Tower 1966a) introduced further changes. By this time the New World Translation of the Bible was complete, and its wording was used as far as possible for biblical quotation. Perhaps more significantly, however, this was the first song book in which every effort was made to drop ‘Babylonian material’ completely and only to include material from the Watch Tower Society. This applied to music as well as words, and secular as well as mainstream Christian tunes were removed: the previous song book had included items by Von Weber, Chopin and Beethoven. An explanatory *Watchtower* article conceded that ‘all this has meant the dropping of some melodies that may have been favorites to many’ (Watch Tower 1966b: 315), but emphasised the importance of Jehovah’s own people making their own music, as the sons of Korah, and King David urge:

‘Make melody to God, make melody. Make melody to our King, make melody. For God is King of all the earth; make melody, acting with discretion.’ (Psalm 47:6-7)

‘Sing you to God, make melody to his name; raise up a song to the One riding through the desert plains as Jah, which is his name; and jubilate before him.’ (Psalm 68:4; quoted in Watch Tower 1966: 315).

Although the new song book had completely eliminated Babylonian material, a further problem still remained. Many of the songs still sounded like those used in mainstream churches, and hence the 1984 song book, *Sing Praises to Jehovah* made further musical innovations. Songs that sounded like traditional Christian hymns were dropped, together with four-part harmony which is characteristic of much church music. The new book also added guitar chords – although this is now also common in some modern mainstream hymn books.

The current song book, *Sing to Jehovah*, appeared in 2009. It continued the established practice of anonymity, together with the absence of ‘Babylonian’ material. This new book makes several changes. The songs are shorter, and the tunes are thought to be easier to learn and sing. Additionally, the songs are set out to avoid page turns – a feature for which any pianists and guitarists will undoubtedly be grateful!

There is a further important consideration in Watch Tower song books, found in the 2009 compilation, but also in several of its predecessors: the practice of recognising ‘new lights’ – that is, new insights that the Society claims to have found regarding biblical truth. Jehovah’s Witnesses frequently cite the verse: ‘But the path of the righteous ones is like the bright light that is getting lighter and lighter until the day is firmly established.’ (Proverbs 4:18). As their understanding of the Bible progresses, changes of doctrine can be observed within Watch Tower teaching; these are sometimes called ‘adjustments in view’, and these are also reflected in singing (Watch Tower 1972:501-505; 1986: 24). Jehovah’s Witnesses attach importance to ‘singing the truth’ as well as believing the truth. To reflect such developments, minor changes in the wording of songs occasionally occurs. For example, the song ‘Now’s the Time’ in the 1966 song book included the lines:

In due time we’ll welcome back the dead,
Help them feed on Christ the Living Bread.
No more demons will there be to dread.

In the 1984 book this last line becomes ‘No more evils will there be to dread,’ the reason being that the true follower of Jehovah should not fear demons. A further example relates to a hymn about Noah, entitled ‘Extending Mercy to Others’. The song ends with the couplet:

‘Flee at once to the ark of salvation,
To the Kingdom of God that is here!’ (no.117)

These lines seem to equate the ark of salvation with the kingdom of God – an idea that was countered in a *Watchtower* article published in 1974, which explains that Noah’s ark was the means of protection from the flood, not the kingdom of God itself (Watch Tower 1974: 635). Thus Noah’s ark symbolises the Watch Tower Society, which offers protection from the evil

world that is under Satan's rule. Consequently the wording of these lines in the 1984 book was changed in order to remove the inappropriate identification, to become:

‘Act at once! Make a full dedication;
Serve the Kingdom of God that is here.’ (no.215)

This may seem a subtle change, but it was obviously thought sufficiently significant to merit the alteration. In the 2009 song book, the expression ‘new world order’ is dropped in favour of ‘the new world’, and Jehovah's name is ‘sanctified’ rather than ‘hallowed’, as in previous books, thus reflecting small but significant changes in the Society's teaching.

Although the editors, authors and composers of the Watch Tower songs are undisclosed, the 2011 *Yearbook* give some explanation of the process of compilation of the most recent song book. In 2007 the Governing Body invited experienced composers to contribute items, and the Teaching Committee of the Governing Body approved a list of topics. Composers were instructed so that they ‘avoided music that sounded like hymns’, as well as ‘charismatic’ tunes that might be associated with the more ecstatic forms of mainstream Christian worship (Watch Tower 2011:18).

