

Psalms, Hymns, and Spiritual Songs: Assessing the Debate

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The New Testament contains very little explicit information concerning singing in Christian churches, and yet debate about what kind of songs may be sung in worship is perhaps one of the most controversial matters facing churches today. For this reason, participants on all sides of contemporary worship debates look to two parallel NT passages as fodder for their views: Ephesians 5:19 and Colossians 3:16. Of particular note in interpretations of these passages are the three musical terms Paul employs: ψαλμοῖς (*psalmois*), ὕμνοις (*hymnois*), and ᾠδαῖς (*ōdais*). What these terms exactly mean has been a matter of disagreement since the church fathers, and worship warriors frequently use dogmatic, and often unsupported, assertions concerning their meaning to defend their arguments.

The purpose of this paper is to examine popular and scholarly discussions of the terms in these passages to determine, if possible, their exact meaning and what implications for contemporary practice may be drawn therefrom. The grammatical construction of the phrases in both Ephesians 5:19 and Colossians 3:16 are nearly identical,² and thus I will treat discussions of the meaning of these terms without distinction between the two appearances. I will survey only recent treatments of these texts for two reasons. First, recent discussions will reflect the most current scholarship in biblical studies. Second, contemporary scholars will take into account and interact with any relevant older scholarship, so there is little need to specifically explore the older treatments. By examining the arguments for the predominant views of the meaning of these terms, I will show that ψαλμοῖς, ὕμνοις, and ᾠδαῖς in Ephesians 5:19 and Colossians 3:16 should not be taken as clearly defined categories of congregational song but should rather be seen as overlapping near synonyms.

Popular Interpretations

Several examples from popular writings will illustrate how authors use clear distinctions between the terms in these passages to argue in defense of a particular worship philosophy.

For instance, after acknowledging that “few biblical scholars identify these song types with certainty,” Donald Hustad asserts, “I must believe that they were different—in origin,

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² The only difference between the two is the presence of καὶ (“and”) between the terms in Ephesians 5:19 (ψαλμοῖς καὶ ὕμνοις καὶ ᾠδαῖς πνευματικαῖς), which is absent in Colossians 3:16 (ψαλμοῖς, ὕμνοις, ᾠδαῖς πνευματικαῖς).

in subject matter, and possibly even in performance practice.”³ He then explains what he believes the terms to mean and concludes,

It is important to be aware of the comprehensive character of early Christian song, since that should set a standard for liturgical music in later centuries and even today. Apparently, first-century worship included traditional (classic) as well as contemporary materials, highly cognitive as well as more emotional forms, and carefully-crafted as well as improvised compositions—psalms of praise and prayer, hymns of doctrine, and spiritual songs of Christian experience.⁴

Like Hustad, Barry Liesch recognizes the ambiguity of the terms, yet he nevertheless insists that Paul uses the three terms to “describe the *full range* of the musical activity occurring. . . . [The Colossians’] music probably reflected their multicultural environment, an aspect our pluralistic society in North America has in common with the early church.”⁵

Notably, Gerrit Gustafson differentiates between the terms in a way that implies their equivalence to contemporary distinctions between biblically inspired psalms, doctrinally rich hymns, and charismatic praise choruses in order to defend a blended approach to worship.⁶ Bob Kauflin agrees, asserting that Paul “seems to be encouraging diversity in the songs we use to praise God” as part of an argument for “stylistic diversity,”⁷ and Mike Cosper defends a pluralistic approach to worship music by stating, “I believe that the wording of Colossians 3 calls us to embrace diversity in the Psalms—referring to the biblical psalms, hymns (the two-thousand-year-old heritage of the songs of the church), and spiritual songs as the continued testimony of believers in new songs.”⁸

Scholarly Interpretations

While popular authors often assert interpretations of the terms in these passages without much explanation or support, more scholarly treatments of the terms do justify their claims. Scholarly opinions can be generally divided into two categories: those that contend there is a clear distinction between the terms and those that believe the terms are ambiguous.

³ Donald P. Hustad, *Jubilate II: Church Music in Worship and Renewal* (Wheaton: Hope Publishing Company, 1993), 146.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 155.

