

Which Hymns were sung in Ancient Christian Liturgies?

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If anything recited at Christian meetings is regarded as a hymn, the above question is tautological. Ralph BRUCKER's studies have shattered the facile and romantic assumption that passages of elevated style within the prose texts of the New Testament are quotations of hymns that were performed in Christian congregations.¹ There is no reason to assume that those texts, which could not even be regarded as poetry according to ancient standards, ever existed in any other form than as part of their literary context. While BRUCKER's approach emphasizes literary characteristics of certain texts, the assessment of the liturgical contexts in which such texts may or may not have been performed calls for the reconstruction of actual congregational practice. If the alleged hymns were not recited within Christian liturgies, would there have been any singing at all? What would have been sung there? The following essay analyses the character and shape of those liturgies in order to determine which songs could have been used there. Instead of looking for the ancient church's songs in the New Testament, it looks for traces of the social background that could help answer the question of which kinds of songs and hymns would have been sung at such meetings.

In addition, extant texts may reflect aspects of the faith of their authors or performers. This does not necessarily imply that important theological tenets must be expressed in poetic form (rather than in prose). There is also no reason to assume that they would have been performed as songs within rituals (rather than discussed in study groups). Nevertheless, one might assume that formally elevated language should express more sublime contents and that this should come to the fore in their ritualized performance. The following essay asks what the data can be expected to reveal about the liturgical use of ancient Christian hymnography. This procedure helps to overcome the simplistic presumption that ancient

¹ Cf. Ralph BRUCKER's paper in this volume and his book 1997.

theologoumena which are regarded as important today (and assumed to be expressed in e.g. Phil 2:6–11) are taken as models for Christian singing in the apostolic church.

The discussion is divided into four sections. The first section sets the stage, exploring the basic conditions for discovering ancient Christian hymns today. It ends with the assumption that some Christians had good reasons to reject the performance of hymns at least in certain situations. The second section refers to explicit statements against hymns and asks what the late antique texts could offer as replacements for such rejected hymns. Next, it returns to the point of departure of the first section by investigating the sympotic context of possible Christian performances of hymns and songs. Hence, the third section takes especially the mealtime prayers of the *Didache* as an example for the insertion of extemporized prose in the place where Greek diners would have performed a solemn hymn. The fourth section discusses the literary forms of the mealtime prayers that came to be regarded as central in the apostolic church.

1. Christian Meetings and the Rejection of Certain Greco-Roman Customs

Several ways to reach these objectives seem viable. Many ancient sources claim or imply that Christians were accustomed to singing songs. However, unless supposed songs are marked as such, then such claims cannot be substantiated by the extant sources. Thus, Pliny's letter mentions the Christians' custom to perform a *carmen*.² He does not, however, give enough details to specify its contents or the shape of its performance. Other approaches assume that texts like the *Magnificat* or *Benedictus*, which became standard elements in the Liturgy of the Hours of the Middle Ages, were originally composed for the purpose of being sung in the congregations and were always used in this way. Gunter KENNEL (1995) has shown that this assumption is unwarranted. Canonical texts are

² “[...] they had met regularly before dawn on a fixed day to chant verses alternately among themselves in honor of Christ as if to a god (*carmenque Christo quasi deo dicere secum invicem*) [...]”, Pliny the Younger, *Letter* 10, transl. LCL 59.289 (text 288). Cf. THRAEDE 2004, 175 n. 78 for observations on the context of the statement and the difficulty or even impossibility of reconstructing the shape of Christian musical performances on the basis of this text. *Carmen* does not imply a hymn; BRUCKER 1997, 108ff.

transformed into prayer texts or rewritten to become songs in many epochs of the history of the Churches.

In the Catholic church the alleged hymn in Phil 2 did not become an official liturgical text before the reform of the breviary after the Second Vatican Council. Earlier attestations of single phrases contained in the later texts do not say anything about the age and the performance of those texts (cf. LEHNARDT 2002 for the *Qaddish*). Prayers were composed as parts of networks of older texts. They use intertextual associations to create meaning in a new composition. The first attestation of a line of a later hymn does not, therefore, say anything about the age of that hymn as a text or whether it was part of a liturgy. It is thus necessary to inquire after the character of early Christian gatherings with regard to hymns and songs that were likely performed in their context.

Attempts to reconstruct the early history of Christian hymnography must overcome, furthermore, the essentialist fallacy that asks, “What *is* an ancient Christian hymn?”³ Instead, it is more useful to suggest plausible scenarios of liturgical contexts for the performance of certain types of texts. These scenarios are based on the assumption that the main occasions and hence the model for early Christian gatherings, were banquets held in a similar manner by Jews, Greeks, Romans, and Christians or a meeting whose ritual structure was derived from and thus resemblant of such banquets.⁴

Chronology also plays an important role. The date of the inscription on a papyrus may or may not indicate the date of the composition of its text. Christian hymnography is well attested from the fourth century on, when the number of hymns increases significantly.⁵ Only very few examples of

³ Mary MCGANN (2000) suggests taking the *contents* (“praise” etc.) of certain texts as point of departure for the search for Christian music. However, she studies non-poetic texts from the 4th/5th cent., a reading them as representative also for much earlier times. Rejecting formal characteristics for the identification of “hymns”, she even discusses acclamations like “Hallelujah” and the *Sanctus* under this rubric. This essay argues that the *distinction* between hymns and anaphoral texts explains their role in the history of Christian worship – not the identification of these two types of utterances in liturgies.

