

CONGREGATIONAL SINGING IN THE EARLY CHURCH

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According to Matthew 26:30 and Mark 14:26 at the conclusion of the Last Supper, Jesus and his disciples "sang hymns and went out to the Mount of Olives." Since this meal was apparently for Jesus and the disciples a Passover meal, these hymns were presumably the Hallel Psalms. According to later Rabbinic literature the Levites sang Psalms 113-118 during the slaughter of the lambs for the Passover offering. In the celebration of Passover at home, Psalms 113-114 were recited during the Passover meal and at the conclusion of the meal the remaining Hallel Psalms (Psalms 115-118) were sung.²

How was the singing done? We do not have much information, but let us pursue what the sources that we do have tell us. The plural verbal form in the text of Matthew and Mark indicates that all participated. What form did this participation take? Did

¹ This paper began as a lecture for the Lita Witt Foundation at the Preston Road Church of Christ, Dallas, TX, May 21, 2000; repeated with modifications at the University of Pretoria, South Africa, Nov. 7, 2001 (published in Acta Patristica et Byzantina 15 [2004]:144-159; and revised and expanded for the symposium "Ascending Voice" at Pepperdine University, June 5, 2007.

² Mishnah, Pesahim 5.7; 10.5-7.

Jesus or someone else lead, and the others respond? Did they divide into two groups and alternate in the singing? Did they sing in unison?

Other statements in the New Testament do not offer much help. Ephesians 5:19, "Speaking to one another in Psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs, singing and making melody with your heart to the Lord." Colossians 3:16, "Singing Psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs with your hearts to God." The plural verbal forms once again indicate group participation. The "one another" is sometimes taken to indicate antiphonal or responsorial singing. That is possible as to the manner of rendition, as we shall see, but probably overinterprets the reflexive pronoun.³ The singing was in some way mutual, reciprocal.

Paul describes his participation in the assembly in 1 Corinthians 14:15, "I will pray with the Spirit, and I will pray also with the mind; I will sing praise with the Spirit, and I will sing praise also with the mind." He individualizes his instructions to the Corinthians in order to correct their practices. As is true throughout 1 Corinthians 14, he describes his own practice in order to instruct the Corinthians on what they are to do in the assembly. He intends his practice to model what they are *all* to do. Hence, we should not be too quick to conclude that 1 Corinthians 14:26 refers to someone offering a solo in the assembly. Once more, Paul is individualizing group practices:

³ The reflexive was often used for the reciprocal pronoun, as in Eph. 4:32 and Col. 3:13.

"When you come together, each one has a Psalm, each one has a teaching; each one has a revelation, each one has a tongue, each one has an interpretation. Let all things be done for building up." It should also be noted that Paul may here be speaking descriptively, not prescriptively; his prescription has to do with the purpose of edification, and how that is to be carried out is detailed later in the chapter. But, assuming that Paul is here giving instructions on what should be done, we may consider several possibilities of how each one brings a Psalm to the meeting. One could make a selection out of the book of Psalms for the congregation to sing; one could bring a new composition to be taught to the congregation; or one could bring a new set of words to which a traditional response was given by the congregation. The Psalm might not be sung as strictly a solo in the same manner that only one person at a time ought to give a teaching or a revelation; indeed we know that the Corinthians were not giving their revelations and messages in tongue one at a time, which was the confusing situation requiring the regulations in 14:27-31. Similarly, in Hebrews 2:12, Psalm 22:22 is quoted as describing Jesus "in the midst of the church" hymning praise to God. Whether a solo or some other method of singing was employed must be determined in part by what evidence we have from contemporary sources as to what Paul's words in 1 Corinthians 14:26 would have meant to his hearers.

So, let us go outside the New Testament to see if other sources offer us any help. I begin with one of the earliest notices of Christianity by a non-Christian, and it reports what

Christians did when they met together. The governor of the Roman province of Bithynia in Asia Minor, Pliny the Younger, wrote a letter about the year 110 to the emperor Trajan. In it he states the practice of Christians "to come together on a certain fixed day before daylight and to sing in alternate verses a hymn to Christ as to a God."⁴ Like the passages in Ephesians and Colossians, this description indicates all were involved but not necessarily in unison or simultaneously. Beyond that, one must speculate as to details, and many interpretations have been offered.⁵ Although the passage is often translated so as to indicate a kind of antiphonal singing, the practice may have been responsorial, but we cannot be sure even what Pliny understood the practice to be, much less that he correctly understood what was told him.