⁵ Barry Liesch, *The New Worship: Straight Talk on Music and the Church*, expanded ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2001), 41. Emphasis original.

⁶ Gerrit Gustafson, “A Paradigm for the Church Music of the Future,” in *Music and the Arts in Christian Worship*, ed. Robert Webber, vol. 4 (Nashville: Star Song Pub. Group, 1994), 181–83.

⁷ Bob Kauflin, *Worship Matters: Leading Others to Encounter the Greatness of God* (Wheaton: Crossway Books, 2008), 104.

⁸ Mike Cosper, *Rhythms of Grace: How the Church’s Worship Tells the Story of the Gospel* (Wheaton: Crossway Books, 2013), 160.

Clear Classification

Several NT scholars argue that Paul intended a clear distinction of categories with the terms he used. For example, Clinton Arnold observes that “there does appear to be a discernible difference between the terms, especially the first two, that can be identified.”⁹ Harold Hoehner and A. Skevington Wood represent two additional examples. How each of these defends their view and defines the terms follows.

Psalms. The first term Paul uses is ψαλμοῖς (“psalms”). Arnold suggests that the term “was used primarily in the context of Judaism” since it “serves as the title for the LXX version of the 150 songs of the Hebrew *Tehillim*, the book of ‘praises,’ and appears 72 times throughout the collection.”¹⁰ After noting that “originally ψαλμοῖς meant ‘plucking’ the string of a bow or the sound of a stringed instrument,” Hoehner¹¹ observes that “most likely they were OT psalms. Although one cannot be dogmatic, the NT church may have followed the OT and Judaistic practice, as it had in other instances, by singing the psalms with a stringed instrument.”¹² Therefore, according to these scholars as summarized by Wood, “Psalms’ seems to refer to the OT Psalter, which was integrated with Christian worship from the first.”¹³

Hymns. In contrast to Jewish psalms, Arnold argues that “the term ‘hymns’ (ᾠμοίς), on the other hand, was commonly used of poetic ascriptions of praise to the various gods and goddesses throughout antiquity.”¹⁴ He suggests that Paul used the term to intentionally include Greek song forms in Christian worship in addition to Jewish psalms. Wood expresses a similar connection of the term to non-Jewish worship songs, noting that “‘hymns’ in pagan circles were sung to eulogize some god or cultic hero. Christian hymns exalted the name of Christ (v. 19) or God (v. 20). Such canticles appear in the NT itself (as at v. 14).”¹⁵ Hoehner posits a more general understanding of the term as “generally poetic material that is either recited or sung, many times in praise of divinity or in honor of one of the gods.”¹⁶

Songs. Ironically, Hoehner connects the final term, ᾠδαῖς (“songs”) to a possible pagan origin, noting that it was “used of a dirge in Greek tragedy, but more often it refers to songs of joy or praise or just simply singing.”¹⁷ Arnold agrees with the latter theory, suggesting that it “was a more general term and was equally at home in Jewish or Gentile circles.”¹⁸ Wood argues that these songs, connected with the term πνευματικαῖς (“spiritual”; more on this below), “may be so designated either to differentiate them from secular compositions or

⁹ Clinton E. Arnold, *Ephesians* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2010), 353.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Although Hoehner acknowledges that “it is difficult to make much of a distinction between [the terms]” (Harold Hoehner, *Ephesians: An Exegetical Commentary* [Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2002], 710), he spends a considerable amount of space doing just that.

¹² Ibid., 708.

¹³ A. Skevington Wood, *Ephesians*, ed. Frank E. Gaebelin, *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1981), 73.

¹⁴ Arnold, *Ephesians*, 353.

¹⁵ Wood, *Ephesians*, 73.

¹⁶ Hoehner, *Ephesians*, 708.

¹⁷ Ibid., 709.

¹⁸ Arnold, *Ephesians*, 353.

because they represent spontaneous singing in the Spirit.”¹⁹ Clearly the meaning of this final term garners the most disagreement among scholars who understand definable distinctions among the terms.