⁴ WILSON 1998 fittingly looks for testimonies pertaining to Christian music in the context of the gatherings of Greco-Roman and Christian associations. Yet, he hardly distinguishes between different occasions that could have required different forms of music, such as the (image of a) sacrifice of an Isis cult in a Temple compared with the meal of a Roman association.

⁵ FERGUSON 2004, 146.148 uses the situation of the 4th/5th cent. (Basil, Cassian) as a yardstick for the interpretation of earlier sources. Yet, such anachronistic approaches blur the differences between earlier and later texts and thus create the historical situation that

pre-Constantinian hymns can be adduced. The point in time when the number of old hymns which are also used in later liturgies increases coincides with the demise of the celebration of the Eucharist as a communal banquet. Although the sympotic structure of the Eucharist began to fade away earlier in certain places, it is probable that the artful composition and chanting of hymns follows the creation of large-scale, public forms of Christian liturgies that abandoned the framework of club banquets. In the Middle Ages, the celebration of the Mass as well as the monastic Liturgy of the Hours is a religious event *sui generis*. Neither the mighty or well trained nor the poor or illiterate persons perform rituals that could be classed as belonging to the same genre as the priests' liturgy of the Mass or the monks' performance of the Liturgy of the Hours. Before that time, the celebrations of Christian clubs closely resembled the way in which similar pagan or Jewish groups would organize their meetings. Thus, it must be asked what Greek or Roman clubs or associations were singing *before* that time of the expansion of Christian hymnography (of the fourth century) in order to reconstruct the background for similar phenomena in Christian groups.

The study of ancient Christian meetings – especially in the context of communal meals – reveals that many Christian groups introduced more or less subtle changes into the structures that were customary in their environment. Thus, Adolf VON HARNACK and more recently Andrew MCGOWAN have shown that many Christian groups designed their Eucharistic celebrations in opposition to certain customs and beliefs of their neighbors (cf. MCGOWAN 1999). Many of those groups shunned meat and wine, the two most important and typical ingredients of pagan festive offerings and banquets. The substitution of bread and wine or water for meat and wine was perceived as a powerful statement against the behavior and system of values of the surrounding society. The theoretical rejection of public sacrifices and other displays of violence and cruelty in Roman society were transformed into the practice of the avoidance of the cuisine of sacrifice. Such a counter-statement only works, however, if large parts of the rest of the ritual context remain intact. This is corroborated by the fact that Christians were not the only groups that used this manner of communal practice and social communication. Pythagoreans and later Rabbis also held symposia and introduced significant changes into the course of the ritualized acts of the formal meal. Christian congregations did not invent

they claim to find in the sources. FERGUSON does not take into account a possible sympotic setting of a Christian performance of songs.

something new, but hallmarked their celebrations in their own characteristic ways.

The abstention from wine among many Christian communities understood as an expression of the rejection of certain features of the surrounding society corresponds to the rejection of musical instruments by Christian writers. Especially the flute seemed to them associated too closely with the pagan cult too closely to be adaptable to Christian artistic expression or entertainment.⁶ Their position towards hymns is more complex, because some authors recommend singing instead of instrumental music. Yet, their pagan neighbors both listened to the flute and sang hymns at solemn occasions.

The observations regarding the abstention from wine (or the rejection of instrumental music) elucidate the history of songs and hymns which could have been recited at certain points during Christian meetings, since many Greek songs mention or are addressed to Greek and Roman gods.⁷

Christians had essentially two ways to react in a situation where they did not feel comfortable reciting such texts. They could have developed a similar system like the Rabbis' approach to idol worship (*avoda zara*), since songs could be defined as mere decoration and hence as devoid of any religiously relevant meaning. In such a case, one could just continue to sing the same songs and ignore the religious implications. While this can never be ruled out regarding single communities, the data rather suggest that Christians tended to replace their Greek and Roman neighbors' hymns and songs with other compositions. An analysis of ancient sources must, therefore, look for traces of texts that might have been used as replacements in this sense. Such replacements must roughly fit into the context of normal Greco-Roman banquets but they must also differ from what was customary in these banquets in significant ways.

Greco-Roman hymns could just have been reworded but performed in similar ways. Like their rejection of the consumption of wine, many Christian groups before Constantine regarded the mere form of pagan hymns as incompatible with Christian performances.

⁶ Cf. QUASTEN 1973, 78–84.176 but also 103–110.161f for the acceptance of zither and lyre. Cf. COSGROVE 2006, 260 referring to Quasten and McKinnon's interpretation of the opposition of the ancient Christian writers against musical instruments.

⁷ Cf. *Apostolic Constitutions* 5.10.2 and METZGER 2000, 59 n. 2.

