

Miriam, Moses and Antiphonal Psalmody in the Medieval Liturgy

J. Frank Henderson

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www.jfrankhenderson.com

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Outline

Introduction

Two Accounts from *The Myroure of Oure Ladye*

The Story of Moses and Miriam: Origins and Transmission

Augustine

Philo of Alexandria

Eusebius

Other Jewish Traditions

The Story of Choirs of Angels: Origins and Transmission

Socrates Scholasticus

Joseph Bingham

Ephraem Syrus

Discussion

Introduction

The psalms and biblical canticles of medieval daily prayer (opus dei, divine office; today, liturgy of the hours), were generally chanted antiphonally when the office was prayed by communities of worshippers. By this is meant that the community was divided into two parts and that each took turns chanting alternate verses of the psalms and canticles. Where did the practice of antiphonal chanting come from? When and where did it begin?

In our own time these questions have been addressed by modern scholarly studies, In the middle ages, however, they were the subject of tradition, legend and imagination. Here I present two medieval accounts of the origins of antiphonal chanting. One is of particular interest inasmuch as Miriam and Moses are given credit as originators and models of this type of worship. I also provide as much additional information as I can regarding the origins and transmission of these stories.

It needs to be mentioned that ancient and medieval writers sometimes confused the practice of responsive singing (solo voice alternating with the whole community) and antiphonal

singing (two halves of the community singing alternatively). They also sometimes confused the language used: responsorial and antiphonal. For present purposes, however, these matters are set aside.

The two stories under consideration here are recounted in a fifteenth century liturgical commentary, *The Myroure of Oure Ladye*. This was written for the nuns of the Brigittine monastery of Syon, near London, by an unknown author; it is dated to the second half of the fifteenth century.

Two Accounts from *The Myroure of Oure Ladye*

The two stories of interest here may be found in John Henry Blunt, ed., *The Myroure of our Ladye*. EETS extra series 18, 1873. The passage of interest is in chapter 13, pp 35-37. The title of this chapter is as follows:

Who ordenyd fyrste the praysyng of god to be songe in quyers, and why psalmes ar oftener songe in holy chyche then other partes of holy scrypture. [Capitulo .xiii.

The first account is given at the beginning of the chapter:

Saynt Austyn [Augustine] sayth that Moyses was the fyrste fynder of this maner of syngynge in quyere. For when god had smyten Egypte with seuen plages, & delyueryd thense hys peple whyche wente thurgh the red see on theyre fete dry, for the water stode up as a walle, and abode tyl they were paste, & Pharao the kinge of Egipte with all hys hooste folowyd after for to haue slayne them; then the water fell upon the same Pharao, & upon all his, & drowned them euerychone, wherfore Moyses in praysyng and thankyng of god for that greate myracle made a songe that begyneth. *Cantemus domino*. whyche is youre fyrst psalme at lawdes, on fryday and then he ordenyd tow quyers, one of men, an other of women, to synge & to prayse god. And in the mennes quyere he was chyfe chanter hymselfe, & hys syster Mary was chyfe chanteres in the womens quyere, as saint Austyn sayth, & as yt is writen in the second boke of scripture.

After this many other bothe men & wyemen fylled with the spiryte of god made songes, & psalmes to the praysyng of god, & specyally the kyng & prophete Dauyd, whome god chose fro chyldehod to the greate gyfte, that he shulde be prynce of syngers of goddes meruayles, & maker of psalmes to our lordes praysynge

Reasons for singing psalms are then presented, at length, after which the second account is given toward the end of the chapter.

The holy pope called Damasus, ordeyned that these psalms shulde be songe one verse on the tone syde of the quyere, an other on the other syde. For a holy bysshop that was the thyerde of antioche after saynt Peter harde aungels on an hyghe mountayne synge psalmes

in suche maner; quier to quier, & so was that maner of syngynge fyrst begonne in grece, & after ordened to be kepte in the chyrche of Rome as is before sayde.

The Story of Moses and Miriam: Origins and Transmission

The attribution of antiphonal singing to Miriam and Moses raises several questions. Where did the author of *The Myroure of Oure Ladye* find this tradition? How was this tradition transmitted from its origins down to the late fifteenth century?

