

# Documents on



Instrumental  
Music

by  
Tom Burgess

"In Judaism, as well as in early christianity, the primacy of vocal over instrumental performances seems so firmly established, so much of an a priori attitude, that it may sound preposterous to debate this matter anew. But it needs renewed examination, since being presented as a 'foregone conclusion,' it has consistently confused every freer view and every unorthodox opinion, until it has become something of a dogma, blindly accepted by all students of ancient church music."

Eric Werner--Professor of liturgical music  
Hebrew Union College, New York

The Sacred Bridge. New York, New York:  
Columbia University Press, 1959, p. 316.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Dedicated to  
DON C. JESSUP  
My Spiritual Father

Introduction	13
English Dictionaries	15
Greek Lexicons	25
Commentators, Encyclopedists, Grammarians	47
Professors of the Greek Language	61
Translators	81
Early Ecclesiastical and Contemporaneous Writings	97
Conclusion	115
Appendix I - Cultural Issues Can Affect Theological Issues - By Larry Jonas	120
Appendix II - Observations in the Old Testament - By Tom Burgess	129
Bibliography	135
Index	139

## FOREWORD

In gathering material for this book many sources have been consulted. Space does not permit me to individually acknowledge the many persons who contributed helpful suggestions. But I think that it is necessary to single out several whose help was especially significant:

Warren E. Bell was the first one whom I heard defend instrumental music in a debate. His debate with Robert Roland, President of Columbia Christian College, ignited my interest in this subject.

Charles Dailey, editor of The Pattern, has patiently worked with me in the preparation of this book. Brother Dailey was the first to review it when I originally wrote this book in the form of a thesis upon graduating from The Churches of Christ School of Evangelists, Portland, Oregon.

Larry Jonas who has conducted several panel discussions on the instrument question, reviewed the manuscript and contributed several useful thoughts and ideas. Special acknowledgement is also due to Brother Jonas for his article in Appendix I.

Bob Haddow, who also reviewed my manuscript, graciously supplied me with a number of worthwhile articles and publications.

Professor George Alder of San Jose Bible College was very helpful in pointing out stylistic improvements.

I also highly prized the review by Bill Thurman. His keen grasp of the Greek language directed my attention to several points which needed clarifying.

We have tried to give proper credit for all material used in this book. Whenever it was possible, we traced articles to their original sources. If at any time we have failed to give correct acknowledgement, we ask forgiveness for the oversight.

Tom Burgess

January 13, 1965

## INTRODUCTION

It was several years ago that I first became aware of the controversy about instrumental music, its problems, its arguments, and saddest of all, its fruit. The desire to investigate it has scarcely left me from that day to this. The result has been the material which I present in this thesis.

There are many avenues of approach that one might take in discussing the problem of instrumental accompaniment in the worship of God. We have chosen here to center our thoughts on the meaning of the Greek verb psallo and its related forms which we find in the New Testament, although other features of the controversy will be incidentally considered.

It is freely conceded by all that "to sing with instrumental accompaniment" had long been the definition of psallein. But it is argued that shortly before the New Testament period this word changed, and came to indicate vocal music "only", exclusive of instrumental accompaniment. Example 1 shows that this is the position taken by M. C. Kurfees, one of the ablest defenders of that position in this century.

Example 1

and to touch the chords of the human heart or to sing. They can also see that just as the English words "resent," "candidate," "animosity," "prevent," "lewd," "silly," "idiot," and many others, once had meanings that are now entirely obsolete and not even known to the average speaker or writer of English to-day, so the Greek word psallo (ψάλλω) once meant to pluck the hair, twang the bowstring, twitch a carpenter's line, and to touch the chords of a musical instrument, but had entirely lost all of these meanings before the beginning of the New Tes-

tament period, and that, therefore, the word is never used in the New Testament nor in cotemporaneous literature in any of these senses. At this time, it not only meant to sing, but that is the only sense in which it was used, all the other meanings having entirely disappeared.

Quoted from M. C. Kurfees, Instrumental Music in the Worship, 1950. pp. 44-45. Used by Permission.

