

Paul and the Septuagint Psalter: Reckoning with Intra-Canonical Exegesis Concerning Our Sung Praises

By Harrison Perkins

Paul's exhortation in Ephesians 5:18–19 that we be “filled with the Spirit by speaking to one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs” (πληροῦσθε ἐν πνεύματι, λαλοῦντες ἑαυτοῖς [ἐν] ψαλμοῖς καὶ ὕμνοις καὶ ᾠδαῖς πνευματικαῖς) has often fueled the Christian imagination concerning our sung praises in corporate worship. We have perhaps, at times, lost sight of how Paul clearly taught that singing these types of songs should be actions of *speaking to one another*, addressing fellow believers with the truth for edification rather than experientially loaded personal blessings, but nonetheless have been intrigued by his clear admonition to sing.¹ Reflections upon Paul's exhortation have been, to say the least, varied in their conclusions, ranging from a clear perception that he was enjoining exclusive psalmody to equally firm conviction that he commanded us to write our own praise and worship choruses.

The debate is certainly not a new one but goes back to the earliest days of the Reformation. However, this article's goal is not to answer this question directly, even if the author's own views will be somewhat obvious. The intent is to provide a fuller account of the data that must be considered exegetically in this question in order to reach conclusions grounded in proper biblical interpretation and to remove to some extent the strangeness many find in the idea that Paul refers to the book of Psalms. The main upshot is that we should not import our own preconceived notions into Paul's categories of songs but should at least explore whether there is exegetical information that clarifies his meaning in terms of intra-canonical coherence. This article's primary consideration is that the Greek words Paul used to exhort us to sing to the Lord come from the Septuagint translation of the Psalter. This point itself is not groundbreaking and has played a major role in these discussions for some time. This article's contribution, however, is in trying to press further into this data in

order to prompt more holistic interpretation of all the issues involved in Paul's intertextual references. Arguably, the main benefit of this article is the table that presents the data of the Greek and Hebrew headings from the Psalter more comprehensively and straightforwardly than simple lists of texts, which hopefully facilitates more in-depth research on its basis.

Concerning the headings within the Psalter, the Septuagint translators did not force any one-to-one correspondence between any particular Greek and Hebrew words. For instance, שִׁיר is usually translated ᾠδὴ, and both are rendered in English as “song.” In two examples, however, מְזִמֹּר is translated ᾠδὴ (Ps. 4; 38[LXX]). The interesting feature about this glossing is that, typically, the Septuagint used ψαλμός to translate מְזִמֹּר, indicating that these two Greek words could both refer to the same sort of song, which is labeled in the ESV with “Psalm.” There are numerous examples also where other instances of lexical flexibility occur. For instance, in Psalm 7, ψαλμός is used to translate שִׁירָא, which is rendered in English as “Shiggaion,” showing how the Septuagint translators did not even pin the word used as the title of the Psalter to a one-to-one correspondence with a particular Hebrew word.

The Septuagint vocabulary also extends beyond simply the use of ψαλμοῖς, ὕμνοις, and ᾠδαῖς. It includes other categories—such as the στιλογραφία (Pss. 15, 55–59 LXX), σύνεσις (Pss. 31, 41, 43–44, 51–52, 73, 77, 88, 141 LXX), and Ἀλληλουϊά that have no related heading in

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1. F. F. Bruce, *The Epistles to the Colossians, to Philemon, and to the Ephesians*, New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1984), pp. 380–81.

the Masoretic Text or English translations (Pss. 104–106, 113–118, 135 LXX)—highlighting not only the Psalter’s internal diversity in terms of perceived form and content for the songs God inspired, but also the flexibility of the Septuagint’s translators.

The event in 2 Chronicles 7:6, whereby the temple was dedicated, provides striking insight into the translation issues already noted, illuminating the categories assigned to the Psalter.

