Old refrain: All together now

by Martin E. Marty in the June 3, 2008 issue

All together now, with heart and soul and voices, let's sing number 1786. Why don't I read the lyrics first, and then let the guitar and drums pick it up:

. . . *together all the eminent* [ ] *of God* . . . *Let it/them be silent*. *Let the luminous stars not* . . . [*let them hold back*, *rushing of winds*, *founts of*] *all the roaring rivers*. *And as we hymn Father*, *Son*, *and Holy Spirit*, *let all the powers answer*, '*Amen*, *Amen*, *strength*, *praise*, *and glory* [*forever to God*] *the sole giver of all good things*, *Amen*, *Amen*.

If you complain that it's a bit bumpy and hard to sing, or that it's "one of those old hymns" and not catchy like the ones that show up on screens, you are right. The manuscript for this song, officially called *P*. *Oxy*. *1786*, exists only on an inches-wide verso. It dates from late in the third century. That makes it *really old*. If scholar Charles H. Cosgrove is right, it is "the sole surviving score of Christian music prior to the earliest preserved chant manuscripts of the ninth century." *Oxy* stands for Oxyrhynchus, an area of Egypt rich as a source of papyri, and the scrap comes from an ancient Egyptian Christian community. Cosgrove, a professor at Northern Baptist Theological Seminary in Lombard, Illinois, suggests that this scrap of hymnody is older by five or six centuries than any previously known hymn of the church.

What is more, we get words with music, for the hymn comes "with ancient Greek musical notation symbols written above the words." In an article in *Ephemerides Liturgicae* Cosgrove writes, "The text joins traditional Christian praise to the Trinity with a call to cosmic reverence by the stars and other natural elements and a response of heavenly praise." That is so old it almost sounds like New Age hymnody.

With his forthcoming article, Cosgrove sent me a photo of *P*. *Oxy*. *1786*. It's not much to look at. It's a brownish crispated chunk of papyrus that makes the word *desiccated* sound wet and fresh.

After this piece was published in 1922, German scholars were engrossed in the words but seemed tone-deaf or incurious about the music. Eventually an argument

developed about the Hellenistic and Judaic origins of the song. Some disliked the possibility of a Hellenistic origin of church music. They thought that only synagogue chants could have inspired it. At the same time, they asserted that “the meter is thoroughly anapaestic,” which is what one would expect, we are informed, in something that came from the imperial period.

Nothing much was added to this argument over the decades. Cosgrove concludes that “it is a third-century Christian hymn squarely in the Greek musical tradition. . . . Notated in the male vocal range, it is not technically difficult to sing,” whether as a solo or in a congregation. (“Women could have sung it at the octave above,” the professor generously adds.)

What we need to better understand the hymn, Cosgrove says, is more knowledge of the nature of ancient Greek melodies and how they were put together. In the meantime, we give thanks for scholars like Cosgrove who bring together the church’s past and present. All together now, let’s sing, in praise to the Trinity and in awareness of how hymnody interrupts cosmic stillness. Creatively.