2. Dangerous Hymns and Early Christian Hymnography

Some Christian sources show a clear disdain for hymns and urge their audience to abide by the reading or recitation of “psalms”. In such cases, the reference to “psalms” refers to the biblical book of Psalms. Hymns and songs are regarded as dangerous because they express heretical positions in beautiful language and make the hearts of the singers and listeners deviate from the truth. In this situation, texts like (probably) Tertullian or the Synod of Laodicea (of the fourth century) demand that one should turn to the biblical book of Psalms in congregational performances.

The purpose of the statement of the Synod of Laodicea, which is repeated in similar contexts, is not clear: “No psalms composed by private individuals (ιδιωτικοί ψαλμοί) nor any uncanonical books may be read (λέγεσθαι) in the church, but only the canonical books of the Old and New Testaments”.⁸ The following canon 60 gives a list of canonical books. Thus, it is not clear whether this canon is at all interested in songs in addition to lections. Moreover, if this and similar statements were designed to abolish the creation and performance of non-biblical poetry for Christian liturgies, then they utterly failed.⁹ For, at the time when these statements were produced and repeated, the first great and well accepted Christian poets flourished. Even if it is unknown for which purposes or liturgical contexts Ephrem the Syrian wrote his *madrāšē*, these compositions eventually entered the liturgical canon of the Syriac churches. Ephrem was all but a heretic and many *madrāšē* were also translated into other languages.

Criticism of non-biblical songs is motivated by the notion that music transports ideology and is hence a means of propaganda and the manipulation of listeners. While this may reflect actual observations, it may also be based on nothing but old clichés. When Plato constructs his totalitarian phantasies for a dictatorship of philosophers, he takes great care to fasten the state’s grip on poetry.¹⁰ All performances of poetry must be regarded as propaganda. Public statements are heresy if they deviate from the stan-

⁸ Can. 59; HEFELE 1907, 1025; transl. NPNF 2.14.158.

⁹ Texts like the can. 59 should not, therefore, be taken as a testimony for the general abolition of non-biblical songs in the churches as suggested e.g. by HENGEL 2006, 219f. The analysis of the sympotic context of early Christian singing is more significant and explains more features of the sources than the search for certain motives – like Christology (according to HENGEL 2006) – in the texts.

¹⁰ Esp. in the second and third books of *Politeia*; cf. COSGROVE 2006, 270–276.

dards regarding contents and form. In the wake of such ideas, uncanonical hymns are suspicious.

The opposite approach – namely the composition of orthodox hymns for the sake of spreading orthodoxy (instead of turning to canonical and hence undisputable texts for recitation) – can be seen as early as the third century when great theological scholars are praised for the composition of orthodox hymns against the heretical ones.¹¹

Some of the early so-called heretical pieces are preserved. Hippolytus quotes these works in his heresiological treatise. Two metric compositions are attributed to the heretic Naassenes and the Gnostic Valentinus. In the same epoch, Clement of Alexandria writes his own Christological poem.¹² These compositions fit well into their Greek literary context (HERZHOPF 1973). One must not accept the systematization of such sources as heretic or orthodox. Second century Alexandrian theologians designed their own approaches to – and syntheses of – their Jewish, Christian, and philosophical literary heritage, many of which were labeled as “Gnostic”. They represent (especially Alexandrian) Christianity as a religion of intellectuals and philosophers (cf. FÜRST 2007). In those circles, one may envisage someone presenting a sophisticated literary composition to his fellows at a meeting of their philosophical club. There is no indication that such texts had any function within a setting of ritualized practice. Such a performance may belong to the same category as the presentation of other pieces of rhetoric, intellectual entertainment, the art of creating an edifying conversation at the table, or a philosophical or theological insight shared with the group on the occasion. Furthermore, Hippolytus’ source for these poems was most likely *written*, not based on his memory of an oral performance. Theological poems could also be created for private, silent reading.

¹¹ About Jacob of Serugh (451–521): “The *mēm̄rē* which he composed [allegedly 763, extant: 300] in order that through a pleasant composition of exciting expressions he could snatch the mass from the illustrious one”, VÖÖBUS 1965, 66f translating NAU 1913, 612 [124]. About Narsai (died at the beginning of the 6th cent.): “What then did the elect of God do? ... he put the truthful thought of orthodoxy into the elaborate form of the *mēm̄rē* to pleasant melodies and he composed the sense of the Scriptures according to the holy fathers, in pleasant responses in the likeness of the blessed David”, *ibid*.

¹² The text is set in meter. The hymn is only missing in one ms. at the end of the *Paedagogus*; MONDÉSERT, MATRAY, MARROU 1970, 192–207. Although Clement’s authorship cannot be proven, there is no reason to doubt this attribution; cf. WOLBERGS 1971, 85f.

This explains the existence but also the scarcity of the extant data. The repertoire was very specific and closely connected with a certain person, group, and situation. These texts only rarely entered the process of the preservation and transmission of literary texts. No worldwide authority could decree that such a text had to be regarded as important and had to be performed in liturgies. A few Christians had already written their own hymns long before Constantine. They bear witness to their writers' literary aspirations and education, sometimes to specialties of their beliefs. It is not clear whether they were written in order to be performed or in order to be read silently. Their specific role within the customs and rituals performed at the meeting of philosophical clubs cannot be recovered. In terms of tradition, they did not have any impact on the later attested history of Christian hymnography.