καὶ οἱ ἱερεῖς ἐπὶ τὰς φυλακὰς αὐτῶν ἐστηκότες, καὶ οἱ Λευῖται ἐν ὀργάνοις ᾠδῶν κυρίου τοῦ Δαυὶδ τοῦ βασιλέως τοῦ ἐξομολογεῖσθαι ἔναντι κυρίου ὅτι εἰς τὸν αἰῶνα τὸ ἔλεος αὐτοῦ ἐν ὕμνοις Δαυὶδ διὰ χειρὸς αὐτῶν, καὶ οἱ ἱερεῖς σαλπίζοντες ταῖς σάλπιγξιν ἔναντιον αὐτῶν, καὶ πᾶς Ἰσραὴλ ἐστηκώς.

“and the priests, were standing upon their posts, as well as the Levites with instruments for songs for the Lord, those written by King David, with the purpose of confessing before the Lord that his mercy endures forever by using David’s hymns through their hand, and the priests sounded the trumpet before them and all Israel stood.”

For the people’s corporate worship, they used “songs for the Lord” (ᾠδῶν κυρίου) but specifically those “written by King David” (τοῦ Δαυὶδ τοῦ βασιλέως). As they sang these songs, the text was clear that they confessed the Lord’s everlasting mercy “by using David’s hymns” (ἐν ὕμνοις Δαυὶδ). This apposition shows that ᾠδὴ and ὕμνος can both refer to the exact same song, since the priests and Levites sang their ᾠδὴ by using a ὕμνος by David. Notably, these *hymns*, which are *odes*, would be the songs David wrote that are now contained in the Psalter. The connection at least between ὕμνος and the Psalter is substantiated in Matthew 26:30 where “after singing a hymn, they went out to the Mount of Olives” (ὕμνήσαντες ἐξῆλθον εἰς τὸ ὄρος τῶν ἐλαιῶν).

2. Herbert W. Bassler with Marsha B. Cohen, *The Gospel of Matthew and Judaic Traditions: A Relevance-based Commentary* (Leiden: Brill, 2015), p. 674; David L. Turner, *Matthew*. Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2008), p. 626; R. T. France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2007), p. 996; Donald A. Hagner, *Matthew 14–28*, Word Biblical Commentary (Dallas, TX: Word Books, 1995), p. 774; Craig L. Blomberg, *Matthew*, New American Commentary (Nashville, TN: Broadman Press, 1992), p. 392; concerning the parallel in Mark 14:26, see also R. T. France, *The Gospel of Mark*, New International Greek Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2002), pp. 574–75; William L. Lane, *The Gospel of Mark*, New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1974), p. 509.

Given the context of the Passover, undoubtedly the “hymn” they sang was from the Hallel Psalms, most likely Psalm 118.²

The lexical data involved in understanding Paul’s reference to psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs is then quite complex, involving several exegetical and translation issues. This article has not aimed to settle those complexities with any resolute conclusions but to reckon more thoroughly with some of the raw data that must be considered for proper exegesis of the passage. The analysis above is somewhat minimal, but the chart below has—for the first time as far as I’m aware—collated the headings from the Psalter according to the Septuagint and the Masoretic Text to facilitate further investigation, now having a full presentation of the exegetical information to interpret.

The following chart then opens a number of avenues for exegetical investigation, a few of which might be suggested here. First, there is significant work to be done concerning how the Septuagint used some terms apparently interchangeably in regard to the translation of some Hebrew words. The most prominent example likely pertains to the varying translations of the Hebrew מְזִמֶּרֶת and the reasons that might explain those variations. Second, the instances where the Septuagint uses the terms under consideration in nearly apposite fashion would deepen our understanding of the semantic range for these lexemes but also strengthen our insight into how these terms inform the way we should understand the form and content of particular psalms. This issue pertains perhaps most precisely to the relationship of ψαλμός and ᾠδὴ. Third, there are a number of categorical headings in the Septuagint Psalter which Paul did not mention in Ephesians 5:19, which is worth considering in terms of the implications for what type of Psalm those are and Paul’s intent in listing out types of songs we should sing. Is his exhortation exhaustive, the regulative principle then suggesting that we should not sing the other types of Psalms in new covenant worship, or summary, broadly directing us to the Psalter to find songs that Christians should sing? The latter seems more likely, but further exegesis can substantiate these points more precisely. More avenues of investigation will of course present themselves as exegesis specifies new conclusions, but these suggestions here provide a sketch of some ways forward.