Allow me to fast forward to the fourth century and take a passage that, although late, in describing Christian practice at that time conveniently summarizes the options available for interpreting the first-century Christian practice. From it we will be in a position to work back to earlier evidence with more understanding. Basil was a presbyter (362-370) and then bishop (370-379) of the church at Caesarea in Cappadocia. His critics in the ecclesiastical conflicts of his time forced him to defend many

⁴ Pliny, Letters 10.96.

⁵ See discussion and notes in my Early Christians Speak, 3rd edn. (Abilene: ACU Press, 1999), pp. 79, 81-82, 88. "Alternately" could be translated "in turn," "mutually," or "reciprocally."

of his practices. One of those charges was connected with psalmody, the singing of the Psalms, probably the practice of antiphonal singing, for there is no indication that the other ways of singing the Psalms were ever in doubt. In the following letter he describes an early morning vigil of his church, probably not a regular Sunday service; but presumably the congregation did at the vigil things with which it was familiar on Sunday, just as Christians' Sunday practice is followed in many respects at mid-week or other additional meetings.

The customs we observe are in agreement and harmony with all the churches of God. At night our people are awake and go to the house of prayer. In labor, affliction, and continuous tears they make confession to God. At last, arising from their prayers, they enter into psalmody. At one time, divided into two groups, they sing antiphonally to one another. This practice strengthens their recitation of the words, and at the same time controls their attention and keeps their hearts from distraction. Next, entrusting to one person the task of leading the melody, the others sing the response. Thus they pass the night in a variety of psalmody interspersed with prayers. When day begins to dawn, all in common--as if of one mouth and one heart--lift up the psalm of confession to the Lord, each one making the words of repentance his or her own.⁶

⁶ Basil, Letter 207.3, 4. Dated about 375. The translation is also found in my Inheriting Wisdom: Readings for Today from Ancient Christian Writers (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2004), p. 242.

Basil had polemical reasons to want to emphasize that the practice of his church was not unique, so there may be rhetorical exaggeration in his claim that its customs agreed with those of "all the churches." Nonetheless, we must grant a substantial truth in his claim, for complete falsehood would have been too readily refuted. He is not describing an isolated practice. His description shows a variety of methods of engaging in psalmody, a variety that would have assisted in keeping people awake for an early morning service. These three kinds of singing are antiphonal, responsorial, and unison. In antiphonal singing the congregation was divided into two parts, each group singing alternately. In responsorial singing a leader carried the main part of the singing with the congregation responding either with a set phrase (like a refrain), which was more common, or with a repetition of what the leader had sung. In unison singing the whole congregation "as if of one mouth and one heart" sang together the same words. The phrase "one mouth" did not mean unison in the sense of all singing the same note but was a phrase for joint participation in which all agreed in speaking the same thing.⁷ Accordingly, I will use "unison" not for singing the same melodic line (although this may often have been the case) but for unified congregational singing.

⁷ Everett Ferguson, "Praising God with 'One Mouth'/'One Voice'," in Mark H. Hamilton, Thomas H. Olbricht, and Jeffrey Peterson, eds., Renewing Tradition: Studies in Texts and Contexts in Honor of James W. Thompson (Eugene: Pickwick, 2007), pp. 3-23.

Before saying something more about each of these forms of expression, I note that solo singing was known in a monastic setting. Thus John Cassian, who was influential in transferring the spirituality of Egyptian ascetics to western Europe (Gaul) in the early fifth century, relates the following story of the early leaders of Egyptian monasticism:

As they were going to celebrate their daily rites and prayers, one rose up in the midst to chant the Psalms to the Lord. And while they were all sitting (as is still the custom in Egypt), with their minds intently fixed on the words of the chanter, when he had sung eleven Psalms, separated by prayers introduced between them, verse after verse being evenly enunciated, he finished the twelfth with a response of Alleluia.⁸

Earlier, about the year 200, Tertullian reported that solos were sung at love feasts. He says that after the meal the following occurred:

After the washing of hands and lighting of lamps, each one who is able is called into the center to chant praise to God either from the holy scriptures or from his own talents.⁹

So far as I know, explicit testimony for such solo recitation at the other church services is lacking, but it may have occurred in situations where only one was learned in the Psalms or skilled in music.