Eusebius' *Ecclesiastical History* contains a passage that quotes an anonymous writing against a certain heretic Artemon. The quoted text, which is set in the early third century, asks in a rhetorical question whether anyone would seriously deny that *psalms* and *odes* were *written as hymning* Christ as God's *logos* "from the beginning".¹³ The basic validity of the claim should not be doubted here. While Eusebius does not, unfortunately, give any details regarding those hymns, it is remarkable that the text says that those odes were *written* and that Eusebius does not hint at any performance. In the preceding line, he refers to *books* which proclaim Christ. Thus, the *psalms* and *odes* are quoted as witnesses to early Christian theological thinking and writing, not to primordial rituals.

Tertullian's remarks could make his reader believe that every Christian was reciting psalms at home. He claims that the Christian husband and wife sing psalms and hymns – privately.¹⁴ Such remarks do not refer to music chanted by the Christian congregation. The third chapter of the *Apostolic Constitutions* (3:7:7) lists virtues for widows, which include among other things singing – ψαλλεῖν. The text quotes Eph 5:19 which

¹³ "And how many psalms and hymns, written (γραφεῖσαι) by the faithful brethren from the beginning, celebrate (ὑμνοῦσιν) Christ the Word of God, speaking of him as Divine (θεολογοῦντες)", *Ecclesiastical History* 5.28.5 transl. NPNF 2.1 247.

¹⁴ *Sonant inter duos psalmi et hymni, et mutuo prouocant, quis melius domino suo cantet; Ad Uxorem* 2.8 CCL 1.394. Christ is the audience. The songs are not performed for or in front of a congregation: *talia Christus uidens et audiens gaudet*. Clement of Alexandria, *Stromateis* 7.7/35.6 SChr 428.130f who just praises the "gnostic" – i.e. the spiritually most advanced person – who sings hymns during his work as a farmer or sailor (γεωργοῦμεν αἰνοῦντες, πλέομεν ὑμνοῦντες). He emphasizes that this gnostic does not sing at special places, at appointed times or in certain ritual contexts.

mentions ᾠδή and ὕμνος. The widow should engage in this kind of hymn-singing incessantly. Thus, the reciting of psalms or similar kinds of texts is the widows' (that means: the religious specialists') virtuous habit. It is just not a liturgy. The *Apostolic Constitutions* understood Eph 5:19 accurately.

Λαλοῦντες ἑαυτοῖς can be translated as "speaking to one another [in psalms, hymns and spiritual songs...]". Yet, Eph 5:19 as well as its parallel (and perhaps its source), Col 3:16, says that this "singing" is done in one's heart – ἐν¹⁵ τῇ καρδίᾳ/ἐν ταῖς καρδίαις. "In the heart(s)" is generally interpreted as an indication that this singing expresses one's inner disposition and true intentions.¹⁶ Thus, commentators understand ἐν τῇ καρδίᾳ as "by means of the heart" implying "out of the heart". However, they regard Christian and Jewish congregational singing of hymns as a given and presuppose that texts like Eph 5:19 refer to this setting. Such bits of interpretation presuppose what they intend to prove. The same is true for the use of Phil 2:6–11. The assumption that texts like Phil 2:6–11 should be quotations of ancient Christian hymns is often used as an argument in favor of the Christian congregational singing of hymns.¹⁷ This presumption requires considerable support by means of data. It must not merely be presupposed.

Apart from the alleged New Testament hymns mentioned here, Eckhard SCHNABEL (2011, 337) mentions 1 Cor 14, Eph 5/Col 3 and some passages of the book of Revelation as proof texts for Christian congregational singing. While 1 Cor 14 probably reflects the situation of the congregational symposium, the alleged hymns in Revelation describe a heavenly liturgy that need not be connected to any contemporary practice.

Furthermore, two of the very rare instances of the use of the term "hymn" in the New Testament (in Eph 5 and Col 3) do not imply public

¹⁵ The majority of mss. read (obviously regarded as *lectio facilior* by the editions and commentators) ἐν ... in Eph 5:19. In Col 3:16, ἐν is read by all witnesses.

¹⁶ QUASTEN 1973, 79; SCHNABEL 2011, 315. Cf. on Eph 5:19: SELLIN 2008, 423 ("Das Herz wird zum Instrument des Singens und Preisens."); BEST 1998, 513 ("This worship is not silent worship in the heart ... but worship offered from the heart where the Spirit dwells ..."). The commentators regard ἐν in Eph as secondary. Tertullian would have expressed that notion as *de pectore oramus* – publicly, but not with hymns and without the official supervisor of ritual standards (*sine monitore*), *Apologeticum* 30.4 CCL 1.141.19.

¹⁷ Cf. SCHNABEL 2011, 337 n. 148 who even (mis-) quotes KENNEL 1995 and BRUCKER 1997 in support of the interpretation of texts like Phil 2:6–11 as Christian hymns.

singing. Rather, they refer to private spiritual exercises, or to a silent virtue, perhaps even a metaphor for a virtuous disposition in more general terms.¹⁸ They were also understood as such in its history of reception. As Charles COSGROVE (2006, 268f) points out, this approach to appointed times or sacred space makes Christian life a “perpetual liturgy“. This notion was shared by Christian and pagan thinkers. It is also reflected in New Testament texts (cf. Rom 12:1; Col 2:16f reworking Gal 4:8–11). Such statements do not, therefore, elucidate Christian liturgical singing. They rather reflect many Christians’ opposition to pagan music – including hymns – and the celebration of appointed times.