Below is a table, displaying the headings according to the Greek Septuagint, the Hebrew Masoretic Text, and several notable English translations head each Psalm. Please note that the Septuagint numbering of the Psalms differs from the Hebrew Psalter and that the English versions follow the Hebrew numbering.

LXX/MT	LXX ³	MT ⁴	KJV ⁵	Geneva 1615 ⁶	ESV
1	—	—	—	—	—
2	—	—	—	—	—
3	ψαλμός	רִמָּז	Psalm	Psalm	Psalm
4	ψαλμός/ὠδή	רִמָּז	Psalm	Psalm	Psalm
5	ψαλμός	רִמָּז	Psalm	Psalm	Psalm
6	ὕμνοις/ψαλμός	רִמָּז	Psalm	Psalm	Psalm
7	ψαλμός	שִׁיגְגִיּוֹן	Shiggaion	Shiggaion	Shiggaion
8	ψαλμός	רִמָּז	Psalm	Psalm	Psalm
9	ψαλμός	רִמָּז	Psalm	Psalm	Psalm
10/11	ψαλμός	—	Psalm	Psalm	—
11/12	ψαλμός	רִמָּז	Psalm	Psalm	Psalm
12/13	ψαλμός	רִמָּז	Psalm	Psalm	Psalm
13/14	ψαλμός	—	Psalm	Psalm	—
14/15	ψαλμός	רִמָּז	Psalm	Psalm	—
15/16	στιγλογραφία	מִקְתָּם	Miktam	Miktam	—
16/17	προσευχή	תְּפִלָּה	prayer	prayer	(prayer) ⁷
17/18	ὠδή	שִׁיר	[Psalm]* song	[Psalm]* song	[Psalm]* song ⁸
18/19	ψαλμός	רִמָּז	Psalm	Psalm	Psalm
19/20	ψαλμός	רִמָּז	Psalm	Psalm	Psalm
20/21	ψαλμός	רִמָּז	Psalm	Psalm	Psalm
21/22	ψαλμός	רִמָּז	Psalm	Psalm	Psalm
22/23	ψαλμός	רִמָּז	Psalm	Psalm	—
23/24	ψαλμός	רִמָּז	Psalm	Psalm	—
24/25	ψαλμός	—	Psalm	Psalm	—
25/26	—	—	Psalm	Psalm	—
26/27	—	—	Psalm	Psalm	—
27/28	—	—	Psalm	Psalm	—
28/29	ψαλμός	רִמָּז	Psalm	Psalm	—
29/30	ψαλμός/ὠδή	שִׁיר / רִמָּז	Psalm/song	Psalm/song	Psalm/song
30/31	ψαλμός	רִמָּז	Psalm	Psalm	Psalm
31/32	συνέσεως	מְשִׁכִּיל	Psalm/Maskil	Psalm/instruction	—
32/33	—	—	—	—	—
33/34	—	—	Psalm	Psalm	—
34/35	—	—	Psalm	Psalm	—
35/36	—	—	Psalm	Psalm	—

3. Alfred Rahlfs (ed.), *Septuaginta* (Stuttgart, Germany: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, 1979).

4. *Biblia Hebraica Stuttgartensia* (Hendrickson Publishers, 2007).

5. *The Holy Bible, containing the Olde Testament, and the New. Newly translated out of the Originall Tongues and with the former Translations diligently compared and revised, by his Maiesties specially Commandement* (London: Robert Barker, 1617) [KJV].

6. *The Bible, that is the Holy Scriptures contained in the Old and New Testament. Translated according to the Ebrew and Greeke, etc.* (London: Robert Barker, 1615) [Geneva Bible].