Implications. The conclusions of these scholars resemble the popular treatments of the phrase surveyed above. For example, Arnold asserts that Paul used “the combination of the three terms to commend a variety of forms and musical styles in his multicultural churches, which were comprised of Jews and Greeks.”²⁰

Ambiguous Classification

Other NT scholars, such as F. F. Bruce, argue that although the terms may indicate slight differences, “it is unlikely that any sharply demarcated division is intended.”²¹ Douglas Moo claims, “Whether we can distinguish the meanings of these three terms is questionable.”²² Andrew Lincoln represents a primary explanation for this view by claiming that “the three terms used here are best seen as another example of this writer’s fondness for piling up synonyms,”²³ and Frank Thielman asserts, “Since the three terms seem almost interchangeable, and since Ephesians has a tendency to be redundant, it is probably a mistake to distinguish the terms sharply from one another.”²⁴ The view is based upon two primary biblical arguments.

The Terms in the LXX. First, these scholars observe how the LXX uses the three terms. Lincoln notes that “they are the three most common terms in the LXX for religious songs and occur there interchangeably in the titles of the psalms.”²⁵ James Dunn bases his conclusion of the near synonymy of the terms primarily on the fact that the LXX uses all three terms to translate psalm titles, and Moo notes this fact as well. Further, certain psalms carry

¹⁹ Wood, *Ephesians*, 73.

²⁰ Arnold, *Ephesians*, 353.

²¹ F. F. Bruce, *The Epistles to the Colossians, to Philemon, and to the Ephesians* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1984), 158–59. See also James D. G. Dunn, *The Epistles to the Colossians and to Philemon* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1996), 238–39. He finds “attractive” the idea that “the ‘psalms’ refer to praise drawn directly from the Scriptures . . . , whereas the ‘hymns’ are the more distinctively Christian compositions . . . which have been widely recognized within the New Testament itself,” but admits that “the description here hardly enables this to be put forward as a firm claim.”

²² Douglas J. Moo, *The Letters to the Colossians and to Philemon* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2008), 289.

²³ Andrew Lincoln, *Ephesians* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1990), 346.

²⁴ Frank Thielman, *Ephesians* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2010), 361.

²⁵ Lincoln, *Ephesians*, 346.

more than one of these classifications.²⁶ Interestingly, although Hoehner spends time distinguishing the terms, he also notes that all three appear in the LXX to translate psalm titles.²⁷

The Terms in the NT. Second, these scholars note the terms are used interchangeably even within the NT. Moo observes that in the NT, “psalm” most often refers to the OT Psalms, but Paul also uses the term to refer to distinctly Christian “hymns” in other passages like 1 Corinthians 14:26.²⁸ Thielman summarizes this point: “Luke regularly uses the term ψαλμός for the material in the canonical book of Psalms (Luke 20:42; 24:44; Acts 1:20; 13:33), although Paul uses the same term to refer to a Spirit-inspired song that someone utters in a Christian assembly (1 Cor 14:26; cf. 1 Cor 14:15; Jas 5:13).”²⁹ Likewise, both David Detwiler and Hoehner observe that the verb form of the second term, ὑμνέω (*hymnéō*), refers in its two uses in the Gospels to “the second part of the Hallel (probably Pss. 113–18), which is sung after the concluding prayer of the actual Passover meal over the fourth goblet of wine.”³⁰

These two points considered together seem to indicate that Paul did not intend any clear distinction between these terms.

“Spiritual”

The other important consideration with this phrase is how Paul is using πνευματικαῖς (*pneumatikais*; “spiritual”). Scholars argue one of two positions.

Modifies “songs.” Some scholars suggest that πνευματικαῖς modifies ᾠδαῖς, which is the clearest conclusion grammatically³¹ and the most represented in English translations. Hoehner explains that “the first two nouns normally have specific reference to the praise of God, whereas the last noun is more general suggesting that Paul wanted to ensure that believers sang spiritual songs.”³² Moo agrees: “It is perhaps probable that *pneumatikos* does qualify only the last of the three terms, since only the last term was general enough to require a qualification that would limit its meaning to religious songs.”³³

Modifies all three terms. Others, such as Arnold, suggest that “the adjective should be understood as qualifying all three nouns. There is no grammatical or contextual reason to limit it to the last word (‘songs’).”³⁴ Peter O’Brien even translates the phrase, “Spirit-inspired