⁸ John Cassian, Institutes 2.5; the practice is further regulated in 2.12.

⁹ Tertullian, Apology 39.18.

The use of antiphonal singing may be the specific practice Basil had to defend, for it is the manner of singing for which he gives an explanation of its value: It helps to strengthen the recitation of the words (it helps to say things together with others), and it helps to maintain the attention of the heart (since one has to pay attention when his or her part comes). Moreover, we know that there was some controversy over the introduction of antiphonal singing reflected in fourth-century sources. One historian testified that the practice was introduced at Antioch in the middle of the century.¹⁰ Another historian, however, reported the claim of a greater antiquity of the practice, attributing it to Ignatius, bishop of Antioch at the beginning of the second century.¹¹ The practice of dividing into

¹⁰ Theodoret, Church History 2.19--"Flavian and Diodore were the first to divide choirs into two parts, and to teach them to sing the Psalms of David antiphonally. Introduced first at Antioch, the practice spread in all directions, and penetrated to the ends of the earth. Its originators now collected the lovers of the divine word and work into the churches of [that is, dedicated to] the martyrs, and with them spent the night in singing Psalms to God."

¹¹ Socrates Scholasticus, Church History 6.8.11--"We must now, however, make some allusion to the origin of this custom in the church of antiphonal singing. Ignatius, third bishop of Antioch in Syria from the apostle Peter . . . saw a vision of angels hymning in alternate chants the holy Trinity. Accordingly he intro-

two groups and singing back and forth was almost certainly known earlier than the fourth century, as we shall see. Was the practice of antiphonal singing introduced at Antioch a revival of an earlier practice that seemed new at the time, or was there something new about the manner in which it was done?¹² We cannot be sure.

One reason that antiphonal singing seemed novel was that the common practice was responsorial singing. There is an abundance of evidence, of which we will cite only a sampling. The instructions concerning a Sunday assembly in the fourth-century Apostolic Constitutions include the following directions:

duced the mode of singing he had observed in the vision into the Antiochian church; whence it was transmitted by tradition to all the other churches. Such is the account we have received in relation to these antiphonal hymns." Earlier in 6.8.2 he uses the same word for antiphonal singing to describe the musical practices of the Arians.

¹² Other references from the fourth century cited for antiphonal singing are the following: Gregory of Nazianzus, Songs 18; Ambrose, Hexaemeron 3.5; Augustine, Explanations of the Psalms 26 pref. A notice of the introduction of antiphonal singing at Milan by Ambrose is given by Paulinus, Life of Ambrose 4.13 and Augustine, Confessions 9.7.

When there have been two lessons [from the Scriptures] read, let some other person sing the hymns of David, and let the people join in the singing at the conclusions of the verses.¹³

John Chrysostom considered the practice to go back to apostolic times:

They all met together in old time and sang in response to the Psalms in common. This we do also now, but then among all there was one soul and one heart.¹⁴

A work by Methodius, bishop of Olympus (d. about 311), entitled the Banquet in 11.2 contains a responsorial hymn sung by a group of virgins with the text of the song sung by the leader given in full and the refrain repeated by the others as a response after each verse. I am spending more time on the fourth century because our evidence is fuller and more descriptive, and so permits us to read the earlier evidence with greater clarity.

There is more evidence than is commonly recognized for unison or congregational song. In fact, one historian of church music argued that congregational singing was the oldest form of church music.¹⁵ Some of the statements about everybody participating,

¹³ Apostolic Constitutions 2.57.6.

¹⁴ Homily 36 On 1 Corinthians 14:33. Other references from the fourth century given for responsorial singing include Chrysostom, Commentary on Psalms 137; Athanasius, Defense of his Flight 24.