We feel that it will be sufficient to show that those representing this statement have failed to prove that such a change of meaning occurred. Then I shall prove that no such change occurred.

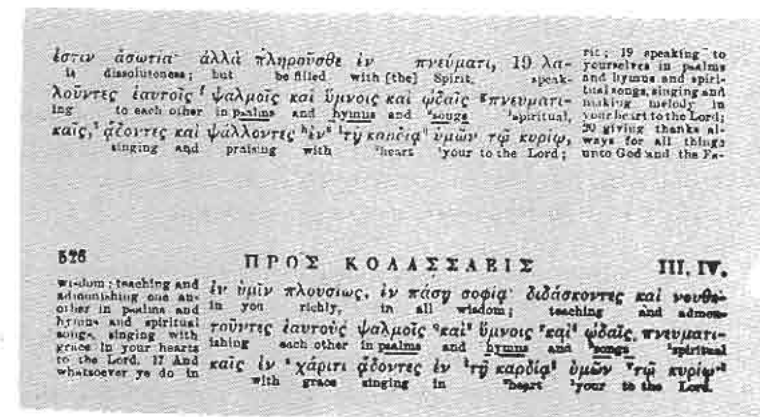
I have not come armed with the wisdom of Solomon, the eloquence of Demosthenes, or the logic of Locke. I have simply gathered, classified and raised to view proof and testimony, facts and figures which will clearly demonstrate that psallein, in the New Testament, meant "to sing with instrumental accompaniment."

It is hoped that the evidence presented will cause us to relegate this often troublesome question to its proper realm. Our prayer is that the spirit of approach and the preponderance of evidence will assure a sincere consideration on the part of all seeking to know the will of God on this subject.

## ENGLISH DICTIONARIES

The arguments for the use of instrumental music, both pro and con, are generally centered around two scriptures. These are Ephesians 5:19, and Colossians 3:16. Both passages are photocopied below from the Greek inter-linear. Throughout the book we will refer to each photocopy by number.

## Example 2



Quoted from G. R. Berry, The Inter-linear Literal Translation of the Greek New Testament, 1954, pp. 509 & 526.

The question needing to be raised is this: are the three words, psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs, absolutely identical? If they are absolutely identical, the passages would have to be translated, "admonish one another in songs, songs, and songs." Or, are they synonymous, with each one individually having a definite distinction and character -

istic peculiar to itself and lacking in the other two? We affirm the latter.

The distinction, which will be brought to light more clearly as we examine them further, is as follows: PSALM, the song sung with musical accompaniment; HYMN; the song sung with a direct address of praise and glory to God; SPIRITUAL SONG or ODE: "the general word for a song, whether accompanied or unaccompanied, whether of praise or on any other subject...."<sup>1</sup>

It is easy to see that it is quite possible for one song to be at once a psalmos, hymnos, and ode all three. We may sing a song (ode) of praise to God (hymn) accompanied by an instrument (psalm), and thus this one song is qualified to be called by any one of the three names.

Since our discussion will be concerning instrumental accompaniment we will be taking particular note of the chief characteristic of the verb psallo and its various forms in the New Testament. We will also note its definite distinction from other related words which have been generally translated "sing."

I make no apology for appealing to the Greek language in this study. Those who oppose our position will do the same on any other subject. "In the Club-Boles debate, H. Leo Boles, one of the main writers in the Gospel Advocate, repeatedly said, 'ANY PROPOSITION IN THE REALM OF RELIGION THAT CANNOT BE PROVED BY OUR ENGLISH BIBLE IS NOT TRUE--IT CANNOT BE PROVED.' M. D. Clubb rightly called that, 'putting a premium on ignorance.'<sup>2</sup>

For the sake of the conscience of those who appear to be sincere in their opposing the use of Greek to prove a point, I would like to present the material which I was able to gather from some English dictionaries concerning the English word psalm. Example 3 is a letter from G & C Merriam Company, (Webster's New International Dictionary), answering the question: "Since instrumental music was so much in the history of the word psalm, as is evidenced by your tracing it to the Greek psalmos, did you mean to define the English word psalm as sing "only," to the exclusion of instrumental accompaniment?"

