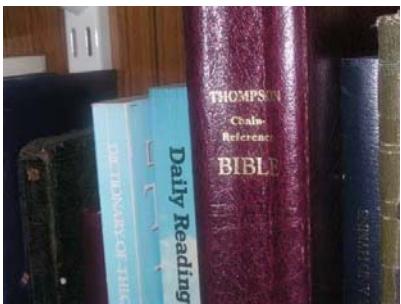




The Burning Bush—Online article archive

An examination of the Greek terms psalmos, humnos and ode as they are used in the Septuagint version of the Scriptures (the LXX) to see if the practice of the LXX lends support to the concept of exclusive psalmody. A study by Rev. Andy Foster (Penticton Free Presbyterian Church, Canada)



One of the main, indeed the main argument, of those who say that only the Psalms should be sung during the worship of God, is that the exhortation of Paul in Ephesians 5:19 and Colossians 3:16 contains three terms that indicate that Paul was commanding the singing of the Psalms of David, and only them, in New Testament worship. The terms are psalms and hymns and songs. It is claimed that these terms correspond with the titles given to the Psalms and must therefore prove that it was the psalms of David that Paul had in mind.

This argument was the main argument employed by Rev. Angus Stewart in the recent debate between us in Ballymena on January 14th. In so doing, he was but copying the argument as developed by others in the "Psalms only" camp. In the study that follows, it is pointed out by Andy Foster that a study of these three terms proves the very opposite to that which the "Psalms only" exponents would have us believe. These terms do not belong exclusively to the book of psalms but are even used of that which does most certainly not belong in the worship of God. Another exegesis is required of Ephesians 5:19 and Colossians 3:16 than that offered by the "Psalms only" lobby. That exegesis is the one put forth in our submission during the debate.

The Editor.

The Septuagint, or LXX (so called because of the story that it was the work of 70 translators), is a Greek translation of the Hebrew Old Testament Scriptures. It appeared about 250 B.C. and was the Bible of Gentile believers and of many of the scattered Jews. One of the claims made in support of the exclusive Psalmody position is that the Greek terms which Paul employs in Eph 5:19 and Col 3:16 for, hymns and songs are proved by their use in the Septuagint (LXX) to refer exclusively to the Psalms of David. The use of psalmos (psalm), humnos (hymn), or ode (song) in the LXX translation of the Psalms particularly is triumphantly pointed to as proof that Paul meant the Church of Christ to sing Psalms only. As part of that argument it may be demonstrated that all three terms appear for example in the LXX translation of Ps 65:1 To the chief Musician, A Psalm [psalmos] and Song [ode] of David. Praise [humnos] waiteth for thee, O God, in Sion... This is supposed to give conclusive evidence of the case for exclusive psalmody.

No proof

However, the mere appearance of these Greek terms, or their derivatives, in the Psalms of the LXX is no proof that Paul is teaching exclusive Psalmody when he uses them in Eph 5:19 and Col 3:16. To get the full picture of the meaning of these three Greek words as



The Burning Bush—Online article archive

they are used in the LXX we must consider their use a little more carefully and especially give attention to the Hebrew equivalents those Greek words translate. When we do this, the use of the LXX as an argument to support exclusive Psalmody is seen to be less than honest. Psalmos, humnos and ode between them are used by the LXX to translate more than twenty-five different Hebrew terms in the Old Testament. This fact alone means that this article will be only a very limited study. However, one does not have to dig very deep into the subject to see that the use of these Greek terms in the LXX does not support the exclusive Psalmody argument. All Scripture references are from the Authorized Version and italicized words in brackets that follow are the English translation of the term under discussion.

A. The use of *psalmos* (*psalms*, Eph 5:19, Col 3:16) in the LXX refutes the exclusive Psalmody argument.

Various forms of the Greek word psalmos are used by the LXX to translate **eight different Hebrew terms**. The verbal form of psalmos is used, in agreement with its root meaning, to refer to the playing of a musical instrument as in I Sam 16:16, 17 (player, play), II Kings 3:15 (played), Amos 5:23 (melody). The noun form is used in Job 21:12, 20:31 (organ). Even when it is only used of simple instrumental music in these references it is clear that psalmos does not discriminate between music that was merely pleasing to the human ear, that which was acceptable to God and that which wasn't. Even at this very elementary level in its meaning, psalmos is not a term used exclusively of that which is mandated by God.

This lack of discrimination and exclusivity in the term itself becomes even more clear in how psalmos is used in the translation of the Hebrew words relating to the verbal expression of praise and song.