The authors of the late fourth century *Apostolic Constitutions* know that the biblical Psalms are recited in public liturgies at several occasions. Yet, METZGER observes that this text hardly speaks about hymns and psalms at all. He infers from this that their compiler did not see any problems that required his intervention (2000, 62). This does not answer the question of what role hymns (as distinct from the biblical book of Psalms) should have played in the liturgy. Furthermore, the church order only quotes several long prayer texts. At some point during the process of the transmission of this text, three pieces of the seventh chapter were designated as hymns (apart from two shorter acclamations¹⁹): the “Hymn of the morning” (ὕμνος ὀρθρινός 7:47); “of the evening” (ἔσπερινός 7:48); and “for the meal” (ἐπ’ ἀρίστω 7:49). The compiler appended them to a list of bishops. They are not surrounded by more elaborate rubrics for a liturgical service. The piece that is labeled as “Hymn of the morning“ is (together with the Codex Alexandrinus of the 5th cent.) one of the oldest witnesses to a form of *Gloria in excelsis*. The text that the heading regards as suitable “for the evening” is a prayer followed by the *Nunc dimittis*. The following so-called “table prayer” is likewise an anthology of verses from the Bible.

These prayers reflect the fashion of reciting Scriptural texts or florilegia. In the same epoch, another unpoetic and purely literary prayer text entered the public liturgies: the Lord’s Prayer (cf. TAFT 1997). The

¹⁸ This is corroborated by the following verse 20 in the same chapter (*Eph* 5), which advises everyone to thank God in the name of Christ for everything (ὕπερ πάντων). Although the author of the letter mentioned the drinking of wine in v. 18 (and thus evokes the atmosphere of the congregation’s banquet) the following injunctions refer to more or less ritualized behavior *as a habit* and not to a congregational *ritual*. On meditating or singing as proper response to all kinds of situations and not connected to any liturgy, cf. James 5:13 and Acts 16:25.

¹⁹ The biblical *Trishagion* (8.12.27, 7.35.3) and acclamations during the liturgy of the Eucharist (7.26.5, 8.13.11–13); METZGER 2000, 63–65.

position of these texts in the collection also shows that they are more recent additions to a core of text that could not be changed any more.

METZGER (cf. 2000, 71) remarks that the hymnic compositions collected in the *Apostolic Constitutions* are little developed. Their wording hardly contrasts with the Psalter and the acclamations of the Bible. The authors of this text were not, apparently, interested in the distinction of this material from the biblical Psalms. On the contrary, they wanted to present themselves as a new Israel that continued the scriptural way of praising God (METZGER 2000, 67). In the *Gloria in excelsis*, a few theological remarks are added to biblical material. These so-called hymns are not, furthermore, in any respect metric compositions. It is also unclear who was in charge of reciting them. Like the wording of biblical Psalms, which hardly ever betrays a possible liturgical setting of its performance, a hymn or prayer can be used and interpreted in many different ways and sung by persons to whom the text does not make any reference (cf. METZGER 2000, 67f.71).

How should this state of affairs in the *Apostolic Constitutions* and other texts up to its epoch be explained? It precedes the widespread use of the composition of hymns from Ephrem's *madrāšē* on. In addition, the singing of the *Magnificat* or *Benedictus* is not yet envisaged. If these latter two pieces were not recited in the liturgies (except for situations where they were read as part of their biblical context), they were still regarded as literature in a narrow sense and not parts of a liturgy. The text of the *Apostolic Constitutions* does not, in any case, use the term "hymn" to refer to a *metric* text and it does not imply a more precise liturgical setting for such "hymns" than "upon the meal" and the like.

Before the age of the *Apostolic Constitutions*, Christians wrote hymns that other Greeks would have recognized as such. There is no indication that such hymns were composed for congregational singing. For the present purpose, the text of the *Apostolic Constitutions* must be regarded as late. With the benefit of hindsight, it can be observed that the *Apostolic Constitutions* reflect the inception of the use of hymns in Christian liturgies. Now, Christian texts quote hymns, which are not metric and which are still clumsily made up of scraps of biblical text. Thus, one must ask again about possible liturgical antecedents of this practice or rather the reasons for the absence of such antecedents.

3. Symptotic Singing in Ancient Christianity

Which songs did Christians perform in the earlier epochs? The most plausible point to begin with is 1 Cor 14:26f: "What then brethren? When you

come together each one has a psalm, has a teaching, has a revelation, has a tongue, has an interpretation.” The remark “each one has a psalm...” fits well with situations that are described in other examples of sympotic literature. Plutarch mentions the singing of σκόλια where each participant in the symposium would contribute a song to the common entertainment.²⁰ Plutarch distinguishes between the *paeon* and the *skolion*, both of which should also have been accompanied by different musical instruments. The *paeon* is said to have been sung by all members of the group while the *skolion* would normally be presented by one member of the group for the benefit (or entertainment) of all others. *Skolia* may cover a wide range of topics and would normally be metric.