¹⁵ Joseph Bingham, Antiquities of the Christian Church (London: Bohn, 1845; repr. of 1708, 1722 edition), Book 14, chapter 1, pp. 680-683, citing Hilary, On the Psalms 65; Augustine, De Verb.

however, could refer to antiphonal or responsorial participation. Some passages, nonetheless, do sound as if they were talking about everyone singing the whole Psalm. Ambrose, bishop of Milan (374-397), has this to say:

What a labor it is to achieve silence in church while the lessons are being read. When one man would speak, the congregation makes a disturbance. But when the Psalm is recited, it makes its own "silence," since all are speaking and there is no disturbance. . . . The singing of praise is the very bond of unity, when the whole people join in song a single act of song.¹⁶

The same passage continues with a defense of women singing in spite of Paul's words, "Let women keep silent in church" (1 Cor. 14:34), which, Ambrose says (and I think correctly), do not apply to group participation in song. Basil of Caesarea in his commentary on the Psalms discusses what psalmody accomplishes and comments on the whole congregation participating: Singing the Psalms together is a bond of unity, "uniting the people into the harmony of one chorus."¹⁷ Eusebius, the church historian and bishop of Caesarea in Palestine (313-339), gives this impressive testimony from the early fourth century:

Apost. Serm. 10; and the Chrysostom passages that I translate as referring to responsorial singing.

¹⁶ Ambrose, On Psalm 1, Exposition 9. Translation by Erik Routley, The Church and Music (London: Duckworth, 1950), p. 129.

¹⁷ Basil, Homilies on the Psalms 1.2.

Throughout the world--in cities, in villages, and in the country-- in all the churches of God the people of Christ, who have been chosen out of all the nations, send up, not to the native gods nor to demons but to the one God spoken of by the prophets, hymns and psalmody with a loud voice so that the sound of those singing can be heard by those standing outside.¹⁸

A frequent expression for this common participation by all was "one mouth." It is already in the New Testament--Romans 15:6--but also in the passage quoted from Basil that provides a framework for our discussion of three types of congregational singing. An equivalent expression was "one voice." Niceta of Remesiana gives this advice:

Let us sing all together, as with one voice, and let all of us modulate our voices in the same way. If one cannot sing in tune with the others, it is better to sing in a low voice rather than drown out the others.¹⁹ [I follow this advice.]

"One voice" or unison singing, as I said, referred to congregational participation, not the same pitch, for some passages make explicit that different ages and sexes participated. John Chrysostom writes:

[God] invites every age to sing: old men, mature men, youths, adults, women, all inhabitants of the world.²⁰

¹⁸ Commentary on Psalms 65.10-15; cf. his Commentary on Psalms 91.2-3.

¹⁹ On the Utility of Hymn Singing 13.

²⁰ John Chrysostom, Commentary on the Psalms 150.6.

In another passage he speaks similarly:

Our tongues are the strings of our kithara [a string instrument played by plucking--the body, as commonly in patristic sources, is the instrument²¹], putting forth a different sound yet a godly harmony. For indeed women and men, old and young, have different voices, but they do not differ in the word of hymnody, for the Spirit blends the voice of each and effects one melody in all.²²

I would insist that all three of these methods of singing, not just the unison, are "congregational singing," for the whole congregation is involved even if not all at the same time. In neither case is there performance, whether by one person (although one person, the precentor or "song leader," has great prominence in responsorial singing) or by a chorus (actually two choruses comprising the whole congregation in antiphonal singing). In each instance the group that is silent part of the time is not simply listening but is actively engaged and must enter in at the appropriate time. We may compare, although not exactly

²¹ See further below and my "Toward a Patristic Theology of Music," Studia Patristica 24 (1993):266-283 (269, 273, 276-277), to which add Gregory of Nyssa, Making of Man 9, on the body as an instrument used by the mind; also my "The Active and Contemplative Lives: The Patristic Interpretation of Some Musical Terms," Studia Patristica 16 (1985):15-23.

²² John Chrysostom, Homily on Psalm 145 [English 146].2. Cf. Basil, Hexaameron 4.7 (PG 29.93C), "mingled voice of men, women, and children."

equivalent, the practice of soprano, alto, tenor, or bass leads (or singing of one verse) and then other parts joining in. The congregation or one of the choruses might not sing the whole song.

