Understanding the meaning of words is necessary in order to ascertain biblical truths. Since the New Testament was written primarily in Greek and was translated into English centuries later, the English dictionary is not the best source for studying definitions of Bible words.

The Koine Greek words of the New Testament cannot in all cases be defined by words that appear in the Septuagint (LXX), the Attic Greek used by classical writers, or the Greek literature of a later period. Language is fluid. The meanings of words can differ from one area of the world to another and from generation to generation.

Some people seek to justify the use of musical instruments in worship based on definitions of Greek words in eras other than New Testament times. For example, ψάλλω (psallo), which once implied the use of a musical instrument, is accurately translated in most English Bibles as "sing" or "make melody." However, instrumentalists, to support their preference and practice, sometimes appeal to a group of synonyms which appear after the definition of the word υμνος (humnos, "hymns") in a prominent lexicon:

While the leading idea of ψαλμος [psalms] is a musical accompaniment and that of υμνος [hymnos] praise to God, ωδη [ode] is the general word for a song, whether accompanied or unaccompanied, whether of praise or on any other subject. Thus it was quite possible for the same song to be at once ψαλμος, and υμνος, and ωδη.1

Those who make an argument from the above statement have overlooked the purpose of the synonyms in the lexicon. These synonyms do not give New Testament meanings; rather, they provide classical uses for comparison, showing the direction and degree of the word’s change in meaning.2

In the body of the lexicon, the following definitions are given for the verb psallo in New Testament usage: “to sing a hymn, to celebrate the praises of God in song.”3 The definition of the noun psalms in the New Testament is “a pious song, a psalm.”4

The verb psallo is translated “sing” (Romans 15:9; 1 Corinthians 14:15; James 5:13), except in Ephesians 5:19, where it is rendered “making melody.” The noun psalms is translated “psalms” or “Psalms” (Luke 20:42; 24:44; Acts 1:20; 13:33; 1 Corinthians 14:26; Ephesians 5:19; Colossians 3:16).

A few writers think that “psalms” refers to the psalms of the Old Testament and, therefore, means to sing with musical accompaniment. In order to prove this, they would need to show that musical instruments were inherent in the meaning of psalms during New Testament times, or that they were used along with singing in the first century.

Some have assumed that Paul used “psalms,” “hymns,” and “spiritual songs” with three distinctly different meanings. Most writers point  

2Thayer, vii.
3Ibid., 675.
4Ibid.
out the difficulty of trying to define them this way.

Though Paul brings three terms together with particular force (psalms, hymns, spiritual songs) it is almost impossible to determine any musical or textual difference among them.5

The original meaning of psallo was “pluck” or “twang.” The progressive change in its meaning is evident in the following explanations, beginning with the usage in ancient works:

3. psallō first seems to mean “to touch,” then it takes on the sense “to pluck” (a string), and finally it means “to play” (an instrument).6

By the time of the New Testament, this was the usage of psallo:

In Eph. 5:19 praise is addressed to the Lord with God’s saving work again as the theme. Emphasis is given in v. 19 by the verbs “singing and making melody” (cf. Ps. 27:6). psallontes does not now denote literally playing on a stringed instrument, and the psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs hardly refer to different kinds of texts. In 1 Cor. 14:26 psalmós is a Christian song which the individual sings at worship. . . .

3. Rom. 15:9 interprets the psallō of Ps. 18:49 by doxázō in biblical support of Gentile praise of God’s mercy. Jms. 5:13 uses psallō for grateful praise of Christ.7

Notice the phrase “does not now denote literally playing on a stringed instrument.” Before New Testament times, psallo [psallontes] meant to play an instrument; but when the New Testament was written, playing an instrument no longer was included in its meaning.

The consensus of most lexicons and commentaries is that psallo means “to sing” in the New Testament.

Although its original meaning involved plucking a stringed instrument, psallo here means to make music by singing . . . , so that there is no reference in this verse [Ephesians 5:19] to instrumental accompaniment.8

Peter T. O’Brien agreed with this:

. . . some have thought that ψαλμός inevitably meant a song sung to the accompaniment of a stringed instrument; but this restriction is unnecessary.10

A more recent commentary contains this statement:

While psallō originally meant to “pluck with the fingers” as on a harp, by the first century the word usually meant “to sing” and did not necessarily imply the use of a musical instrument.11

CONCLUSION

Those who argue for instrumental accompaniment as a possible definition of psallo during the New Testament period do so without justification. They are relying on definitions from different periods and localities.

Owen D. Olbricht

Questions Often Asked

Q: Aren’t musical instruments mentioned in the New Testament?

A: The New Testament contains references to instruments, but these are not related to religious music. No passage in the New Testament states or implies that musical instruments were used in the worship assemblies of Christians.

Jesus, regarding people’s reactions to John and Himself, said, “But to what shall I compare this generation? It is like children sitting in the


market places, who call out to other children, and say, ‘We played the flute for you, and you did not dance; we sang a dirge, and you did not mourn’” (Matthew 11:16, 17; see also Luke 7:31, 32). This statement about singing and dancing has nothing to do with worship.

In the parable of the prodigal son, Jesus mentioned music being played when the son returned (Luke 15:25). Since nothing is said concerning whether or not the music was religious or secular, no conclusion can be made concerning instruments in worship from this statement.

With the destruction of the harlot called “Babylon the great,” representing ancient Rome (Revelation 17:1, 2, 5, 9, 15, 18), John declared that the joyful reveling within the city would end. “And the sound of harpists and musicians and flute-players and trumpeters will not be heard in you any longer” (Revelation 18:22a).