Augustine

The source of the story of Miriam and Moses is twice said to be St Austin (Augustine). However, I have been unable to find it in modern editions of Augustine's works or in appropriate indices. In addition, it is not to be found in medieval versions of the Rule of St Augustine, nor in Hugh of St Victor's Exposition of the Rule of St Augustine (Latin text or English translation). I hope that readers who know this literature better than I will be able to supply further information. Of course, works were attributed to Augustine in the middle ages that are now considered to be by other authors. This tradition is unlikely to have jumped straight from the first to the fifteenth century but as yet the path of transmission remains obscure.

Philo of Alexandria

The story given in *The Myroure of Oure Ladye* is highly reminiscent of the account of the worship of the Jewish group called the Therapeutae that is provided by the first century writer, Philo of Alexandria. This is shown in the following excerpt from Philo's *The Contemplative Life*. "The Contemplative Life," pp 41-57. In *The Contemplative Life, the Giants, and Selections*. Translation and introduction by David Winston. New York: Paulist Press 1981
[Here p 56.]

After the meal they hold the sacred vigil, which is celebrated in the following manner. They all rise up in a body and at the center of the refectory they first form two choirs, one of men, the other of women, the leader and precentor chosen for each being the most highly esteemed among them and the most musical. They then sing hymns to God composed in many meters and melodies, now chanting together, now moving hands and feet in concordant harmony, and full of inspiration they sometimes chant processional odes, and sometimes the lyrics of a chorus in standing position as well as executing the strophe and antistrophe of the choral dance.

Then when each choir has completed for itself its own part in the feasting, having drunk as in Bacchic revelries of the strong wine of God's love, they mix, and the two choirs

become one, a copy of the choir organized at the Red Sea on the occasion of the wonders there wrought. For at the divine command, the sea became a cause of salvation to the one side and of utter destruction to the other. For as the sea was rent asunder, drawn downward by the violent recoil of its waves, and on either side, facing each other, the waters virtually walled up in solid form, the intervening space thus opened up broadened into a highway fully dry, through which the people marched to the opposite mainland, safely escorted to higher ground. But when the waters came rushing in with the returning tide, and from either side poured over the dried sea floor, the pursuing enemy were overwhelmed and perished. After witnessing and experiencing this act, which went beyond word, thought, and hope, men and women alike were filled with divine ecstasy, forming a single choir, sang hymns of thanksgiving to God their Savior, the men led by the prophet Moses and the women by the Prophetess Miriam.

Modeled above all on this, the choir of the Therapeutae, both male and female, singing in harmony, the soprano of the women blending with the bass of the men, produces true musical concord.

Eusebius of Caesarea

The only Christian writer between Philo and *The Myroure of Oure Ladye* that I have come across who alludes to Philo's description of the Therapeutae is Eusebius of Caesarea (fourth century). Book II, chapter 17 of C.F. Cruse, translator and editor, *The Ecclesiastical History of Eusebius Pamphilus*. London: Henry G. Bohn, 1851 is entitled "The account given by Philo respecting the ascetics of Egypt", though there is no clear description of antiphonal singing.

Additional Jewish Traditions

Here I quote several other Jewish traditions and writers regarding the Song of the Sea (Exodus 15) and the practice of antiphonal singing; some, in fact, refer back to Philo. Some follow familiar paths, while others go their own way.

Louis Ginsburg

The following appears in Louis Ginsburg, *The Legends of the Jews*, vol III. Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society of America 1968, p 32.

When Israel prepared to sound their praises to God for delivering them from destruction in the Red Sea, God, to show His recognition of Israel's fulfilment of the token of the Abrahamic covenant, bade the angels who came to intone their song, wait: "Let My children sing first," He said.

...

But even after the men had completed their song, it was not yet given to the angels to raise their voices, for after the men following the women of Israel, and only then came the turn of the angels. Then they began to murmur, and said, “Is it not enough that the men have preceded us? Shall the women come before us also?” But God replied, “As surely as ye live, so it is.”

Naham M Sarna

A recent commentary on the book of Exodus makes the following comments: *Exodus: The JPS Torah Commentary*. The Traditional Hebrew Text with the New JPS Translation. Commentary by Nahum M. Sarna. Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society 1991, p76 82..