In those passages where it is emphasized that the whole congregation was involved, can we tell more about how? Which of the three methods was involved in any given case?

Here I think it is instructive to compare Basil's statement with a Rabbinic passage that describes similar but not identical practice. The time of writing was nearly contemporary, but it cites earlier Rabbis. The subject is the song of Moses and Miriam in Exodus 15, and the discussion is how the singing was done. The passage compares different ways in which the congregation participated in a synagogue service:

Our Rabbis taught: On that day R. Akiba [early second century] expounded: At the time the Israelites ascended from the Red Sea, they desired to utter a song; and how did they render the song? Like an adult who reads the Hallel (for a congregation) and they respond after him with the leading word. (According to this explanation) Moses said, "I will sing unto the Lord," and they responded, "I will sing unto the Lord"; Moses said, "For He hath triumphed gloriously" and they responded, "I will sing unto the Lord." R. Eliezer [mid-second century], son of R. Jose the Galilean, declares, Like a minor who reads the Hallel (for a congregation), and they repeat after him all that he says. (According to this explanation) Moses said, "I will sing unto the Lord" and they responded, "I will sing unto the Lord"; Moses said, "For he hath triumphed gloriously" and they responded, "For He

hath triumphed gloriously." R. Nehemiah [second century] declares: Like a school-teacher who recites the Shema ["Hear, O Israel"] in the Synagogue, viz., he begins first and they respond after him. On what do they differ? -R. Akiba holds that the word "saying" refers to the first clause; R. Eliezer, son of R. Jose the Galilean, holds that "saying" refers to every clause; and R. Nehemiah holds that "and spake" indicates that they sang all together "and saying" that Moses began first.²³

The passage describes two types of responsorial participation and one type of unison participation. In the first type the response is with a key phrase repeated as a refrain each time; in the second type the response is to repeat the words of the leader (who might be a minor);²⁴ and in the third type the leader starts and everyone joins in unison. The whole congregation is involved in all three types. The passage would indicate various types of singing were known among the Jews in the period shortly after the beginning of the church. Can we go back earlier? The interpretation of the Song of the Sea in Exodus 15 points us to a Jewish writer on the eve of the New Testament, Philo of Alexandria.

Philo describes a Jewish sect known as the Therapeutae, who lived as a kind of monastic community composed of both men and

²³ Babylonian Talmud, Sotah 30b.

²⁴ Is the congregational repetition of everything because the minor might speak indistinctly and it was important for everything to be clearly understood?

women not far from Alexandria. The following passage describes their celebration on the fiftieth day (presumably Pentecost).

[Following a discourse by the president,] The president having stood up sings a hymn addressed to God, either a new one composed by himself or an old one by poets of an earlier time [one of the Psalms?], for they have left behind in many meters and melodies verses in trimeters, hymns for processions, at libations, and at the altars, and careful metrical arrangements for the stops and varied movements of choruses.²⁵ After him the others [sing] in proper order according to their rank, while all the rest listen in great silence except when they must sing the closing phrases or refrains, for then all, both men and women, lift up their voices. [When each has finished his hymn, the meal is served.]

[Then came an all-night vigil of the community that was spent in song.] They all rise together in the midst of the dining room and first form two choruses, one of men and one of women. For each chorus the most honored and most musical is chosen as precentor and leader. Then they sing hymns to God composed in many meters and melodies, sometimes singing together and at other times with antiphonal harmonies, motioning with their hands and dancing, inspiring in turn processional odes and then performing the stops, turnings, and movements of a choric dance. Then when each of the

²⁵ Alternatively, instead of referring to the dances ("varied movements"), we could translate "the stationary choral songs well arranged with versatile strophes."

choruses has taken its own part in the feast, . . . they combine and out of the two become one chorus, a copy of what was constituted at the Red Sea on account of the marvelous things done there. . . . [At that time (Ex. 15)] filled with divine enthusiasm, the men together with the women, becoming one chorus, sang thanksgiving hymns to God their Savior, the prophet Moses leading the men and the prophetess Miriam the women. On this model the male and female members with responsive and antiphonal strains, blending the bass sound of the men with the treble of the women, perform a harmonious and truly musical symphony. Truly beautiful are the thoughts, truly beautiful the words, reverent are the chorus members. The goal of the thoughts, the words, and the choruses is godliness.²⁶