A further important part of the publication process is translation. The Watch Tower Society is a multinational organisation, extending well beyond the English-speaking world. From 1950, efforts have been made to enable congregations to sing Watch Tower music in different languages. The 1950 book was translated into around 20 languages, and translation of songs has progressively increased. The present song book is now available in full in 116 different languages, with a further 55 languages having a shorter 55-song version. Clearly it is not possible to produce a literal translation of the songs that is also usable for singing, so the procedure is for a translator first to write a literal translation, and then for an author to create lyrics that capture the essence of the song, combining faithfulness to scripture with idiomatic expression in the foreign language (Watch Tower 2013: 24-25).

Implications

The practice of insisting that all worship material comes from the Watch Tower Society has a number of implications. Singing provides a means of obeying Jehovah, since the practice is recommended in the Bible. It is an important way of worshipping Jehovah, and Jehovah alone, since no humans are extolled in song, and none are credited with having any

role in the production of the words or music. The hymns are composed so that one consistently addresses Jehovah, and no other spiritual being such as past builders of the faith, angels, or even Jesus, who is mentioned, but – in accordance with scripture – not addressed directly.

Since none of the material in the past two songbooks borrows words, music, or even style from outside the Watch Tower organisation, the singing at Kingdom Hall meetings becomes a means of demonstrating that those who are ‘in the truth’ have come out of Babylon, as the Bible exhorts. Further, the monolithic nature of Watch Tower theology ensures that there are no theological disagreements in the organisation that can become reflected in its singing. In mainstream denominations, worshippers might occasionally find themselves singing words with which they are uncomfortable, maybe because they reflect a particular stance in some theological controversy, or perhaps because they have been composed by some celebrated saint or scholar, whose ideas may no longer wholly reflect 21st-century Christian thinking. It is important to ‘sing the truth’, not merely read it in the Bible or Watch Tower publications, or hear it proclaimed in Kingdom Halls.

Allied to this, the practice of revising songbooks to take into account ‘adjustments in view’ ensures that congregational singing keeps pace with any changes in the Society’s teachings (although at a slower speed than the rest of the Society’s literature), and that the congregation is ‘singing the truth’. A further implication of the Watch Tower policy is that there is no scope for any ecumenical sharing of musical contributions, as increasingly happens in mainstream Christianity. Jehovah’s Witnesses would not wish things to be otherwise, of course, being firmly opposed to any ecumenical activity (Chryssides 2012).

There is a further consequence of Watch Tower policy: because of the self-contained nature of the Watch Tower organisation, there is no ‘cultural production’ that results from these words and music. In mainstream Christianity, it is common for religious works to go beyond the sacred space of a church and to become disseminated in one’s culture. Works like Handel’s *Messiah* and Bach’s *St Matthew Passion* are listened to by believer and non-believer alike, and most people – at least in the West – are familiar with songs like ‘Morning has broken’ and ‘Give me oil in my lamp’, which have filtered down to the public through school assemblies, and (at least in Britain) form the staple diet of wedding music when the bride and bridegroom are not churchgoers. Christmas carols percolate well beyond the confines of church buildings. Although it is true that all the items in the current song book can be found and listened to on the day Jehovah’s Witnesses’ official website, they are

unknown beyond the boundaries of Kingdom Halls, and have secured no uptake in popular culture.

Finally, the Watch Tower policy on singing precludes any innovation on the part of members of the congregation, who do not even choose their own songs, let alone take the initiative in composing them. Although congregational singing is a crossroads between religious organisation's theology and its laity, there is no scope for 'bottom up' contributions. Members do not get out guitars, as happens in mainstream Christianity, and treat congregations to an item that they have just composed, and which may eventually reach the hymn books as, for example, Graham Kendrick's hymns have done.

Because Witnesses are strongly discouraged from attending mainstream worship services, increasingly Witnesses are less conversant with what a church service and its accompanying music are like. This entails that their musical output is increasingly less likely to resemble conventional church music, and the fact that the songs in *Sing to Jehovah* or not recognisable as Christian hymns is something that has no doubt come naturally, and not merely by design. This is, of course, how the Watch Tower organisation would wish things to be.

It is always tempting to close the discussion by commenting on the possible future of music within the Watch Tower Society. Of course, unexpected changes can occur within any religious organisation. On present showing, however, we are likely to see the continued practice of the Jehovah's Witnesses' separation from Babylon being reflected in their music. We can also expect changes in Watch Tower music, as new generations make their contributions, and as 'new light' is shed on their understanding of scripture. In the words of one of the current songs ('The Light Gets Brighter': no.116):

Our path now becomes ever brighter;
We walk in the full light of day.
Behold what our God is revealing;
He guides us each step of the way.

Whatever happens in the Watch Tower Society in the coming years, it is more than likely that it will be reflected in its singing.

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