<sup>1</sup>Lightfoot, Commentary on Colossians, 1879, p. 223.

<sup>2</sup>Krewson, Percy E., Facts about Instrumental Music, 1945. p. 9.

Example 3

# G. & C. MERRIAM COMPANY

PUBLISHERS OF MERRIAM-WEBSTER DICTIONARIES

SPRINGFIELD 2,



MASSACHUSETTS

April 27, 1962

Mr. Tom Burgess  
8624 N. E. Glisan  
Portland, Oregon

Dear Mr. Burgess:

In reply to your query of April 16, we certainly know of no evidence to suggest that the word psalm in English was ever intended to exclude the idea of instrumental accompaniment. The Psalms of David have been sung daily to organ accompaniment in many Anglican churches for centuries. On the other hand, we find references to "speaking" the Psalms as well as to "singing" them as early as the 9th century.

One of the earliest occurrences in English of the word psalm is in the phrase "sing psalms" used in an anonymous translation of about 825 of Isaiah 38 : 20, where the later King James version has "sing songs to the stringed instruments". A better known example explicitly mentioning instrumental accompaniment is to be found in lines 10 - 16 of Milton's "At a Solemn Music":

"Where the bright seraphim in burning row  
Their loud uplifted angel-trumpets blow,  
And the cherubic host in thousand quires  
Touch their immortal harps of golden wires,  
With those just spirits that wear victorious palms,  
Hymns devout and holy psalms  
Singing everlastingly."

Very truly yours,

G. & C. MERRIAM COMPANY

By *F. Stuart Crawford*  
F. Stuart Crawford

The New World Dictionary in Example 4 gives the same answer, in substance, as did Merriam-Webster.

Example 4

CABLE ADDRESS: World Cleveland • New York Office: 119 West 57th Street, New York 19, N. Y.



BOOK PUBLISHERS  
SINCE 1905

## THE WORLD PUBLISHING COMPANY

2231 West 110th Street • Cleveland 2 • Ohio

May 9, 1962

Mr. Tom Burgess  
8624 N.E. Glisan  
Portland, Oregon

Dear Mr. Burgess:

The English word psalm today means, as stated in Webster's New World Dictionary, "a sacred song or poem; hymn." It is used especially to refer to any of the songs composing the Book of Psalms. These songs are often sung by solo voice or chorus unaccompanied, or they may be sung with instrumental, sometimes full orchestral, accompaniment. They remain "psalms" in any event, whether accompanied or unaccompanied.

Very sincerely yours,

*David B. Guralnik*  
David B. Guralnik  
Dictionary Editor

DBG:t

Also inquired of Thorndike-Barnhardt Dictionary which is published by Scott, Foreman and Company. The research assistant, after a lengthy discussion of the history of the word, made reference to The Oxford English Dictionary. Her quotes from it and her comments upon it follow in Example 5.

Example 5

In regard to the English word psalm, The Oxford English Dictionary enters the following as two of its definitions:

1. In a general sense: Any sacred song that is or may be sung in religious worship; a hymn: esp. in biblical use.... Also more generally, any song or ode of a sacred or serious character.

2. spec. Any one of the sacred songs or hymns of the ancient Hebrews which together form the 'Book of Psalms'...; a version or paraphrase of any of these, esp. as sung (or read) in public or private worship. (The prevailing use throughout.)

Note that these definitions relate psalms to being sung, as do the definitions of most of the derivatives of psalm. According to many of the citations of usage in The Oxford English Dictionary, it would appear that throughout the history of the word, it has been used in connection with singing and musical instruments.

psalm aefter haerpansang. (about 1000)

David that sang the psalms on the psalter. (about 1175)

Psalmes with instruments musicall. (about 1649)

Thank you for giving me the opportunity of discussing this question with you--I hope I have been able to be of a little help.