Philo adopts the terminology of the choral music and dances of the Greek theater and religious festivals. My interest here is not in the possible bodily movements he describes as accompanying the singing but what he says about the way the singing was done. He mentions a solo by the president of the assembly, community responses to songs (both new and old) sung by the various members,

²⁶ Philo, On the Contemplative Life 10.80; 11.83-85, 87-88. For Philo's treatment of music in general, see my "The Art of Praise: Philo and Philodemus on Music," in John T. Fitzgerald, Thomas H. Olbricht, and L. Michael White, Early Christianity and Classical Culture: Comparative Studies in Honor of Abraham J. Malherbe (Leiden: Brill, 2003), pp. 391-426 (417-422 on the Therapeutae).

antiphonal choruses (one of men and one of women),²⁷ and unison singing of all together. The passage has the great interest of describing the extensive musical practices of a Jewish community contemporary with the beginnings of Christianity. It would be supposed that Jewish musical practices would provide the pattern for those of Christians. That supposition and the interest of the passage for historians of early Christianity are confirmed by what the church historian Eusebius says about it.

Eusebius in the early fourth century thought that Philo in the first century in writing about the Therapeutae was describing early Christians. He singles out one aspect of Philo's account of their musical practices as agreeing with the church music of his own day.

What need is there in connection with these things to speak of their meetings together, . . . the exercises even now customarily accomplished by us, especially those we are accustomed to fulfill at the festival of the passion of the Savior with fasting, vigils through the night, and attention to the divine words? The writer

²⁷ This is the interpretation that my translation assumes, but antiphonos ("answer in response") may not have yet had the technical sense of answering choruses. The wording may refer only to the contrasting pitches of male and female voices. Philo elsewhere in Life of Moses 1.180 and 2.256-257 also refers to the choruses of men and women in Exodus 15, where he seems to describe the men and women singing together with the low voices of the men and the high voices of the women blended into a harmonious melody.

referred to [Philo] gave in his own writing a description exactly agreeing with those things that are observed until now by us alone. He narrates the vigils of the great festival, its exercises, the hymns we are accustomed to recite, and how while one sings the Psalm decorously in time, the rest listen attentively in quietness and join in singing the refrains of the hymns.²⁸

Eusebius claims (certainly incorrectly) that the description is of Christians because they alone observe the customs that Philo describes. That seems to refer to the all-night vigils and would not include the responsorial singing (which Jews also did), but it is notable that this manner of singing (that is, responsorial) is the only aspect of the musical practices that he singles out for mention as done by Christians. Eusebius's words are a testimony to responsorial singing being the common form of Christian practice in his day. He underscores the attentiveness of the congregation in listening to the one who sings the lead and their participation in singing the ending of the Psalms.

Some information about pagan practices fills out the background.²⁹ Literary sources once more do not tell us much about

²⁸ Church History 2.17.21-22.

²⁹ A brief introduction to the available sources on music (especially singing) in pagan clubs and associations is now available in Stephen G. Wilson, "Early Christian Music," in Julian V. Hills et al., eds., Common Life in the Early Church: Essays Honoring Graydon Snyder (Harrisburg: Trinity Press International, 1998),

the manner in which singing was done; the treatises that were produced "On Music" mostly deal with the technical aspects of music. There is a first-century pictorial representation, however, that provides a suggestive parallel to Philo's description of the Therapeutae. The scene comes from a wall painting at Herculaneum, one of the cities destroyed by the eruption of Mt. Vesuvius in A.D. 79.³⁰ It depicts a temple of the Egyptian goddess Isis. In front of the temple an attendant kindles a fire on the altar. At the head of the stairs two figures each hold a sistrum (a metal rattle used in the cult of Isis) and at the bottom of the picture two more figures each hold a sistrum and one person plays an aulos (a pipe). Between the altar and the temple there are arranged two choruses, each containing about twenty persons. As far as can be made out from the heads for which details are given, the chorus on the spectator's left is made up of men and the one on the right of women. A director stands between them, apparently leading them in

pp. 390-401, although he (to my mind incorrectly) downplays Jewish evidence in favor of pagan evidence relative to Christian practice. Wilson notes (pp. 399-400) that for the associations the evidence points to communal participation rather than solo performance; where the singular (hymnodos, hymn singer) is used it refers to member of a group.