Paul mentions several kinds of contributions to the symposium as useful and welcome. Regarding the question of the origins and traditions of Christian liturgical songs, where should one look for “the” Christian *skolion*? While the New Testament does not contain such metric pieces, it would also not be expected that, for instance, Paul should record a *skolion* that a certain person had sung at this or that meeting. The contribution of a member of the community – whether improvised on the spot, composed at home, or learned from someone else – would not, furthermore, qualify as the main focus for the construction of the congregation’s identity.²¹ Of

²⁰ Plutarch, *Quaestiones Conviviales (Moralia 8)* 1.1.5/615B–C transl. LCL 424.23, describes the mode of singing the *skolia*: “As for the *scolia* [...] that first the guests would sing the god’s song together, all raising their hymn with one voice (*πρῶτον μὲν ἦδον φθὴν τοῦ θεοῦ κοινῶς ἅπαντες μιᾷ φωνῇ παιανίζοντες*), and next (*δεύτερον*) when to each in turn was given the myrtle spray [...] and thus the *scolium* owes its name to the fact that it is not sung by all and is not easy.” Probably reworking Plutarch’s statement, Clement of Alexandria rejects musical instruments and favors singing instead. Yet, he confuses the terminology (*παιανίζω*), the mode of performance, and the occasion; *Paedagogus* 2.4/44.3 SChr 108.94f; cf. QUASTEN 1973, 97; COSGROVE 2006, 261f. It is all the more significant that Clement compares the singing of biblical Psalms with the *skolion* (that is sung “second” in order according to Plutarch) not with the “ode to the god” (apparently a *paeon*, which is sung “first”). COSGROVE 2006, 262f assumes that Clement prefers the Christians to sing *paeans*, although he only reflects a literary, not an actually performed musical tradition. If one does not take Clement’s use of *παιανίζω* as strictly a technical term, emphasizing rather his reference to Plutarch’s *skolia*, psalm singing belongs to the performances of the drinking party after the meal. It does not replace the solemn transitory ritual between meal and post-prandial conversation. For literary examples, cf. VAN DER VALK 1974, who reviews the *skolia* quoted by Athenaeus.

²¹ Cf. KLINGHARDT 1996, 387f and his reference to Tertullian, *Apologeticum* 39.18f CCL 1.153, where everyone can be called forth (*provocatur* – as a single performer singing in front of the congregation without requiring that the congregation sings as a whole) to sing from the Holy Scriptures or according to his own ability and talent after

course, one would perform an edifying text that pleases one's fellow diners. Its theological implications would generally be acceptable for the congregation, but it would not be a dogmatic treatise.

As soon as a *paean* was supposed to be sung by the whole congregation and hence regarded as more solemn in religious terms than a *skolion*, one would expect to find the production and proliferation of the typically Christian hymns for exactly this occasion. Paul and Luke describe Jesus' ritual manipulation of the chalice after the meal. They do not describe something like a *paean* or a psalm. Did Christians abandon the singing of *paean*s as integral parts of their formal banquets?²²

Matthias KLINGHARDT interprets *Didache* 10:6 as quoting two *incipits* of liturgical songs: "Let grace come and let this world pass away" and "Hosanna to the God of David". KLINGHARDT quotes a long list of parallels that support the assumption that "Let grace come" could be a plausible beginning for a song. The two songs replace the *paean* according to KLINGHARDT (1996, 399f). The conclusion of the meal has, however, already been marked by means of the prayer of *Didache* 10 that precedes these two songs. Thus, it seems that the author of the *Didache* wanted the congregations for whom he composed his treatise to replace the *paean* as well as the other ritualized elements of the conclusion of the meal with the prayers of chapter 10, not with another hymn. "Let grace come and let this world pass away" and "Hosanna to the God of David" may thus be understood as songs of the congregation to be performed within the ensuing sympotic meeting and not as the replacement for the central religious performance of the normal Greek banquet. The text of *Didache* 10:6 was not understood as the *incipits* of hymns by the authors of the *Apostolic Constitutions* who reworked and expanded the *Didache* some 250 years after its composition. The alleged songs did not, likewise, leave any trace in the further history of the Christian liturgies. Nevertheless, KLING-

the meal and during the drinking party (*post aquam manualem et lumina*) – a practice that highlights the sobriety of Tertullian's congregation.

²² HENGEL 2006, 213 refers to Mark 14:26 and Matt 26:30 as evidence for the performance of the *Hallel* at the end of the celebration of Pesach; cf. against this identification STEMBERGER 1987, 154f. There are no indications that the *Hallel* should have been sung in the way that the Rabbis designed the rituals of the *Seder* after the destruction of the Temple. Before that time, "the *Hallel*" was sung by the Levites in the Temple during the slaughtering of the Pesach animals, *mPes* 5.7. The extent of the *Hallel* is unknown. The Mishnah only quotes the beginning of Ps 116. According to the Tosefta, the *Hallel* is one of the very few pieces of biblical text which the Rabbis assume that only very few people could recite, *tPes* 10. 6.

HARDT's explanation of *Didache* 10 remains plausible,²³ since the absence of a reception history of the two alleged songs just supports their character as literary pieces of lesser importance.