Psalmos is used as an equivalent to the Hebrew word mizmor, rendered Psalm in the AV. The word mizmor is confined to the book of Psalms and is a derivative of a Hebrew verb for playing a stringed instrument. Mizmor appears very often in the titles of some of the Psalms. It is striking, however, to observe that this Hebrew term does not appear in the Old Testament outside the Book of the Psalms, even when the songs of that book are in view. While many of the titles to the psalms include the word mizmor, that term is not to be taken as one that identifies every Psalm or is used universally in the Scriptures to exclusively identify the inspired psalms. In fact only 57 of the 150 psalms are so identified. "The Psalms of the Old Testament remarkably enough have no single, well-recognized, universally accepted name by which they are designated in the Hebrew Scriptures" — De-litzsch, cited by Trench, New Testament Synonyms, Chapter 78. In other words, the Psalms of David are nowhere in Scripture exclusively identified by a specific term or name. There is no single term that points to the Psalms and to nothing else.

Psalmos also appears in the LXX as equivalent to the Hebrew word neginah. This Hebrew term is used to describe a wide variety of songs. Neginah is translated by psalmos in Lam 3:14 (song), in Lam 5:14 (music) and in Ps 69:12 (song). It is striking to observe that in the LXX translation of Lam 3:14 and Ps 69:12, psalmos, or its verbal form, is used for songs that are not only uninspired but are in fact the product of the wicked, even drunkards, who mocked God and His word. The Hebrew term neginah is used elsewhere in the Hebrew Scriptures of: the songs of the wicked, Job 30:9 (song); the inspired praise of



The Burning Bush—Online article archive

God, Psalm 61 title (Neginah-a song performed on a stringed instrument); and the uninspired praise of the Lord composed by King Hezekiah, Is 38:20 (my songs).

The fact is clear that by their use of psalmos the LXX scholars did not see this term as referring exclusively to the Psalms of David, not even exclusively referring to inspired praise, nor even referring exclusively to the praise of God. It is a common mistake to regard psalmos as only and necessarily referring to the inspired songs of the Book of Psalms, but this is not in fact the case.

B. The use of humnos (hymns, Eph 5:19 and Col 3:16) in the LXX does not support the argument for exclusive Psalmody.

Humnos, or its verbal root, is used to translate **nine different Hebrew terms**. Humnos is used by the LXX in Ps 65:1 (praise), 148:14 (praise). The Hebrew equivalent here is the word tehillah coming from the Hebrew verb hallal, a word of wide-ranging meaning in the Hebrew Scriptures and it includes within the scope of its meaning: inspired praise of God, Nehemiah 12:46 (praise); uninspired praise of God, Hab 3:3 (the praise of God by His people at Sinai is in view); and the praise of that which is wicked and idolatrous, II Samuel 14:25 (Absalom's carnality praised), Judges 16:24 (Philistine idols praised). In this breadth of meaning there is a harmony with the classical use of humnos. In classical Greek it had the significance of a song offered in praise of pagan deities but humnos developed in meaning to include the praise of God as is evident from its New Testament use, for example, of the Saviour's song in Matt 26:30 (hymn).

Humnos is also used as an equivalent to the Hebrew term shir in I Chron 25:6 (song). The same wide range of meaning is seen in shir as in the other words seen thus far. It is used of inspired song outside the book of Psalms, Ex 15:1, Num 21:7, Judges 5:12, Is 5:1, Song of Solomon 1:1. Shir is also used of generic songs of celebration, Gen 31:27 (songs); the songs of the wicked, Ecclesiastes 7:5 (song); uninspired songs of praise to God such as those authored by Solomon, I Kings 4:32 (songs).

The verbal form of humnos appears in Proverbs 1:20 (crieth) as the equivalent of the Hebrew verb ranan, which refers to an exuberant, celebratory shouting for joy. See examples of ranan used in Deut 32:43 (rejoice), Ps 5:11 (shout for joy) and Ps

51:14 (sing aloud). Proverbs 1:20, where there is a joyful declaration of the wisdom of the gospel in its promises of life and its threatenings of judgment (v 24-33) may, according to the LXX, be legitimately regarded as a 'hymn'.

C. The use of ode (songs, Eph 5:19 and Col 3:16) in the LXX does not support exclusive Psalmody.

Ode in its noun and verbal forms is used by the LXX to translate as many as **eleven different Hebrew terms** including some noted above. Ode appears in the LXX translating the following Hebrew words: shir (Deut 31:19, 21, song); neginah (Hab 3:19, stringed instruments); mizmor (Ps 39:1, Psalm); and tehillah (Ps 65:1, praise). The LXX uses ode to translate the Hebrew word tephillah in Psalm 72:20 (prayers) and one striking use of ode is found in I Chronicles 15:22, 27 (song) where the Hebrew equivalent is massa, more commonly translated by the English word burden, and used extensively of the burden carried by the prophets as they taught the people the word of God. This is an interesting con-



The Burning Bush—Online article archive

nexion to Paul's exhortation that the odes (songs) of Eph 5:19 and Col 3:16 were to be part of a teaching and admonishing ministry.