Revelation is a book of symbols. For example, the seven stars represented seven angels, and the seven lampstands stood for seven churches (1:20). The fact that harps are mentioned (5:8; 14:2; 15:2) does not mean that they were used in Christian worship. The religious symbols in this book are not representative of New Testament worship, but are reflections of worship in the Old Testament. These include the golden lampstands (1:20; 4:5; see Exodus 25:31); a sea (4:6; see 1 Kings 7:23); an altar (6:9; 8:3; see Exodus 27:1); a golden censer (8:3; see Leviticus 10:1); incense (8:3; see Exodus 30:34, 35); the ark of the covenant (11:19; see Exodus 25:10); and the tabernacle or temple (15:5; see Exodus 26:1; 1 Kings 6:14).

Further, harps are not actually said to have been played. The sound of a voice that was heard was “like” (ὁς, hos) harpers playing on their harps (14:2; NASB; NIV). Singing, not playing, is all that is mentioned in 14:3. Neither is playing specified in 15:2, even though the victors are said to be holding “harpers of God.”

Trumpets are mentioned in the Book of Revelation to describe certain sounds (1:10; 4:1), to announce coming events (8:2, 6, 13; 9:14) and to show the completeness of the destruction of the symbolic city of Babylon (18:22). In these contexts, the musical instruments were not being used in worship.

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**Psallo: A Word Study**

Important Greek dictionaries have appeared in modern times, and some have gone through repeated revision. One of the most renowned is Walter Bauer’s work, which was first printed in German in 1928 and now is in its sixth edition. Bauer’s fourth revision, made available in 1952, was translated into English by William F. Arndt and F. Wilbur Gingrich in 1957. Revisions of the English translation were printed in 1979 and 2000.

While lexicons are excellent tools to use in Bible study, they have occasionally added to the confusion regarding the meaning of certain words. This is the unfortunate case in tracing the lexical history of *psallo*.

In the fourth revision by Bauer, the definition given for *psallo* is “sing.” The following is from a German scholar’s translation of the entry in that edition:

> praise by singing—sing praises to, with the dative of the person, for whom the song of praise is intended . . . Eph. 5:19. In this passage a second dative appears . . . in your heart . . . and in contrast to that . . . [singing] praises in a state of ecstasy caused by the Spirit and with a clear mind 1 Cor. 14, 15. Absolute: letting a song of praise resound, Jas. 5:13.

In their first edition, Arndt and Gingrich added to Bauer’s definition of *psallo* the idea of using instrumental accompaniment:

> . . . in our [literature], in accordance [with Old Testament] usage, sing (to the accompaniment of a harp), sing praise [with dative] of the one for whom the praise is intended . . .

When challenged concerning the insertion of “to the accompaniment of a harp,” the editors dropped the phrase in the second edition (1979), but they reinserted it in the third edition (2000). Here are some excerpts from a translation of that entry:

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Obedience Today: Old Testament or New Testament?

New Testament worship of God is a clear break from that of the Old Testament. If we look to Moses, he points us to Jesus (Deuteronomy 18:18; John 5:46; Acts 3:22, 23), the author of the Christian faith (Hebrews 2:10; 12:2). Recognizing the differences between the two testaments makes it easier to understand why Christians should not look to the Old Testament to learn how to worship. If one part of the Law were binding, then all would be binding (Galatians 3:24, 25; 5:3). The Book of Hebrews shows the superiority of the new covenant (see 7:19, 22).

Forgiveness & Sacrifices

The Law required many sacrifices (as described in Leviticus), but such sacrifices could not take away sins (Hebrews 10:4). True forgiveness comes through Jesus’ death (1 Peter 2:24). Salvation is attained through obeying Jesus (Hebrews 5:9) when one believes the gospel, repents, confesses faith in Christ, is baptized (Mark 16:15, 16; Acts 2:38; Romans 10:10), and continues to walk in the Light (1 John 1:7–9). The sacrifices of Christians are to be the fruit of the lips and good deeds (Hebrews 13:15, 16).

Feasts, Festivals, & the Sabbath

The Law also required Israel to observe feast days (Numbers 28:16–25; Deuteronomy 16:16; 2 Chronicles 8:13). The special day for Christians is the Lord’s Day (see Revelation 1:10). Under the New Testament, we have this special day of worship in honor of Jesus. The term “Lord’s Day” was used by the early church to refer to Sunday, the first day of the week (Acts 20:7; 1 Corinthians 16:2), on which it met to remember Jesus through the observing of the Lord’s Supper.

The Place of Worship

God expected Israel to go to Jerusalem to worship. Christian worship is not limited to one specific location. Jesus taught that a change would be made so that worship would no longer be limited to one place (John 4:21–24).

Giving

Under the Law, the tithe was not optional, but was to be paid as a tax every three years (Deuteronomy 14:28, 29; 26:12). Nowhere is tithing commanded of Christians. Members of the church are to give every first day of the week, according to how they have prospered and have purposed in their hearts (1 Corinthians 16:2; 2 Corinthians 9:7).

The Priesthood

Israel was to approach God through priests, Aaron’s descendants of the tribe of Levi (Exodus 28:41; 29:9). Today, Christians approach God through Jesus, our only mediator (1 Timothy 2:5). Now all Christians, both men and women, are priests (1 Peter 2:5, 9; Revelation 1:6; 5:10).

Under the new covenant, Christians are a “chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for God’s own possession” (1 Peter 2:9).

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