



Musical instruments and musicians in worship in the Bible: The New Testament

Right from the beginning, musical instruments and musicians made an integral contribution to human life and culture. King David organized and supervised the ministry of music and song by appointing a generous tithe – more than ten percent – of Levites to this ministry, giving them specific instructions, and providing them with the resources they needed to fulfill their task. Musical instruments, furthermore, were the tools – the temple implements – which David gave the Levites to carry, lift up, and enhance the holy song of God's people for the worship and praise of God. They were fittingly called, therefore, *the LORD'S instruments and instruments of sacred song*.

In Jesus Christ, Old Covenant worship reaches its fulfillment

The musicians were expected to make music that was loud, moving, and impressive – even fearful, for they were wielding instruments of power. When musical instruments came to life and voices of joy and gladness sang, when the Levitical musicians had work and their mighty Selahs punctuated the people's praise, that was a sure sign of the health, vigour, and strength of God's beloved nation!

New Covenant fulfillment of Davidic worship

The coming of the Lord Jesus Christ and the inauguration of the New Covenant does not represent the complete abolition of Old Covenant worship, resulting concurrently in the complete abandonment of musical instruments and musicians. Rather, in Jesus Christ, Old Covenant worship, including the Davidic ministry of liturgical music and song, reaches its fulfillment. Jesus declares in his Sermon on the Mount:

"Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them."

(Matthew 5:17)

After his resurrection from the dead, the Lord Jesus tells his confused disciples:

"This is what I told you while I was still with you: Everything must be fulfilled that is written about me in the Law of Moses, the Prophets and the Psalms."

(Luke 24:44)

When he receives from the Lord God the throne of his father David (Luke 1:32), Jesus sings God's praises using psalms composed by his father David.

"He says, 'I will declare your name to my brothers; in the presence of the congregation I will sing your praises'."

(Hebrews 2:12; Psalm 22:22; cf. Romans 15:7-13)

Pauline Use of Psalms and Psallo

The Septuagint, the Greek version of the Old Testament, translates "psalm" with the Greek word *psalmos*, which means *"song of praise, psalm, ...music made with an instrument."*¹ This word is defined as the state of *"plucking"* a bow or of *"playing"* a stringed instrument.² This is the same noun that Paul uses in Ephesians 5:19-20 in his exhortation to believers about being filled with the Holy Spirit. In this passage Paul uses the verbal form of this word, *psallo*, which means *"sing, sing praise."*³ Paul writes there:

"Speak to one another with psalms (psalms), hymns, and spiritual songs. Sing and make music (psallontes) in your heart to the Lord, always giving thanks to God the Father for everything, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ."

A closer look at the verb *psallo* suggests that its meaning includes the aspect of instrumental accompaniment. This word originally meant "to touch," then "to pluck" the string, leading to the definition: "to play a stringed instrument."⁴ In the New Testament context, this word means: "strictly, **strike the strings of an instrument; hence, sing to the accompaniment of a harp; in the NT sing praises.**"⁵ If one should ask why Paul would command the believer to sing to the accompaniment of musical instruments "in your heart," as the NIV translates, it could be pointed out that the Greek phrase *tei kardiai* can also be rendered "with your heart" (ESV) – that is, *with all your heart, or with your heart fully engaged*. This phrase "refers to 'singing aloud' (cf. 1 Corinthians 14:26) and collective singing in the assembly: (it) refers not to inwardness but to full participation."⁶ Furthermore, the fact that Paul also uses the word *adontes*, "singing," in combination with *psallontes*, "making music with instruments," strengthens the case; for otherwise readers would be left wondering why Paul would use the word *psallontes* in addition to the word *adontes*, if both words mean the same thing. Paul, then, is undoubtedly espousing Davidic-style worship along the lines of Psalms 33, 98, 144, and 150, as cited in the last article.

Pauline use of musical instruments

When Paul uses musical instruments to illustrate his point concerning edifying speech in the church in 1 Corinthians 14:7-8, furthermore, in no way does he condemn or revile musical instruments. On the contrary, he states that the members of the church should produce edifying, intelligible speech, just as musical instruments such as harps, flutes, and trumpets should produce clear, distinct notes and sounds. Paul also tells the believers that the great resurrection of the dead at the return of Jesus Christ will be announced by the trumpet (1 Corinthians 15:52; 1 Thessalonians 4:16). Arguably, Paul is assuming the presence and playing of musical instruments among the assembled believers.

Musical instruments in the Revelation to John

In the Revelation to John, which begins dramatically with a voice that sounds like a trumpet (Revelation 1:10; cf. 4:1), the four living creatures and the twenty-four elders play harps (Revelation 5:8); angels blast trumpet-calls (Revelation 8-11); and the worshipping multitude around God's throne, whose sound is "like the roar of rushing waters and like a loud peal of thunder," resembles the sound of "harpists playing their harps" (Revelation 14:2). The sound of musical instruments and songs is everywhere in the eschatological worship before God, for David's royal Son Jesus Christ is sitting on his throne!

Preliminary summary of New Testament on musical instruments and musicians in worship

Old Covenant worship, including the Davidic ministry of liturgical music and song, reaches its fulfillment in Jesus Christ. Jesus sings God's praises with the music composed by his father David – the Psalms. The Greek word by which Jesus himself designates these songs, *psalms*, actually means "song of praise, music played with an instrument." Paul calls upon believers to speak such songs to one another with music, *psallontes*, that is, to the accompaniment of instruments. He also assumes the believers' acquaintance with a variety of musical instruments like those that had been used in Old Testament worship when he uses the sound of musical instruments as an illustration for edifying speech in the church, and when he offers comfort concerning the resurrection of the dead. Finally, as David's royal Son takes his throne in the Revelation to John, the mighty sound of musical instruments and songs powerfully emanates from God's presence through all creation!

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- ¹ Johan Lust, Erik Eynikel and Katrin Hauspie, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the Septuagint* (Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, 2003).
- ² Gerhard Delling, "Psalmos," *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, Gerhard Kittel and Gerhard Friedrich, eds. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1964), 8:491.
- ³ Horst Balz, "Psallo," *Exegetical Dictionary of the New Testament*, Horst Balz and Gerhard Schneider, eds. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990), 3:495.
- ⁴ Delling, "Psallo," *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, 8:490.
- ⁵ Timothy Friberg, Barbara Friberg and Neva F. Miller, *Analytical Lexicon of the Greek New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2000).
- ⁶ Balz, "Psallo," *Exegetical Dictionary of the New Testament*, 3:495.