One may wonder why the redactor of the *Didache* transmitted what we would understand today as pre- and post-prandial Eucharistic *prayer* texts but no hymn. This can be explained on the basis of the following observations. The *Didache* allows the "prophets" to use their own texts or improvise the Eucharistic prayers. The advice to use the prayer texts of the *Didache* does not concern these "prophets" but other persons of the community, presumably the presidents of the congregation. They should abide by the text of the Eucharistic prayer as it is written. Thus, the central prayers which were normally improvised or whose wording was at the president's discretion attract the attention of the author of the *Didache*. The presumable readers of the text are the only ones that are likely to be influenced by it. The Didachist does not even try to change the ways of the prophets who might occasionally visit the congregation. The president's prayer texts did not follow a universal standard and could be changed without any poetic competence. If *Didache* 10:6 should refer to songs that were performed by more than one singer, they would likewise have been more stable, well known to several people, and less prone to changes on the basis of a commandment of this short book. In this case, the Didachist replaced a hymnic text with a definitely non-hymnic piece of prose. The typically Christian *paean*, libation, etc. is not a typically Christian hymn, but a presider's extemporized statement.

4. Sympotic Praying Instead of Singing

Poetic texts that were written for use in the liturgies are absent from the literary record of ancient Christianity, although rubrics and suggestions for prose prayer texts survived. Three observations may explain their absence apart from the fact that only very few pagan texts of this genre also survived.

²³ KLINGHARDT's 1996, (chapter VI) esp. 380–402 interpretation of *Didache* 10 is more plausible than Lietzmann's, who interprets the lines as a dialogue between the president and the congregation before receiving communion. Lietzmann's reconstructed dialogue does not appear in any other liturgy and he must abandon the structure of the meal in the *Didache*, because he assumes that the important, sacramental part of the food was consumed after the prayer of *Didache* 10.

First, the set of rituals at the end of a Christian communal meal remotely resembles the rabbinic *birkat ha-mazon*. *Birkat ha-mazon* was expanded and embellished in the Middle Ages – after the demise of the formerly ubiquitous custom to hold symposia in several strata of the society. Although the rabbis do not give the exact text, they make it clear that it consists of three or four *brakhot*, not hymns. Otherwise, the rabbis describe the structure of their meals in Hellenistic terms (cf. *tBer* 4f). It may thus be supposed that they added new ritualized performances and dropped pagan elements of the table etiquette depending on whether those could be brought in line with their own principles. Although the introduction of *birkat ha-mazon* indicates that this stage within the meal was of high importance, the sages apparently did not bother to compose an appropriate *paeon*. It may be assumed that the whole genre – contents, form, and music – was regarded as utterly pagan, rejected en bloc, and replaced by the *brakhot*.

Second, Christians also did not replace all the elements of pagan table etiquette. They seem to have avoided the performance of a *paeon*, together with the libations and the sound of the flute, which one could regard as an indispensable part of this performance.²⁴ Neither does Justin, who has recently been re-interpreted as reflecting a type of Eucharistic celebration that opposes pagan practices in its performance, mention hymns or psalms in his description of the Eucharist as celebrated on the “Day of Helios”. The president of Justin’s community recites “prayers” as much as he can.²⁵ He does not sing songs. The same is true for the congregation. The central and only prayer also *precedes* the consumption of the meal and it is performed by one person on behalf of all. The solo performance is necessary, because the president improvises this prayer. It seems that Justin’s congregation (together with many others) did not only reject the cuisine of sacrifice, as observed by Andrew MCGOWAN, but also its music as pagan. This rejection did not only result in theological censorship of customary texts, but also in the rejection of their performance en bloc. Conversely, the *Didache* only advises the replacement of the *paeon* with another set of prayers by the president. The ancient sources agree in their rejection of hymns in general. They did not, apparently, regard the mere form and genre as neutral.

²⁴ Cf. Plutarch, *Quaestiones Conviviales* 7.8.4/713A–B LCL 425.86f.

²⁵ His prayer contains αἶνον καὶ δόξα τῷ πατρὶ [...] and εὐχαριστία, *1 Apol* 65.3 and cf. 67.5. The whole process is designated as εὐχαί.

The recension of the *Traditio Apostolica* that underlies its Ethiopic translation provides a further very illuminating example. While many of its liturgical rules reflect fourth century practice only, it seems nevertheless to have preserved older material – especially in those sections that deal with ecclesiastic banquets. Fourth century Christians would, of course, continue to hold banquets. Yet their theological attention concentrated on the Mass, which was no longer a banquet. Thus, several rules of the *Traditio Apostolica* appear as anachronistic in the fourth century. One of those parts instructs the readers:²⁶

With the bishop present, when evening has come, a deacon is to bring in a lamp, and, standing among all the faithful who are there, he is to give thanks. [Introduction, Prayer over the lamp] ... And when they have then risen after the supper and have prayed, the children and the virgins are to say the psalms. After this, a deacon, holding the mixed cup of the oblation, is to say a psalm from the ones over which ‘Hallelujah’ is written. And after this a presbyter, if he has commanded, [is to read] in this way from those psalms...