³⁰ A black and white reproduction is found in my Backgrounds of Early Christianity, 3rd edn., 2nd printing (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004), p. 273.

song. The arrangement of the singers suggests some sort of antiphonal or alternating song, although unison singing cannot be excluded. The practice of the Therapeutae described by Philo, therefore, would fit the cultural context as to manner of singing.

Returning to the Christian sources, we can now bring the evidence for church practice back closer to New Testament times with some confidence that the allusions do indeed refer to what was actually done in church. We do not have explicit reference to antiphonal singing in early Christian sources, but it may be that Pliny the Younger is referring to such soon after the New Testament period in the early second century. Origen in commenting on the Song of Solomon speaks of two choirs answering each other, one composed of the bride and her maids and the other of the bridegroom and his companions. Presumably he offers this explanation because he is familiar with such a practice of male and female choruses singing antiphonally, but we do not know if he was acquainted with this practice from churches.³¹

Responsorial singing is confirmed by sources widely separated geographically at the end of the second century. We may note the words of Tertullian from Carthage in North Africa at the beginning of the third century:

The more diligent in prayer are accustomed to add to their prayers the "Hallelujah" Psalms and such other Psalms, at the closing of which the company responds.³²

³¹ Origen, Commentary on the Song of Songs 1.1.

³² Tertullian, On Prayer 27.

Clement of Alexandria in Egypt at the end of the second century criticized the hypocrisy of some church members by making a contrast between worldly and Christian singing:

After having paid reverence to the discourse about God, they leave within what they have heard. And outside [the meeting] they foolishly amuse themselves with impious playing and amatory quavering, occupied with pipe-playing and dancing, and intoxication, all kinds of trash. They who sing thus and sing in response are those who before hymned immortality.³³

Clement does not say how they "hymned immortality," but his specifying "sing in response" in reference to the worldly singing is likely suggested by the parallel practice of responsorial singing in church. At least, Clement implies that they had all participated in the church's singing.

Clement makes another statement that refers to the unison or group singing of the Psalms, whether by Jews or Christians or both is not absolutely clear. In describing the singing at Greek banquets he mentions as two alternatives singing by all together "with one voice after the manner of the Hebrew Psalms" or taking turns in the singing.³⁴ The implication seems to be that the usual manner of rendering the Psalms known to Clement was for the whole group to join in singing them. I think that we can add testimony from the beginning of the second century for this unison congregational singing.

³³ Clement of Alexandria, Instructor 3.11.80.4.

³⁴ Instructor 2.4.44.

Even as Philo drew on pagan musical practice to describe the activities of a Jewish religious group, so a Christian author nearly a century after Philo, Ignatius of Antioch, at the beginning of the second century drew on that practice in alluding to Christian practice. He is exhorting to unity, but seems to employ Christian musical practice as well as a pagan musical illustration to make his point:

For your deservedly famous presbytery, worthy of God, is attuned to the bishop as strings [are] to a harp. Therefore by your concord and harmonious love Jesus Christ is being sung. Now all of you together become a chorus so that being harmoniously in concord and receiving the key note from God in unison you may sing with one voice through Jesus Christ to the Father.³⁵

Ignatius uses a musical instrument as an illustration, a common illustration in other Christian authors, but Ignatius, like them, speaks of the church's practice as only vocal music, singing.³⁶

The unity of the church makes it like a chorus that sings with one voice. I take it that the illustration reflects actual church practice--the whole church singing in unison. The pagan background of his imagery is a chorus gathered around an altar, as is clear in another of Ignatius's statements:

³⁵ Ignatius, Ephesians 4.

³⁶ Examples collected in my A Cappella Music in the Public Worship of the Church, 3rd edn. (Fort Worth: Star Bible Publishing Co., 1999), pp. 43-58 and further bibliography given through the book.