This breadth of use demonstrates the flexibility of the Greek word, even though in its New Testament and LXX usage, ode is "always used of praise to God or Christ" (Abbott-Smith, Manual Greek Lexicon). In Amos 5:23, however, ode is used, and while the reference is to songs that were ostensibly the Lord's, because of apostacy and sin they had become wicked blasphemies and hateful to Him. It is evident that the Greek word ode has enough breadth of meaning to warrant Paul adding the adjective spiritual to qualify ode (songs) in Eph 5:19 and Col 3:16. The addition of spiritual has a double effect: it qualifies the word songs thus indicating that there were songs or odes particularly which were unfit for Christian use; and it defines the nature of the song that the Christian is to sing.

The use of ode by the LXX to translate terms that have such breadth of meaning makes it very clear that they did not see this term as exclusively referring to the Psalms of David.

Conclusions

1. The wide range of Hebrew expressions translated by the LXX using the three Greek terms Paul uses in Eph 5:19 and Col 3:16, indicates very clearly that the LXX scholars did not see these terms referring exclusively to the Book of Psalms.

Their translation practice gives the lie to the claim that any or all of these terms refers exclusively to the Book of Psalms. Even psalmos when it is used in Eph 5:19 and Col 3:16 is not necessarily a reference to the psalms of David, although it is probable that Paul had the book of Psalms in view. Neither humnos (hymns) nor ode (songs) exclusively refers to the book of Psalms either.

2. These three terms are sufficiently flexible in their use so as to be used interchangeably to some degree.

All three Greek terms (psalmos, humnos, ode) are variously used to translate both Hebrew terms neginah and shir, while in other instances two of the three terms are interchanged in the translation of identical Hebrew words. One instance of this flexibility of use is seen in Ps 65:1, a text often used as a mainstay argument by the exclusive Psalmist. In this place all three Greek terms occur as indicated above and in a sense therefore this Psalm is also an ode and a hymn. This juxtaposition of psalmos, humnos and ode in the LXX is sometimes presented as infallible proof that Paul was speaking exclusively of the Psalms. But this is not so. This flexibility means that, to some degree, the three Greek terms are synonymous and that what our English Bible refers to as a Psalm may legitimately be called a 'song' or a 'hymn' and vice versa - indeed has frequently been so called by the LXX by its interchanging of the Greek terms. The flexibility in the use of the Greek words demonstrated by the LXX means that where song or praise is referred to anywhere in the Old Testament it may legitimately be called a psalm, a hymn or a song. This means that there are psalms, hymns and songs to be found everywhere in Scripture and not just in the Book of the Psalms.

3. It is therefore the context, content and the state of the heart that determines whether praise is acceptable to God.



The Burning Bush—Online article archive

As we have seen, the same term, whether in Hebrew, Greek or even English, may be used to describe song that ranges in meaning from the inspired praise of God, to uninspired praise of God by His people, to the derisive songs of drunkards and even to wicked praise of idols by the ungodly. For example, psalmos does not discriminate between the song of the drunkards (Ps 69:12) and a Psalm of David (Ps 3:1) for it is used for both in the LXX; humnos does not discriminate between the Philistines who praised their god (Judges 16:24) and the songs of thanksgiving and praise unto God (Nehemiah 12:46) since it is used for both in the LXX. When these Greek terms, therefore, are used in Scripture it is the context and not the word itself that determines whether it is a song that is acceptable to the Lord. The Greek words alone are not sufficient to indicate the character of truly Christian praise, rather Paul must enlarge on them in the context of Eph 5:19 and Col 3:16 to indicate clearly what he means. When applied to the Christian, psalms, hymns and songs will mean praise that is:

a) agreeable with Scripture in content. For this reason Paul emphasizes that these psalms, hymns and spiritual songs will spring out of the word of Christ dwelling in Christians. Our song will not be of fleshly or worldly themes but rather, without the need to use inspired songs only, will be thoroughly Scriptural in content. The three Greek terms we have been considering make no such demands as to content, but the Christian must see to it that his psalms, hymns and songs are Scriptural in content.

b) motivated by a Scriptural purpose. Praise will not merely be for self-gratification but for the purpose of edification teaching and admonishing one another, Col 3:16. Our praise is to be a part of worship activity that is directed to the Lord (Eph 5:19) and not to men. While the Greek terms may not discriminate as far as the purpose and object of praise is concerned the Christian must make such discrimination.

c) offered in spirit and in truth. Even though the Greek words themselves have no specific reference to Christ or the Spirit, Eph 5:19 emphasizes the infilling of the Spirit that is necessary for the Christian to sing psalms, hymns and songs that please God. They are to be from the heart to the Lord. Col 3:16-17 emphasizes that this praise is to be offered in the name of the Lord Jesus.

By these additional instructions Paul qualifies the words psalmos, humnos and ode and indicates what they are to mean for the believer. It is the practice of these inspired qualifications of the Greek terms, and not the exclusive use of a metrical Psalter, that determine whether our praise is truly Christian and in obedience to the commands of the Apostle. These are the factors that will set the psalms, hymns and songs of the Christian apart from their wicked equivalents.