Cordially yours,

*Sandra Miller*  
(Mrs.) Sandra Miller  
Dictionary Department

SM:b

A summary statement concerning the English word psalm can best be made by drawing one conclusive statement from each letter. Merriam-Webster Dictionary: "We certainly know of no evidence to suggest that the word psalm in English was ever intended to exclude the idea of instrumental accompaniment." The New World Dictionary: "They remain psalms in any event, whether accompanied or unaccompanied." Thorndike-Barnhardt Dictionary: "According to many of the citations of usage in The Oxford English Dictionary, it would appear that throughout the history of the word, it has been used in connection with singing and musical instruments." (Note: One of the historical references which connect it with singing and musical instruments was written thirty-eight years after the King James Translation.)


It is plain to see what close investigation will bring to light. Even the English word psalm has never excluded instrumental accompaniment. This is an important point that must be stressed. It must be shown that instrumental music has been excluded since it is readily admitted by all that at one time it was included. We do not need to prove that instrumental accompaniment was inserted into the word, but rather our opposition must show and prove that it was removed!

Our English dictionaries also supplied me with some interesting facts concerning the use of psallo and psalmos during the New Testament period. It can be easily observed in all dictionaries which trace the history of our English words, that psalm is always traced back to the Greek language. Inquiry into this observation revealed some more interesting and pertinent facts. I asked specifically about the etymological development of the Greek psalmos and psallo. I inquired if they knew of any development of the word which would have taken the meaning of instrumental accompaniment out of the word and/or have replaced it with vocal only, during the New Testament period. Example 6 is a reply from Merriam-Webster Dictionaries.

Example 6

**G. & C. MERRIAM COMPANY**  
PUBLISHERS OF MERRIAM-WEBSTER DICTIONARIES

SPRINGFIELD 2, MASSACHUSETTS



March 7, 1962

Mr. Tom Burgess  
8624 N. E. Glisan  
Portland 20, Oregon

Dear Mr. Burgess:

We are glad to reply to your letter of February 26 addressed to the late Dr. Holt. The Greek word psalmos means literally the plucking of a string, and its earliest known use is by Euripides to refer to the plucking of a bowstring. But more commonly it refers to the plucking of a lyre string, and hence to the sound produced by such an instrument. There are several examples of this usage, also

in 5th century F.C. authors. The pagan Greeks do not seem to have used the word for a specific tune or composition for the lyre, but we do find psalma, which has the same literal meaning, in this sense as late as the 2d century A.D. The sense of a sacred song or poem for psalmos is due entirely to the translators of the Old Testament into Greek in the 3d and 2d centuries B.C.; they chose this Greek word to render the Hebrew mizmōr applied to a psalm of David, no doubt because David's psalms were believed to have been sung to the harp, or Jewish equivalent of the lyre. There is no evidence that pagan Greeks ever used the word for a vocal composition.

Very truly yours,

G. & C. MERRIAM COMPANY

By *F. Stuart Crawford*  
F. Stuart Crawford

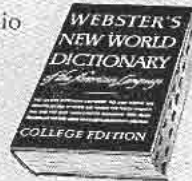
FSC/ab

Example 7 is a reply from Webster's New World Dictionary concerning the same question.

Example 7

CABLE ADDRESS: *World Cleveland* • New York Office: 119 West 57th Street, New York 19, N. Y.

**THE WORLD PUBLISHING COMPANY**  
2231 West 110th Street • Cleveland 2 • Ohio



April 16th, 1962

Mr. Tom Burgess  
8624 N.E. Glisan  
Portland, Oregon

Dear Mr. Burgess:

The Greek verb psallein, from which our psalm ultimately derives, means in its basic sense "to twitch or pluck." From this it came to



mean "to play (a stringed instrument) with the fingers rather than a plectron." Still later it acquired the meaning "to sing to the accompaniment of a harp." This meaning of psallein was already well established by the third century B.C., for it appears in the Septuagint. It also appears in parts of the New Testament whose authorship dates to the latter half of the first century A.D.

Sincerely yours,

  
David B. Guralnik  
Dictionary Editor

DEG/k

Example 8 represents the answer of Funk & Wagnall's Dictionary to the same inquiry.

Example 8

FUNK & WAGNALLS COMPANY, INC.  
PUBLISHERS  
380 LEXINGTON AVENUE  
NEW YORK 17, N. Y.