The extensive use of parallel clauses, the opening prose statement that attributes the *shirah* to “Moses and the Israelites,” and the notice about Miriam and the women also singing – all these suggest that it was sung antiphonally. As early as the first century B.C.E. Philo of Alexandria imagines the Israelites forming two choruses, Moses leading the males and his sister, the females. Rabbinic interpretation understood that the *shirah* was sung responsively by Moses and the people. Exactly how the antiphony was to have operated is left unclear and remains a matter of dispute. One view was that the people repeated or completed the phase or verse that Moses initiated. Another held that the verses were recited by them in alternation. Still another view had the people reciting the entire song after Moses had finished it. (p 76)

This popular English title [“Song of Miriam”] is somewhat misleading since the text states that Miriam recites only the first line of the *shirah*. However, a midrash has it that Miriam and the women actually recite the entire song. These verses affirm the custom, chronicled in Judges 11:34 and 1 Samuel 18:6, of women going forth with music and dance to hail the returning victorious hero, although in the present instance, it is God and not man who is the victor. (p 82)

Elihu Feldman

In a popular article on the World Wide Web, cantor Feldman has posted the following “Cantorial Comments” at <http://www.uscj.org/njersy/w-orange/cantor/cantor2001jan.htm>

According to Zamir Chorale conductor Joshua Jacobson’s reading of the verses in Exodus [chapter 15], the ancient Israelite choir had two conductors, both of whom were Levites. The first was Moses, who conducted the basses and tenors: “Then Moses and the men of Israel sang this song to the Lord: I sing to the Lord for He has greatly triumphed.” The second conductor was his sister Miriam the prophetess, Aaron’s sister, who led the sopranos and altos; when she took the drum in her hand, all the women followed her with

drums and dances, and the men and women sang antiphonally: “I sing to the Lord for he has greatly triumphed, casting chariots and horses into the sea.”

Professor James Kugel offers a different approach . . . Did Miriam simply form a women’s chorus to sing along with the men, yet separately? Such modest behavior seemed altogether praiseworthy, and a number of authors specifically mentioned it: Philo of Alexandria (ca 20 BCE - 40 or 50 CE) wrote: They set up two choirs, one of men and one of women, on the beach, and sang hymns of thanksgiving to God. Over these two choirs Moses and his sister presided and led the hymns. Ephraem Syrus who lived in the fourth century wrote: The people were divided into two groups on that day, so that they might sing the wondrous hymn to Him who split the sea and drowned their oppressors on that day. Moses led the men in singing and Miriam, the women.

The Story of The Choirs of Angels

The second account of the origins of antiphonal singing is attributed by *The Myroure of Oure Lady* to the practice of two choirs of angels, as “heard” by the third bishop of Antioch after Peter. This is understood to be a reference to bishop Ignatius of Antioch (beginning of the second century). More is known about the origins and transmission of this story than that of Miriam and Moses.

Socrates Scholasticus

Attribution to Ignatius appears to have originated with the Greek theologian known as Socrates Scholasticus (born ca 380). The source is A.C. Zenos, ed., “The Ecclesiastical History of Socartes Scholasticus,” book VI, chapter VIII, vol 2, p 144.. In *A Select Library of Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church. Second Series*, ed. Philip Schaff and Henry Wace. Grand Rapids: W. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company 1957. Socrates states:

The Arians, as we have said, held their meetings without the city. As often therefore as the festal days occurred – I mean Saturday and Lord’s day – in each week, on which assemblies are usually held in the churches, they congregated within the city gates about the public squares, and sang responsive verses adapted to the Arian heresy. This they did during the greater part of the night: and again in the morning, chanting the same songs which they called responsive, they paraded through the midst of the city, and so passed out of the gates to go to their places of assembly. But since they did not desist from making use of insulting expressions in relation to the Homoousians, often singing such words as these: “Where are they that say three things are but one power?” – John fearing lest any of the more simple should be drawn away from the church by such kind of hymns, opposed to them some of his own people, that they also employing themselves in chanting nocturnal hymns, might obscure the effort of the Arians, and confirm his own party in the profession of their faith. John’s design indeed seemed to be good, but it

issued in tumult and dangers. For as the Homoousians performed their nocturnal hymns with greater display – for there were invented by John silver crosses for them on which lighted wax-tapers were carried, provided at the expense of the empress Eudoxia – the Arians who were very numerous, and fired with envy, resolved to revenge themselves by a desperate and riotous attack upon their rivals. For from the remembrance of their own recent domination, they were full of confidence in their ability to overcome, and of contempt for their adversaries. Without delay therefore, on one of these nights, they engaged in a conflict; and Briso, one of the eunuchs of the empress, who was at that time leading the chanters of these hymns, was wounded by a stone in the forehead, and also some of the people on both sides were killed. Whereupon the emperor being angered forbade the Arians to chant their hymns any more in public. Such were the events of this occasion.