7. In this instance, the ESV does include the heading but has incorporated it into the Psalm's actual lines.

8. The heading "Psalm" is included in the English translation but not in the MT or LXX.

LXX/MT	LXX	MT	KJV	Geneva 1615	ESV
36/37	—	—	Psalms	Psalms	—
37/38	ψαλμός	מְזֹמֵר	Psalms	Psalms	Psalms
38/39	ὠδή	מְזֹמֵר	Psalms	Psalms	Psalms
39/40	ψαλμός	מְזֹמֵר	Psalms	Psalms	Psalms
40/41	ψαλμός	מְזֹמֵר	Psalms/remembrance	Psalms/remembrance	Psalms
41/42	σύνεσιν	מִשְׁכִּיל	Maskil	Psalms/instruction	Maskil
42/43	ψαλμός	—	—	—	—
43/44	σύνεσιν ψαλμός	מִשְׁכִּיל	—	Psalms/instruction	Maskil
44/45	σύνεσιν/ὠδή	מִשְׁכִּיל/שִׁיר	Maskil/song	Song/instruction	Maskil/song
45/46	ψαλμός	שִׁיר	song	Song	song
46/47	ψαλμός	מְזֹמֵר	Psalms	Psalms	Psalms
47/48	ψαλμός/ὠδή	שִׁיר/מְזֹמֵר	Song/psalm	Song/psalm	song/Psalms
48/49	ψαλμός	מְזֹמֵר	Psalms	Psalms	Psalms
49/50	ψαλμός	מְזֹמֵר	Psalms	Psalms	—
50/51	ψαλμός	מְזֹמֵר	Psalms	Psalms	Psalms
51/52	συνέσεως	מִשְׁכִּיל	Maskil/Psalms	Psalms/instruction	Maskil
52/53	συνέσεως	מִשְׁכִּיל	Maskil/Psalms	Psalms/instruction	Maskil
53/54	ὑμνοίς/συνέσεως	נְגִינָה/מִשְׁכִּיל	Maskil/Psalms	Psalms/instruction	(instruments)/Maskil
54/55	ὑμνοίς/συνέσεως	נְגִינָה/מִשְׁכִּיל	Maskil/Psalms	Psalms/instruction	Maskil
55/56	στηλογραφίαν	מִקְתָּם	Miktam	Psalms/Miktam	Miktam
56/57	στηλογραφίαν	מִקְתָּם	Miktam	Psalms/Miktam	Miktam ⁹
57/58	στηλογραφίαν	מִקְתָּם	Miktam	Psalms/Miktam	Miktam
58/59	στηλογραφίαν	מִקְתָּם	Miktam	Psalms/Miktam	Miktam
59/60	στηλογραφίαν	מִקְתָּם	Miktam	Psalms/teach	Miktam
60/61	ὑμνοίς	נְגִינָה	Psalms	Psalms	(instruments)
61/62	ψαλμός	מְזֹמֵר	Psalms	Psalms	Psalms
62/63	ψαλμός	מְזֹמֵר	Psalms	Psalms	Psalms
63/64	ψαλμός	מְזֹמֵר	Psalms	Psalms	Psalms
64/65	ψαλμός/ὠδή	שִׁיר מְזֹמֵר	Psalms/song	Psalms/song	Psalms/song
65/66	ὠδή ψαλμοῦ	שִׁיר מְזֹמֵר	Song/Psalms	Song/Psalms	—
66/67	ἐν ὑμνοίς· ψαλμός ὠδῆς	בְּנְגִינָה מְזֹמֵר שִׁיר	Psalms/song	Psalms/song	(instruments) Psalms/song.
67/68	ψαλμός ὠδῆς	מְזֹמֵר שִׁיר	Psalms/song	Psalms/song	Psalms/song
68/69	—	—	Psalms	Psalms	—
69/70	—	—	Psalms/remembrance	Psalms/remembrance	—

9. It seems that the LXX translators used the phrase ἐν ὑμνοίς to translate a Hebrew phrase indicating to play the song on stringed instruments. This gloss does not really seem to fit the semantic range of ὑμνος, at least if the point was to preserve the function of the original Hebrew. It would translate into English as “in praises” or “in praise songs.” This textual issue might prompt worthwhile

investigation into the LXX’s theology, possibly suggesting that its Psalter was primarily aimed at use in the synagogues where instruments were not used to accompany singing. In light of these considerations, I have placed “instruments” in parenthesis under the English version column throughout this chart, which also removes the necessity of using a bulkier phrase in a minimalist table.