The rituals described here take place after the meal and manipulate wine, which is presumably drunk on this occasion during the meeting. The whole scene or the first parts of it could be read as a replacement ritual for the singing of a *paean* and for the pouring of libations. Yet, the “psalms” are recited by individuals or choirs. The brief remark, “when they have then risen *after the supper and have prayed*”, rather seems to indicate that the end of the meal was already celebrated by prayer instead of the common recitation of poetic but pagan compositions. Now the congregation turns to other pious acts. They may now listen to someone who recites a psalm – whether biblical or not. The singing of psalms at this banquet does not function as a replacement for the customary solemn Greek hymns. That replacement seems to have been performed already.

Third, the recitation of a *paean* as well as the singing of *skolia* or the presentation of a psalm did not leave traces in later liturgies, because the celebration of symposia gave way to other forms of liturgies during the third century. Perhaps already in Tertullian’s and certainly in Cyprian’s time, the majority of the Christians in Carthage met in the morning at the bishop’s house in order to receive consecrated food and wine (or water). They were supposed to consume at least part of it on the spot but could also take home part of the consecrated bread. In this setting, the typical roles and expected behavior of participants at communal meals was out of place. The bishop may have recited prayers on that occasion or given an

²⁶ *Traditio Apostolica* 29C; BRADSHAW/JOHNSON/PHILLIPS 2002, 156f.

explanatory speech. He would not have sung a post-prandial hymn, because most of the people who lined up in order to receive the consecrated food were most likely gone by the time everyone had received a share.

Besides the meeting for the distribution of consecrated bread, the communities held other meetings. Hardly anything is known about their liturgical shape. As soon as descriptions of Christian communal daily prayers emerge, they refer to the use of biblical Psalms and prayers. These meetings were social institutions *sui generis* and did not provide the background for a survival of formerly sympotic compositions. With the growing standardization of the aesthetic arrangement of the liturgy of the Mass as well as the liturgies of hours, Christian poets began to write *new* texts for *new* occasions. Some of these texts still survive in liturgical use today. As a result of the early rejection of pagan poetic compositions, texts that were regarded as central and effective in the course of the liturgy were not only composed in prose. Even authors of such compositions emphasize that these texts are not fixed and should not be standardized. This kind of prose was improvised on principle for a long time (cf. BOULEY 1981, BUDDE 2001). It is an unpoetic and likely an even anti-poetic trace in Medieval and modern liturgies that these prayers continue to be elevated prose but not poetry.

The lack of attested hymns in early Christianity is, therefore, neither the result of the coincidences of transmission nor the inability of early Christianity to produce sophisticated poetic texts. It reflects the conscious rejection of a literary and religious custom of the society in which they lived.

5. Conclusions

The sympotic background of the most important Christian liturgies helps to understand the structure of the extant data. It suggests explanations for the absence and presence of compositions and their social context and avoids anachronistic readings of much later evidence. In the first centuries after Constantine, Christian congregations and clubs replaced the most solemn hymnic and hence poetic element of Greek and Roman banquets with prose texts that were improvised or at least chosen by the presidents. This does not exclude the performance of pieces of music or the recitation of poetry during these meetings. Those poetic performances did not, however, reach the same level of dignity as the pieces of rhetoric prose. Hardly any examples of the non-standardized and often improvised texts have survived. Tending to be spontaneous, they were dependent upon the

individual situation and of little interest for other situations and groups. In addition, none of the popular songs were preserved. They were neither important nor did many congregations use the same texts. In rare cases, Christian intellectuals composed sophisticated poetry with theological interests. Those did not gain wider acceptance and there are no indications when and how often they crossed the boundary between written literature and oral performance as part of a liturgy, because there was simply no liturgical background that would have required their repeated performance and wider dissemination.

The equivalents to modern pieces of liturgical poetry, chants, and hymns began to develop in post-Constantinian times when the Mass and the Liturgy of the Hours became public performances in the city hall, having grown away from the banquets in the dining room. At that time, the biblical Psalms, texts that resembled the Psalms or were even composed in their wake, other pieces of biblical texts, and newly created poetry or prose prayers emerged as parts of this liturgy and began to appear detached from their literary context and surrounded with rubrics that hint at liturgical use.

The presupposition that important theological statements should have been sung or recited in poetic form during the liturgies is too simplistic to be of any historical significance. The proclivity to repeat over and over at every major meeting the decisions of councils about the boundaries of orthodoxy belongs to much later epochs. Those creedal formulas are, furthermore, prose expressions of a theological consensus and not poetic texts. They are not performed as songs. Early Christianity did not sing its theology during its congregational meetings.

These observations also support the validity of Ralph BRUCKER's analyses of epideictic passages in the New Testament into the post-biblical church. Texts like Phil 2:5–11 are anything but ancient Christian liturgical hymns, simply because there was no Christian liturgy that required their performance. On the contrary and similar to other forms of opposition of the Early Church against the Greek and Roman ways of life, many Christians regarded not only the contents but also the forms of hymnic performances as typically pagan. Thus, they rejected the invocation of the gods together with its musical form and vice versa. This does not mean that Christians of that epoch did not sing songs or abstained from writing poetry. Those were just not regarded as important or solemn elements of the agendas at their meetings. This is the reason why the music of the early church is lost.

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