



Psalms, Hymns & Spiritual Songs

By Steve Booth

BABY BOOMERS growing up in church during the '50s and '60s will likely be able to complete the chorus to the well-loved gospel song "In My Heart There Rings a Melody." The peppy tune, written by Elton Menno Roth on a hot Texas summer afternoon in 1923,¹ is one of those that sometimes sticks in your mind and stays there. Fortunately, it also lifts the spirit and reminds us of the love of Christ and the joy each child of God can and should experience regularly.

Referring to God, David wrote, "He brought me up from a desolate pit, out of the muddy clay, and set my feet on a rock, making my steps secure. He put a new song in my mouth, a hymn of praise to our God"

(Ps. 40:2-3a).² This is likely the same sentiment Paul was expressing when he exhorted the believers at Ephesus to speak to one another "in psalms, hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making music from your heart to the Lord, giving thanks always for everything to God the Father in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ" (Eph. 5:19-20, emphasis added). This text, along with the parallel passage in Colossians 3:16-17, is strong evidence that the early Christian church was a singing church. (See also 1 Cor. 14:15,26 and Jas. 5:13.)

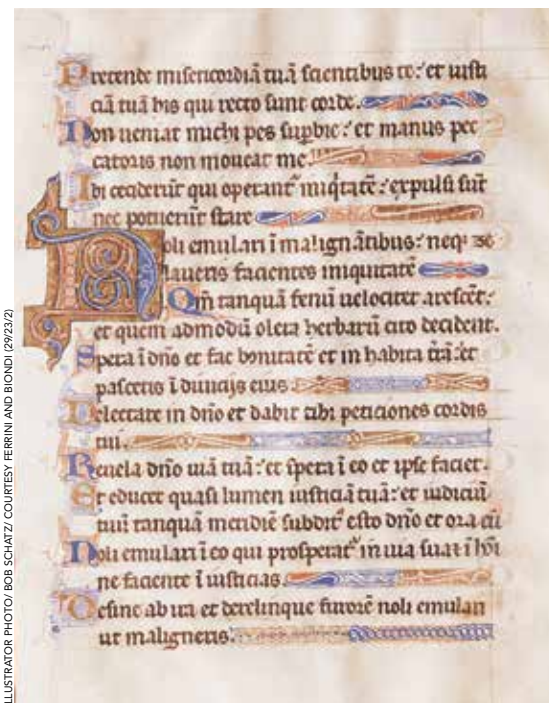
Right: Found at Qumran and dated about 1200-1210, a leaf from the Psalter; Latin on parchment; the words are based on Psalm 36:1-4.

Far right: Wall painting from Deir

el-Medina, Egypt, shows a woman holding a sistrum. These instruments were played at temple ceremonies. The inscription indicates she may have served at the temple of the god Amon.

Lift Your Voices...

For years scholars have attempted to demarcate the types of music in the early church based on Paul's three terms, but with little success. Paul's intention does not seem to be to classify the different forms of Christian



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...the heart must be the place where true worship through singing originates.



Right: From Thessalonica, gravestone dated to the 3rd cent. B.C. The incised letters are musical notes, making this one of the few surviving samples