LXX/MT	LXX	MT	KJV	Geneva 1615	ESV
70/71	—	—	—	—	—
71/72	—	—	Psalms	Psalms	—
72/73	ψαλμός	מְזֹמֵר	Psalms	Psalms	—
73/74	συνέσεως	מִשְׁכִּיל	Maskil	Psalms/instruction	—
74/75	ψαλμός ὠδῆς	מְזֹמֵר/שִׁיר	Psalms/song	Psalms/song	Psalms/song
75/76	ἐν ὕμνοις· ψαλμός, ὠδή	בְּגִיטֵי מְזֹמֵר/שִׁיר	Psalms/song	Psalms/song	(instruments) Psalms/song
76/77	ψαλμός	מְזֹמֵר	Psalms	Psalms	Psalms
77/78	συνέσεως	מִשְׁכִּיל	Maskil	Psalms/instruction	—
78/79	ψαλμός	מְזֹמֵר	Psalms	Psalms	—
79/80	ψαλμός	מְזֹמֵר	Psalms	Psalms	Psalms
80/81	ψαλμός	—	Psalms	Psalms	—
81/82	ψαλμός	מְזֹמֵר	Psalms	Psalms	—
82/83	ὠδή ψαλμοῦ	שִׁיר מְזֹמֵר	Song/Psalms	Song/Psalms	Song/Psalms
83/84	ψαλμός	מְזֹמֵר	Psalms	Psalms	Psalms
84/85	ψαλμός	מְזֹמֵר	Psalms	Psalms	Psalms
85/86	προσευχή	תְּפִלָּה	Prayer	Prayer	—
86/87	ψαλμός ὠδῆς	מְזֹמֵר שִׁיר	Psalms/song	Psalms/song	—
87/88	ὠδή ψαλμοῦ	שִׁיר מְזֹמֵר	Song/Psalms/Maskil	Song/Psalms/instruction	Song/Psalms
88/89	συνέσεως	מִשְׁכִּיל	Maskil	Psalms/instruction	Maskil
89/90	προσευχή	תְּפִלָּה	Prayer	Prayer	—
90/91	ὠδῆς	—	—	—	—
91/92	ψαλμός ὠδῆς	מְזֹמֵר שִׁיר	Psalms/song	Psalms/song	Psalms/song
92/93	ὠδῆς	—	—	—	—
93/94	ψαλμός	—	—	—	—
94/95	ὠδῆς	—	—	—	—
95/96	ὠδή	—	—	—	—
96/97	—	—	—	—	—
97/98	ψαλμός	מְזֹמֵר	Psalms	Psalms	—
98/99	ψαλμός	—	—	—	—
99/100	ψαλμός	מְזֹמֵר	Psalms	Psalms	—
100/101	ψαλμός	מְזֹמֵר	Psalms	Psalms	—
101/102	προσευχή	תְּפִלָּה	Prayer	Prayer	Prayer
102/103	—	—	Psalms	Psalms	—
103/104	—	—	—	—	—
104/105	Ἀλληλουϊά	—	—	—	—
105/106	Ἀλληλουϊά	—	—	—	—
106/107	Ἀλληλουϊά	—	—	—	—
107/108	ὠδή ψαλμοῦ	שִׁיר מְזֹמֵר	Song/Psalms	Song/Psalms	Song/Psalms
108/109	ψαλμός	מְזֹמֵר	Psalms	Psalms	—
109/110	ψαλμός	מְזֹמֵר	Psalms	Psalms	—