²⁶ Dunn, *Colossians and Philemon*, 238–39; Moo, *Colossians and Philemon*, 289. The classification of the psalm titles in the LXX are as follows: ψαλμος (3–9, 11–15, 19–25, 29–31, 38–41, 43–44, 46–51, 62–68, 73, 75–77, 79–85, 87–88, 92, 94, 98–101, 108–110, 139–41, 143); συνεσιον (32, 42, 44–45, 52–55, 74, 78, 88–89, 142); υμνοις (6, 54–55, 61, 67, 76); ωδη (4, 18, 30, 39, 45, 48, 65–68, 75–76, 83, 87–88, 91–93, 95–96, 108, 120–34). See also David F. Detwiler, “Church Music and Colossians 3:16,” *Bibliotheca Sacra* 158, no. 631 (July 2001): 360.

²⁷ Hoehner, *Ephesians*, 708–9.

²⁸ Moo, *Colossians and Philemon*, 289. See also Detwiler, “Church Music and Colossians 3:16,” 360.

²⁹ Thielman, *Ephesians*, 361.

³⁰ Detwiler, “Church Music and Colossians 3:16,” 361; Hoehner, *Ephesians*, 708–9.

³¹ The feminine gender of πνευματικαῖς matches ᾠδαῖς but not ψαλμοῖς or ὑμνοις.

³² Hoehner, *Ephesians*, 709.

³³ Moo, *Colossians and Philemon*, 290. Detwiler agrees (“Church Music and Colossians 3:16,” 362).

³⁴ Arnold, *Ephesians*, 354.

psalms, hymns, and songs.”³⁵ Lincoln agrees, and even bases his conclusion on the presupposition that all three nouns are synonymous, suggesting that “their synonymity makes it all the more likely that the adjective πνευματικάῃς, ‘spiritual,’ although agreeing in gender with only the last in the series, embraces all three terms because they are inspired by the Spirit and manifest the life of the Spirit.”³⁶

How these scholars interpret the meaning of πνευματικάῃς in reference either to all three terms or just ᾠδαῖς is beyond the scope of this paper. However, what is apparent is that there is no correlation between considering the terms as distinct or synonymous and applying πνευματικάῃς to one or all three of the terms.

Implications

Since ψαλμοῖς, ὕμνοις, and ᾠδαῖς are each used as translations of psalm titles in the LXX and are employed interchangeably in the NT, the weight of the evidence seems to suggest that Paul did not intend the terms to designate clearly identifiable genre of corporate song. Several implications can be drawn from this conclusion.

First, at very least these passages include a mandate to sing Spirit-inspired OT psalms. No matter how narrowly or broadly one interprets the terms, that Paul commands believers to sing psalms is clear. Whether these psalms are paraphrases or versifications is beyond Paul’s purview, but churches wishing to actively apply Paul’s instructions should make efforts to regularly incorporate OT psalms in their corporate repertory.

Second, conversely, no clear argument may be made from these passages alone concerning the warrant for singing songs beyond the OT psalms. Because these terms could refer only to different types of psalms, one cannot argue with certainty that Paul intended to broaden the church’s song beyond inspired psalms in these passages. Other NT passages may imply the allowance of non-inspired songs in Christian worship, but this cannot be proven from Ephesians 5:19 or Colossians 3:16.

Third, on the other hand, these passages do not clearly restrict Christian song to OT psalms. As with the previous point, the ambiguity of these terms presents enough uncertainty to prevent any dogmatic argument for or against a psalmody-only position.

Fourth, these passages are not relevant as defense for any side of the contemporary worship debates. Any attempt to define these terms using contemporary categories is anachronistic at best. No warrant exists to use these passages to defend contemporary praise choruses or the continuation of Spirit-inspired songs, but neither do these passages disallow them.

The only certain application to Christian churches from this phrase is that God expects his people to sing—at the very least they should sing inspired psalms.

³⁵ Peter T. O’Brien, *The Letter to the Ephesians* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1999), 394.

³⁶ Lincoln, *Ephesians*, 346.