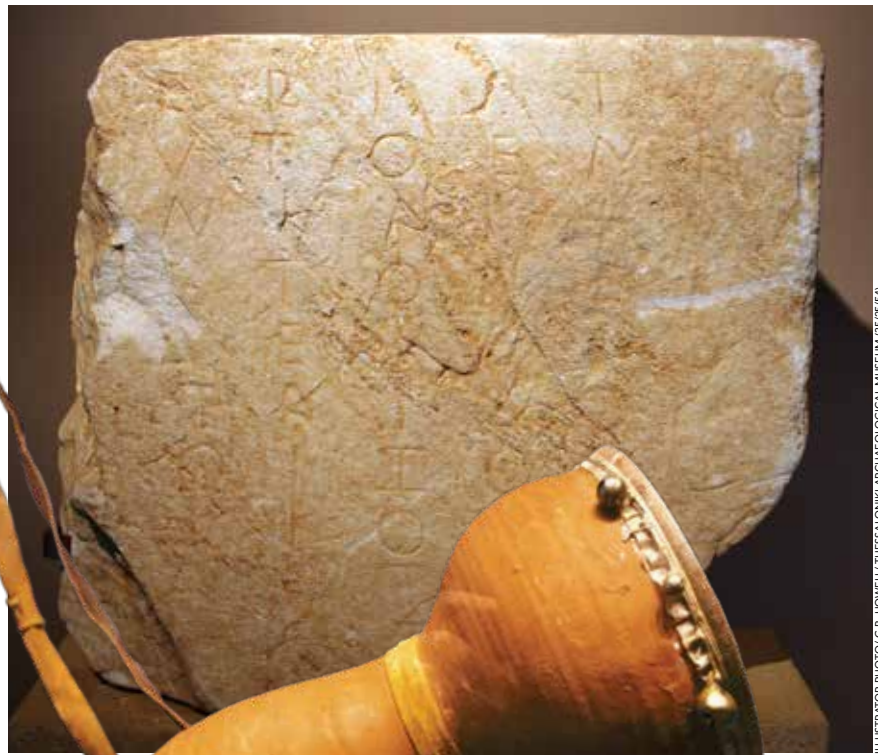
of musical notation. The letters that are legible do not form meaningful words; they are likely musical symbols, such as do, re, mi, fa, sol, la, ti, do.

worship. However, asking, “Why did Paul use three different words if one would have been sufficient?” might be helpful. A closer look at the background of the three synonyms may prove instructive.

The meaning of the first word, “psalms,” seems to be the most obvious. The Greek translation of the Old Testament (the Septuagint), uses this word in the titles of more than 50 psalms.³ The Book of Psalms was the “hymnbook” of ancient Israel. That the early church, originating in the womb of the Jewish faith, would follow many of the same worship patterns seems logical. In fact, of the seven times that this word appears in the New Testament, all of the references outside of those written by Paul refer to the Old Testament Psalms.⁴ Paul, too, possibly—and even likely—was commenting on the early church practice of singing psalms from the Jewish Scriptures in the context of Christian worship.

Furthermore, an early form of this word meant “to pluck” the string of a bow or musical instrument.⁵ In the Old Testament, “psalm” can refer not only to playing a stringed instrument, but to the instrument itself, or to the song sung with musical accompaniment. Regarding Paul’s usage of the word “psalms,” we cannot say that he definitely had in mind music with instrumental accompaniment, but neither can we rule out the possibility.

The Greek word for “hymn,” which occurs in the New Testament only in Ephesians 5:19 (and in the parallel Col. 3:16) is of more uncertain origin. The ancient Greeks used the word in reference to the recitation of poetry



or singing of songs to extol heroes and gods: for example, the “Hymn to Zeus” that the Stoic philosopher Cleanthes wrote several centuries before Christ.⁶ Cultured Jews living in the diaspora would have been familiar with such literature. This word also occurs in the Greek Old Testament in some of the titles of psalms, as well as hymns of praise within the psalms.⁷ The verbal form, “to sing a hymn,” occurs four times in the New Testament: singing the Hallel Psalms at Passover (Matt. 26:30; Mark 14:26); a quotation of Psalm 22:22 (Heb. 2:12); and the hymns Paul and Silas sang to God in the Philippian prison (Acts 16:25).⁸ By the New Testament Era, apparently the meanings of the words “psalm” and “hymn” had some overlap. The basic historical meaning of “hymn,” though, seems to be “a song of praise to God.”⁹

Above: Small hand-held terracotta drum found near Corinth. The head, likely made of vellum, has been replaced.

Right: The treasury of the Athenians at Delphi, Greece; the base is inscribed with hymns to Apollo.