LXX/MT	LXX	MT	KJV	Geneva 1615	ESV
110/111	—	—	—	—	—
111/112	—	—	—	—	—
112/113	—	—	—	—	—
113/114–115	Ἀλληλουϊά	—	—	—	—
114/116:1–9	Ἀλληλουϊά	—	—	—	—
115/116:10–19	Ἀλληλουϊά	—	—	—	—
116/117	Ἀλληλουϊά	—	—	—	—
117/118	Ἀλληλουϊά	—	—	—	—
118/119	Ἀλληλουϊά	—	—	—	—
119/120	ὠδὴ	שִׁיר	Song	Song	—
120/121	ὠδὴ	שִׁיר	Song	Song	—
121/122	ὠδὴ	שִׁיר	Song	Song/Psalm	—
122/123	ὠδὴ	שִׁיר	Song	Song	—
123/124	ὠδὴ	שִׁיר	Song	Song	—
124/125	ὠδὴ	שִׁיר	Song	Song	—
125/126	ὠδὴ	שִׁיר	Song	Song	—
126/127	ὠδὴ	שִׁיר	Song	Song	—
127/128	ὠδὴ	שִׁיר	Song	Song	—
128/129	ὠδὴ	שִׁיר	Song	Song	—
129/130	ὠδὴ	שִׁיר	Song	Song	—
130/131	ὠδὴ	שִׁיר	Song	Song/Psalm	—
131/132	ὠδὴ	שִׁיר	Song	Song	—
132/133	ὠδὴ	שִׁיר	Song	Song/Psalm	—
133/134	ὠδὴ	שִׁיר	Song	Song	—
134/135	—	—	—	—	—
135/136	Ἀλληλουϊά	—	—	—	—
136/137	—	—	—	—	—
137/138	—	—	Psalms	Psalms	—
138/139	ψαλμὸς	מְזִמֹּר	Psalms	Psalms	—
139/140	ψαλμὸς	מְזִמֹּר	Psalms	Psalms	Psalms
140/141	ψαλμὸς	מְזִמֹּר	Psalms	Psalms	—
141/142	συνέσεως	מְשָׁכִיל	Maskil/prayer	Psalms/instruction/prayer	Maskil
142/143	ψαλμὸς	מְזִמֹּר	Psalms	Psalms	—
143/144	—	—	Psalms	Psalms	—
144/145	Αἴνεσις	תְּהִלָּה	Psalms of praise	Psalms of praise	—
145–150	—	—	—	—	—

The preceding considerations have aimed at some ground-leveling work, specifically by bringing forth the exegetical data to study Paul’s reference to psalms and hymns and spiritual songs. One facet, however, is missing from the above statistics concerning the word

πνευματικαῖς as the modifier in “spiritual songs.” The exact designation ὠδαῖς πνευματικαῖς does not appear in the Septuagint Psalter, which some have said means that Paul could not be referring to a category of Psalms. Even on its surface, this dismissal of the possibility that

Paul referred to a type of Psalm is rather superficial because it demands more precision from Paul's terminology than is realistic. As we have already seen, these categories from the Psalter are somewhat flexible in meaning.¹⁰ The translation issues in the table intensify this point, making that flexibility even more fluid in application to any New Testament implementation of these categories. All the same, the commitment to be more thoroughly exegetical in understanding Paul's exhortation does demand that we take account of this modifier and its implications, if any, for clarifying his reference at an inter-canonical level. Admittedly, this investigation raises questions about issues lacking extensive data. The combination of ᾠδαῖς πνευματικαῖς appears only elsewhere in the New Testament in Colossians 3:16, and even the word ᾠδὴ alone is not that frequent (Rev. 5:9; 14:3).