THE **Standard** DICTIONARIES  
EDITORIAL OFFICES

April 16, 1962

Mr. Tom Burgess  
8624 N.E. Glisan  
Portland, Oregon

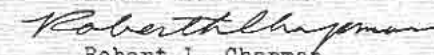
Dear Mr. Burgess:

Your letter of April 2 about "psalm" was referred to our etymologist, who has returned the following note:

The Greek psallein means "to pull," especially a bow---hence, pull the strings of a musical instrument with the fingers, hence to sing to the accompaniment of a harp. This verb is used in the Greek Bible translation (Septuagint) as translation of the Hebrew "sing praises," as in Psalm 7, 17; 9; 11, etc. Hence the word "Psalm" (Greek Psalmos), a song with the accompaniment of the harp, a song of praise, and the name of the Book of Psalms.

Our etymologist cannot determine when the word became specialized in Greek to mean church singing in particular. It has only the specialized meaning in modern Greek. One might reason that the word retained its more general meaning "to sing with the accompaniment of a harp" until well into the Christian era in spite of its specialized use in the Septuagint (3rd century B.C.). The Septuagint was made in Alexandria, not in Greece, and the word would not have begun to specialize in Greece proper until that country had become Christian. It would be a safe guess, certainly, that psallein still meant "to sing with the accompaniment of a harp" in the 1st century A.D.

Sincerely yours,

  
Robert L. Chapman  
Managing Editor

RLC:lm

Example 8 A is the response we received from The American College Dictionary.

Example 8 A



**RANDOM HOUSE, INC.**

501 MADISON AVENUE, NEW YORK 22, N.Y.

TELEPHONE PLAZA 1-2600

April 19, 1962

Mr. Tom Burgess  
8624 N.E. Glisan  
Portland, Oregon

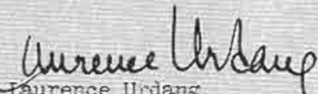
Dear Mr. Burgess:

Mr. Stein has passed on to me your letter of April 2 concerning the etymology of psalm.

The meaning of the Greek word psallein is "pluck, pull, twitch or play (with the fingers) on a stringed instrument." Another sense

may be derived from the Septuagint and the New Testament -- "to sing with a harp or cithara." The noun form is psalmos, which came into Latin as psalmus and thence into Germanic and Romance. In other words, as early as the second century B.C. psalmos meant "a singing with a stringed instrument." Our sources do not indicate whether by the first century A.D. the meaning broadened so as to include all musical instruments; certainly by 1649, as evidenced in Roberts' Clavis Bibliorum, the word no longer referred only to the accompaniment by stringed instruments.

Sincerely yours,



Laurence Urdang  
The American College Dictionary

A concise summary of evidence needs to be made here also. This will distinctly indicate that our English dictionaries observed no revolutionary change in psallo or psalmos just prior to, or during, the New Testament period, as is asserted by those who oppose instrumental music.

Merriam-Webster Dictionaries: "There is no evidence that pagan Greeks ever used the word for a vocal composition." (Note: Most pagan Greeks spoke Koine Greek, the language in which the New Testament was written. The credit for this discovery, which is now generally accepted, belongs to a brilliant German theologian, Adolf Deissmann. J. H. Moulton, co-author of a Greek lexicon writes, "The New Testament is written in the spoken Greek of daily life, which can be proved from inscriptions to have differed but little, as found in nearly every corner of the Roman Empire of the first century.")<sup>3</sup>

Webster's New World Dictionary: "Still later it acquired the meaning 'to sing to the accompaniment of the harp'. This meaning of psallein was already well established by the third century B. C., for it appears in the Septuagint. It also appears in parts of the New Testament whose authorship dates to the latter half of the first century A. D."

Funk & Wagnall's Dictionary: "It would be a safe guess, certainly, that psallein still meant 'to sing with the accompaniment of a harp' in the 1st century A. D."

The American College Dictionary: "Another sense may be derived from the Septuagint and the New Testament-- 'to sing with a harp or cithara.'" Notice also that Mr. Urdang refers us to Roberts' Clavis Bibliorum which indicates that the Greek words had broadened to include other instruments by 1649.

<sup>3</sup>Moulton, James Hope, Dictionary of the Bible, 1909. p. 529.