The third Greek term Paul employed is the source of our English word “ode.” Prior to the New Testament period, the word “ode” shows up in Greek and Jewish literature and seems to have broader usage, appearing in both religious and secular contexts. In the Septuagint, however, references are always to a song of praise to God. As with the previous two terms, this word occurs in some psalm titles in the Greek Old Testament. Other Old Testament references include musical accompaniment and on occasion both music and dancing.¹⁰

“Ode” occurs seven times in the New Testament. In both passages where Paul employs the term (Eph. 5:19; Col. 3:16), he qualifies it with the word “spiritual.” In Paul’s

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mind, this word may have represented new “spiritual songs” written by Spirit-filled believers in the early church who were using their musical gifts and talents. Interestingly enough, the other five New Testament occurrences are in Revelation; and in each, context descriptors accompany the term: 5:9, “a new song”; 14:3 (twice), “a new song” and “the song”; 15:3 (twice), “the song of Moses” and “the song of the Lamb.” The verbal form of “ode,” as well as the verbal form of “psalm,” shows up in Ephesians 5:19b, literally “singing odes and singing psalms” to the Lord.

Significantly, the “audience” in the first part of verse 19 is “one another,” while in the second part of the verse it is “the Lord.” Paul is not speaking

of two different kinds of musical worship in the two parts of verse 19; rather, he is describing the same activity from different perspectives. The horizontal view sheds light on the corporate nature of singing in worship, where mutual edification between believers takes place (as amplified in Col. 3:16: “teaching and admonishing one another”). The vertical view draws attention to the personal aspect of singing in which each one brings his or her adoration to Christ.¹¹

...with Joy

One additional aspect of singing that Paul underscores in verse 19 is that this melodic worship must be in our hearts. His point is not that it should

be inaudible rather than vocalized, but instead the heart must be the place where true worship through singing originates. The heart also represents the whole of one’s being, and so our singing should be wholehearted.¹² Taken together with the three terms at the beginning of the verse, Paul showed the richness and diversity of the full range of singing that the Spirit prompts. From its inception, the church has had much to sing about and many ways to do so. The same is equally as true for the church today. Now, if only we each had a thousand tongues to sing! 🕊

1. Kenneth W. Osbeck, *101 More Hymn Stories* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 1985), 148.
2. All Scripture quotations are from the Holman Christian Standard Version (HCSB).
3. Gerhard Delling, “ὕμνος, ὕμνέω, ψάλλω, ψαλμός,” (*hymnos*, hymn; *psalmos*, psalm) in *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, ed. Gerhard Friedrich, trans. and ed. Geoffrey W. Bromiley, vol. 8 (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1972), 494.
4. Luke 20:42; 24:44; Acts 1:20; 13:33; 1 Corinthians 14:26; Ephesians 5:19; Colossians 3:16.
5. Delling, “ὕμνος, ὕμνέω, ψάλλω, ψαλμός,” (*hymnos*, hymn; *psalmos*, psalm), 490, 494.
6. Ralph P. Martin, *The Worship of God: Some Theological, Pastoral, and Practical Reflections* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1982), 48.
7. Delling, “ὕμνος, ὕμνέω, ψάλλω, ψαλμός,” (*hymnos*, hymn; *psalmos*, psalm), 493.
8. Readers cannot know for sure what genre of hymn the two sang, yet to assume they sang Old Testament Psalms would be reasonable. See Ralph P. Martin, *Worship in the Early Church* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1975), 43.
9. Harold W. Hoehner, *Ephesians: An Exegetical Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2002), 709.
10. *Ibid.*
11. While in Ephesians singing is addressed to Christ, in the parallel passage in Colossians 3:16 the recipient is God. Hymns in Revelation are addressed to Christ and God (5:9,13; 7:10; 12:10). Peter T. O’Brien, *The Letter to the Ephesians* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999), 394-96. Many of the songs of the early church would have had a Christological emphasis. Scholars have identified a number of pre-formed poetic pieces that Paul included in his letters and which may have been early Christian hymns (for example, Phil. 2:6-11; Eph. 2:14-18; Col. 1:15-20; 1 Tim. 3:16). Other New Testament writers also included similar “hymns” in their writings. Before the New Testament writings were collected and accepted as canonical, singing played a vital role in transmitting doctrinal truths, particularly about Jesus and His place in God’s plan of salvation.
12. Contrast this with Jesus’ citation of Isaiah in Matthew 15:8—“These people honor Me with their lips, but their heart is far from Me” (HCSB).

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