Colossians 3:16 is instructive in this respect though, saying, "Let Christ's word richly dwell in you by teaching and admonishing one another with all wisdom by singing with thanks in psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs in your heart to God" (Ὁ λόγος τοῦ Χριστοῦ ἐνοικεῖτω ἐν ὑμῖν πλουσίως, ἐν πάσῃ σοφίᾳ διδάσκοντες καὶ νοουθετοῦντες ἑαυτοὺς, ψαλμοῖς ὕμνοις ᾠδαῖς πνευματικαῖς ἐν τῇ χάριτι ἄδοντες ἐν ταῖς καρδίαις ὑμῶν τῷ θεῷ). Regardless of whether Paul in Colossians expanded material from Ephesians or in Ephesians compressed the point in Colossians, the relationship between the passages is clear. Colossians similarly notes an instructive function for singing, clarifying Ephesians' instruction to "speak to one another" as the need for "teaching and admonishing one another." Most notably, the supplemental information in Colossians highlights that this edification is for making "Christ's word dwell richly in you." In other words, *the Scripture* is in view as what should dwell in our hearts for teaching through our singing. In that respect, *the Scripture* inspired by or about Christ for singing would be the Psalms (Luke 24:44–47).¹¹

The other major New Testament discussion of singing occurs in 1 Corinthians 14, amidst Paul's critique of the Corinthians' misuse of spiritual gifts. Anecdotally, it has been said to me that Paul's statement that "I will sing in spirit" (ψαλλῶ τῷ πνεύματι; 1 Cor. 14:15) proves that whatever the church was singing, it could not be Psalms, making this passage worth considering. Why it precludes that spiritual songs cannot be from the Psalter is not immediately apparent. Indeed, in Romans 15:9 Paul quoted Psalm 18:49 (Ps. 17:50 LXX), including the same verb: "and I will sing to your name" (καὶ τῷ ὀνόματι σου ψαλλῶ). In this respect, the Septuagint categorized this psalm as ᾠδῆς. So, the verb itself can

directly tie this sort of singing to psalm singing of the *ode* sort. Regarding the connection of spirit, Paul's point in 1 Corinthians 14:15 is nowhere near the same as in Ephesians 5:19 or Colossians 3:16, since it fits within an ongoing contrast in verses 13–19 between singing not only in spirit (τῷ πνεύματι) but also with the mind (τῷ νοῷ). This contrast is then between personal faculties which either have awareness of the content of the action they perform or not. Although Paul did not use the possessive pronoun in verse 15, he elided it from verse 14, excluding here a reference to the Holy Spirit. Singing in spirit then related to using the gift of tongues to sing when the language used is not mentally understood by the singer—the song's content is not addressed, so fails to inform the nature of ᾠδαῖς πνευματικαῖς.

Paul's discourse did address congregational singing. In 1 Corinthians 14:26, he wrote, "when you come together, each has a psalm, has a teaching, has a revelation, has a tongue, has an explanation" (ὅταν συνέρχησθε, ἕκαστος ψαλμὸν ἔχει, διδασχὴν, ἀποκάλυψιν ἔχει, γλῶσσαν ἔχει, ἐρμηνείαν ἔχει). Within the list of service items, each seems to relate to what God has revealed, since teaching, revelation, tongues, and explanation all relate to delivering or expositing God's Word. Since the sung item here is a ψαλμὸν—it is unclear why some English versions translate this word as "hymn" since that should likely be reserved for the Greek word it transliterates—there is good reason to assume that the songs sung were from the Psalter.

How does this help us understand ᾠδαῖς πνευματικαῖς? In the context of discussing spiritual gifts, Paul still defaulted to refer to the Psalms as the basic content of Christian singing for gathered worship. What then is the exact meaning of modifying "songs" as "spiritual"? At this point in considering the evidence, it seems clear that this question in some ways is a matter of judgment rather than a determination of exegetical warrant in the specific construction. The dative would seem to be glossed either objectively or subjectively: "songs about the Spirit" or "songs [inspired] by the Spirit." The latter seems more likely given the drift of the evidence considered so far and the significant lack of songs about the Holy Spirit throughout the church's entire history, which would indicate that we have totally failed in the

10. Charles Hodge, *Ephesians* (Geneva Series of Commentaries; Carlisle, PA: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1964; repr. 2003), 221

