

ANCIENT CHRISTIAN COMMENTARIES ON CHANTING
(Part I)

Clement of Alexandria (+215), in his work *Paedagogús* [The Instructor] (PG VIII, 441), writes the following:

The Spirit, distinguishing the Divine Liturgy from this sort of revelry, sings: "Praise Him with the sound of trumpet", and indeed He will raise the dead with the sound of the trumpet. "Praise Him on the psaltery", for the tongue, is the psaltery of the Lord. And "praise Him on the harp", let the harp be taken to mean the mouth, played by the Spirit as if by a plectrum. "Praise Him with timbrel and dance" refers to the Church meditating on the resurrection of the flesh in the resounding membrane. "Praise Him with strings and flute" refers to our body as an instrument and its sinews as strings from which it derives its harmonious tension, and when strummed by the Spirit it gives off human notes. "Praise Him with tuneful cymbals" speaks of the tongue as the cymbal of the mouth which sounds as the lips are moved. Therefore the psalmist called out to all mankind, "Let every breath praise the Lord", because He watches over every breathing thing He has made.

A work attributed to Origen (+265), but actually written by Evagrius of Pontus (+399), essentially reinforces what is said in the passage above. The title of this work is *Selecta in Psalmos* (PG XII, 1304).

"Praise the Lord on the harp, praise Him with the psaltery of ten string etc." The harp is the practical soul set in motion by the commandments of God; the psaltery is the pure mind set in motion by spiritual knowledge. The musical instruments of the Old Testament are not unsuitable for us if understood spiritually: figuratively the body can be called a harp and the soul a psaltery, which are likened musically to the wise man who fittingly employs the limbs of the body and the powers of the soul as strings. Sweetly sings he who sings in the mind, uttering spiritual songs, singing in his heart to God. The ten strings stands for ten sinews, for a string is a sinew. And the body can also be said to be the psaltery of ten strings, as it has five senses and five powers of the soul, with each power arising from a respective sense. "Sing unto the Lord a new song, etc." He who is renewed after the interior man would sing the new song; he has put off the old man and put on the new, being made new in the image of the Creator.

In his Letter to Marcellinus (PG XXVII, 40-D), St. Athanasius the Great (+373) says the following:

Those who do not recite the sacred songs in this manner, do not sing with understanding, but rather gratify themselves and incur blame, because "Praise is not seemly in the mouth of a sinner" (Eccles 15.9). But those who sing in the manner described above — that is, with the melody of the words proceeding from the rhythm of the soul and its harmony with the spirit — such as they sing with the tongue and sing also with the mind, not only for themselves, but also to benefit greatly those who would hear them. Hence, blessed David, by singing in this manner for Saul, pleased God for his own sake and removed the confusion and manic passion from Saul, and made his soul be at peace. The priests sang in this manner, summoning the souls of the people to tranquility and to unanimity with the heavenly choir. Hence, to recite the psalms with melody is not done from a desire for pleasing sound, but is a manifestation of harmony among the thoughts of the soul. And melodious reading is a sign of the well-ordered and tranquil condition of the mind.

In his *Life of Macrina* (PG XLVI, 992-3), which is dedicated to his sister, St. Macrina, St. Gregory of Nyssa (+395) tells us the following:

While we were involved in these activities, and as the psalmody of the virgins, mingled with lamentation, was heard about the place — the rumor of her death, I know not how, having circulated everywhere — all those who lived in the area gathered for the sad event, so that the forecourt was not adequate to house all those assembled. At day-break, when the chanted vigil in her honor was completed after the manner of martyrs' celebrations, the crowd of men and women who had come together from the entire region broke in on the psalmody with their loud wailing. But I, though my spirit was in so sorry a state because of my misfortune, contrived as much as possible from the circumstances that nothing befitting a funeral of this sort be omitted. So I separated the assembled people according to sex, and mixed the crowd of women with the choir of virgins, and the male population with the band of monks, thus bringing it about that one coordinated and harmonious psalmody resulted, like that of a practiced chorus, blended from the graceful common song of all.

And, of course, there is the famous passage from St. Basil the Great's work on the *Hexaemeron* [The Six Days of Creation] (4.7):

If the ocean is good and worthy of praise from God, how much more beautiful is the assembly of a Church like this, where the voices of men, of children, and of women, arise in our prayers to God, mingling and resounding like the waves which beat upon the shore. This Church enjoys a profound calm, and malicious spirits cannot trouble it with the breath of heresy. Be deserving, therefore, of the approbation of the Lord by remaining faithful to such good guidance in our Lord Jesus Christ, to Whom be glory and power forever and ever. Amen.

God willing, as other passages come to my attention, I will send these to you.

Please pray for me.

In Christ,

✠Ephraim, Metropolitan of Boston