We must now however make some allusion to the origin of this custom in the church of responsive singing. Ignatius [3] third bishop of Antioch in Syria from the apostle Peter, who also had held intercourse with the apostles themselves, saw a vision of angels hymning in alternative chants the Holy Trinity. Accordingly he introduced 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 responsive hymns.

Footnote 3, above, reads as follows:

There has been some difference of opinion as to whether Socrates is correct in here ascribing the institution of responsive chants to Ignatius. Valesius doubts Socrates' accuracy, but other authorities are inclined to the view that Ignatius did introduce these chants, and Flavian and Diodorus, during the reign of Constantine, to whom Valesius ascribes their origin, simply developed them.

A cross reference is then given to Bingham, *Christ. Antiq.* XIV, 1, and this source is considered in the next section.

Bingham's Christian Antiquities

Joseph Bingham's exhaustive studies of the history of the early church then provides additional information regarding Ignatius and antiphonal singing. The source is Joseph Bingham, *Origines Ecclesiasticae*; or, the *Antiquities of the Christian Church* and Other Works, 9 vol. London: William Straker, 1844. [Here book XIV, chapter 1, section XI. Volume 4, pp 433-436; his footnotes have been omitted.]

The title of Book XIV is "On that part of divine service which the ancients comprised under the general name of missa catechumenorum, 'the service of the catechumens, or ante-communion service,' that of chapter 1 is "Of the psalmody of the ancient church" and that of

section XI is “Sometimes alternately, by the Congregation divided into two Parts.” Words in square brackets are transliterated from Greek script.

This way of singing the psalms alternatively was, when the congregation, dividing themselves into two parts, repeated the psalms by courses, verse for verse one after another, and not, as formerly, all together. As the other, for its common conjunction of voices, was properly called ‘symphony;’ so this, for its division into two parts, and alternate answers, was commonly called ‘antiphony,’ and sometimes *responsoria*, “the singing by responsals.” This is plain from that noted iambic of Gregory Nazianzen, [sumphonon, antiphonon aggelon stasin], where the symphony denotes their singing alternatively verse by verse by turns. Socrates calls it [antiphonon umnodian], “the antiphonal hymnody;” and St Ambrose, *responsoria*, “singing by way of responsals.” For, comparing the Church to the sea, he says, “From the responsories of the psalms, and singing of men, women, virgins, and children, there results a harmonious noise like the waves of the sea.” He expressly mentions women in other places, as allowed to sing in public, though, otherwise, the apostle had commanded them to keep silence in the church. St Austin also frequently mentions this way of singing by parts, or alternatively by responses; and he carries the original of it in the Western Church no higher than the time of St Ambrose, when he was under the persecution of the Arian Empress Justina, mother of the younger Valentinian; at which time both he and Paulinus, who writes the Life of St Ambrose, tell us the way of antiphonal singing was first brought into the Church of Milan, in imitation of the custom of the Eastern Churches; and that from this example it presently spread all over the Western Churches,. What was the first original of it in the Eastern Church is not so certainly agreed upon by writers either ancient or modern. Theodoret says, “that Flavian and Diodorus first brought in the way of singing David’s Psalms alternately, into the Church of Antioch in the reign of Constantine.” But Socrates carries the original of this way of singing hymns to the Holy Trinity as high as Ignatius. Valesius thinks Socrates was mistaken; but Cardinal Bona [1677] and Pagi [1738] think both accounts may be true, taking the one to speak of David’s Psalms only and the other of hymns composed for the service of the Church. Some say the custom was first begun by Ignatius, but destroyed by Paulus Samosatensis, and revived again by Flavian. But Pagi’s conjecture seems most reasonable, that Flavian only introduced this way of singing the psalms in the Greek tongue at Antioch, whereas it had been used in the Syrian language long before, as he shows out of Theodorus of Mopsuestia, and Valesius himself confirms this out of the same author, whose testimony is preserved by Nicetas. However this matter be as the first original of this way of antiphonal psalmody, it is certain that from the time that Flavian either instituted or revived it at Antioch, it prevailed in a short time to become the general practice of the whole Church. St Chrysostom encouraged it in the vigils at Constantinople, in opposition to the Arians. St Basil speaks of it in his time, as the received custom of all the East. And we have seen before, how, from the time of St Ambrose, it prevailed over all the West. And it was a method of singing so taking and delightful, that they sometimes used it, where two or three were met together for private devotion. As Socrates particularly remarks of the Emperor Theodosius Junior and his sisters, that they were used to sing alternate hymns together, every morning, in the royal

palace.