While an altar is still ready, so that by becoming a chorus in love, you may sing to the Father in Christ Jesus.³⁷

It probably goes without saying in this context that the singing in the early church was unaccompanied by instrumental music. This fact is recognized by nearly all historians of church music and of Christianity in the ancient and early Medieval periods. I could say "by all of the historians," but I cover myself in case of possible exceptions. The fact of early Christian a cappella music nonetheless needs to be stated, because so much of what is styled "Christian music" today is instrumentally conceived. Classic church music, however, is vocal music and was so until quite modern times. Even when organs were present, the music initially was primarily vocal.

There is no evidence for the use of a musical instrument in the congregational assemblies of early Christians. The congregational singing was not accompanied by a musical instrument. The only instrument used was the human voice. When the musical instruments of the Old Testament were applied to Christians, the instruments were interpreted of the human body. Clement of Alexandria is typical in his comments on Psalm 150:

The Spirit, distinguishing from such revelry [at pagan banquets that he has referred to] the divine service, sings, "Praise him with the sound of the trumpet"; for with the sound of trumpet he shall raise the dead. "Praise him on the psaltery"; for the tongue is the psaltery of the Lord. "And praise him on the lyre."

³⁷ Ignatius, Romans 2.2.

By the lyre is meant the mouth struck by the Spirit, as it were by a plectrum. "Praise with the timbrel and dance," refers to the church meditating on the resurrection of the dead in resounding skin [the timbrel was made of skin stretched tight on a frame]. "Praise him on the chords and organ." Our body he calls an organ, and its nerves are the strings, by which it has received harmonious tension, and when struck by the Spirit, it gives forth human voices. "Praise him on the clashing cymbals." He calls the tongue the cymbal of the mouth, which resounds with the pulsation of the lips. Therefore he cried to humanity, "Let every breath praise the Lord," because he cares for every breathing thing which he has made. For a human being is truly a pacific instrument; while other instruments, if you investigate, you will find to be warlike, inflaming to lusts, or kindling up amours, or rousing wrath.³⁸

Many other passages could be quoted that take a similar approach. The interpretation of the human body as an instrument of music is found in Judaism in Philo and the Dead Sea Scrolls also. Early Christians understood the human body to be the only instrument God approved for use in his praise. As a modern correspondent of mine put it, "The voice is the only instrument created by God."

Different from this allegorical approach to the instruments of the Old Testament taken by the school of Alexandria, the school

³⁸ Clement of Alexandria, Instructor 2.4.41.4-42.1. Translation from the Ante-Nicene Fathers, Vol. II, pp. 248-249.

of Antioch took the historical approach of distinguishing the covenants. Theodoret of Cyrhus in Syria is quite explicit:

Question: If songs were invented by unbelievers to seduce men, but were allowed to those under the law on account of their childish state, why do those who have received the perfect teaching of grace in their churches still use songs, just like the children under the law?

Answer: It is not simple singing that belongs to the childish state, but singing with [accompanied by] lifeless instruments, with dancing, and with clappers. Hence the use of such instruments and the others that belong to the childish state is excluded from the singing in the churches, and simple singing is left. For it awakens the soul to a fervent desire for that which is described in the songs.

(Questions and Answers for the Orthodox 107)

To summarize, early Christian, Jewish, and pagan sources indicate the following forms of vocal rendition: (1) solo, (2) responsorial of two types--with the community responding either by repeating what the leader has sung or singing a set refrain, (3) antiphonal, and (4) unison or group. Solo performance is largely absent from the Christian sources, except in settings other than the Sunday service for the Lord's supper. The other options, I would repeat, are all forms of "congregational singing." They each (responsorial, antiphonal, as well as unison) involve participation by all the congregation, even if not all at the same time. They required close attention by everyone to the words and to the part of others as well as one's own. And that would be the

point of the New Testament references to singing and its purposes of instruction, edification, reciprocal concern, and mutuality.

The usual manner of congregational singing in the present, with four-part harmony, occasional voice leads, and western or African style melodies are obviously different and culturally conditioned. But the essential of congregational participation with all the people singing most or some of the time and even such an incidental as a song leader have very ancient roots indeed. And we can aspire to a similarity in spiritual content and purpose in what is sung.