When Bingham says that “St Austin also frequently mentions this way of singing by parts, or alternatively by responses,” he quotes Augustine as follows (p 433): :

Aug. Serm. In Psalm. xxvi in Prefat. Voces istae psalmi, quas audivimus, et ex parte cantavimus, etc. (89)

Aug. Serm. In Psalm. xlvi. (Bened. 1700, vol iv, p 305). In hoc psalmo, quem cantatum audivimus, cui cantando respondimus, es sumus dicturi que nostis.

Note that in neither case are Miriam and Moses mentioned.

Ephraem Syrus

Cantor Feldman, above, has indirectly referred to another ancient writer, Ephraem Syrus, as a source of information regarding the history of antiphonal singing.

Ephraem Syrus who lived in the fourth century wrote: The people were divided into two groups on that day, so that they might sing the wondrous hymn to Him who split the sea and drowned their oppressors on that day. Moses led the men in singing and Miriam, the women

James McKinnon, in his *Music in Early Christian Literature* (Cambridge University Press 1987), p 92, however, views this attribution with some reservation. He explains that published editions of Ephraem’s works contain much spurious material and need to be interpreted with great caution.

Secondly, the biographical tradition that Ephraem trained choirs of virgins and boys to sing remains plausible enough; and that he employed a cithara in doing so, while somewhat less plausible, is not out of the question. Still, both points require a very careful analysis of the sources involved. p 92

He quotes a portion of Ephraem’s *Hymns of Eastertide*, as being a source of this notion, and points out that his “music imagery ... is striking, if obscure” p 93.

The young men their alleluias,
the boys their psalms,
The virgins their madrashe,
the rulers their achievements....

Discussion

It is interesting in the first place, that the history of antiphonal singing in the Christian liturgy should have been of such great interest to our ancestors. It obviously stimulated the

imagination, giving rise to several accounts of its origins. The writer of *The Myroure of Oure Ladye* clearly thought it worthwhile to communicate these accounts to the nuns of Syon Abbey.

We do not know to what extent the average nun or monk was aware of these “origin myths” as they sang antiphonally down the centuries. If they did know these stories, did it make a difference in their prayer and piety? Did they value the association between themselves and Miriam and Moses or the choirs of angels? Might having Miriam as model have been of any special significance for nuns? Unfortunately these questions remain unanswered.

There is considerable evidence for the transmission of the account of the choirs of angels and Ignatius of Antioch through the centuries to the writer of *The Myroure of Oure Ladye* in the late fifteenth century. The transmission of the story of Miriam and Moses, in contrast, has left no foot prints (at least that I can find) between the first and the fifteenth centuries.

Miriam and the role of women singers in biblical history have received scholarly attention in our own time; the following references are merely a few examples.

Deborah Menken Gill

The Female Prophets: Gender and Leadership in the Biblical Tradition

Ph.D. Dissertation Fuller Theological Seminary 1991

Eunice Blanchard Poethig

The Victory song tradition of the women of Israel

Ph.D. Dissertation Union Theological Seminary 1985

Rita J Burns

Has the Lord indeed spoken only through Moses? A Study of the Biblical Portrait of Miriam?

SBL Dissertation Series 84

Atlanta GA: Scholars Press 1987

Carol A. Newsom and Sharon H. Ringe, eds.

The Women's Bible Commentary

London: SPCK and Louisville: Westminster/John Knox 1992

The following references are also of interest with respect to singing in the church, and singing by women in early Christian tradition.

Johannes Quasten

Music & Worship in Pagan & Christian Antiquity

Washington DC: National Association of Pastoral Musicians 1973, 1983

James McKinnon, ed

Music in Early Christian Literature
Cambridge University Press 1987

Finally, the development of Christian daily prayer has been considered at length in the following studies:

Paul F. Bradshaw
Daily Prayer in the Early Church. A Study of the Origin and Early Development of the Divine Office
Alcuin Club Collections 63
Alcuin Club / SPCK 1982

Robert Taft
The Liturgy of the Hours in East and West: The Origins of the Divine Office and its Meaning for Today
Collegeville: Liturgical Press 1986

These authors consider the several musical practices of early Christian worship: unison and responsive as well as antiphonal. Robert Taft notes that “antiphonal forms of psalmody appear from the fourth century,” as a development of the earlier practice of responsive singing (soloist and entire community) (p 139).