11. If the genitive is understood as objective—"the word about Christ"—rather than, as here, subjective and possessive—"Christ's word"—the point remains the same that Paul was referring to the Scripture, since even Christ himself was explicit that *the psalms* were about him.

injunction here.¹² Rather, in keeping with an exhortation to be filled with “Christ’s word” by singing (Col. 3:16), Paul seemed to enjoin singing Scriptural songs, drawing categories from the Septuagint Psalter, neither exhaustively listing the types of Psalms he envisioned nor intending to implement overly precise versions of traditional headings from the Greek Psalter. Regardless, psalms and hymns were inherently religious types of songs, but odes could be religious or secular, so Paul was certainly specifying that he had the religious sort of ode in view, namely those related to the Spirit.¹³

One of the issues related to this discussion of Paul’s terminology for songs the church sings is synonymy. The objection to seeing Paul’s three designations as all referring to the Psalter is that referring to the Psalms in three ways is too redundant to make sense of why Paul implemented three terms. Nonetheless, even some who do not recognize these terms as drawn from the Psalter contend that “It is unlikely that any sharply demarcated division is intended,” suggesting that all sides of the lexical debate should be content to accept that Paul used his terms with somewhat flexible application.¹⁴ The question is then simply where he got those terms. The objection to synonymy seems to pose that the apostle got them from unknown sources or from culture, using rather generic words without ultimately discernible (at least by exegesis) meaning.¹⁵ The argument that Paul used terms from the Psalter poses that he got his categories from Scripture and the historic practices of the synagogue. Even apart from the source issue, the data about the lexical issues in the Masoretic Text and the Septuagint Greek shows that the point is not strict synonymy, as if Paul meant precisely the same referent by all three terms. Certainly, it undermines the misleading objection that each of Paul’s Greek terms supposedly corresponded respectively to only one Hebrew term from the Psalter, since the correlation of all the headings from the Psalms shows greater flexibility and variety than such claim.¹⁶ Rather than strict synonyms, Paul’s use of Septuagint terminology shows him referring to multiple types of songs found in the Old Testament Scripture.

12. John Murray and William Young, “The Report of the Minority to the Fourteenth (1947) General Assembly” (accessed on August 12, 2022 at <https://www.opc.org/GA/song.html#Minority>); Bruce, *Colossians, Philemon, Ephesians*, 159 n. 157.

13. Hodge, *Ephesians*, 222. In terms of the regulative principle, this specification would certainly have bearing upon those instances where churches have used secular songs in worship in hopes to “redeem” them by using them to make church appealing to worldly minded people.

14. Bruce, *Colossians, Philemon, Ephesians*, 158.

15. Bruce, *Colossians, Philemon, Ephesians*, 158–59.

16. Cf. Bruce, *Colossians, Philemon, Ephesians*, 158–59 n.155.

This objection again relates to an improper demand for an overly precise use of Old Testament terminology, as was the case with some claims about ᾠδαὶ πνευματικαῖς. It does not hold up under the standards of linguistics nor of everyday ways of speaking. I own an album by a single artist titled “The Best of Ballads and Blues.” It should be more than obvious that “ballads” and “blues” refer to different types of songs contained on the album. Yet, both types of songs come from a common source, namely the catalogue of recordings by this one artist. The point is that Paul’s use of three terms from the Greek Psalter does not indicate redundant synonymy but indicates three unique categories of songs drawn from a common source, namely the catalogue of the Old Testament Scripture. More work may be needed to describe and understand those categories more precisely, but the lexical data presented here removes the synonymy objection by showing how it conflates the content of unique categories in a superficially absurd way by not reckoning with the exegetical material or its specific meaning in the original context. Paul implemented these three categories seemingly at least to show that our sung worship should not be one-dimensionally flat—as is the case in much modern praise music with its chant-like droning. The Psalter’s multivalent content provides the needed variety to keep our sung worship biblically diverse, hence the need to sing its psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs. Those who have previously defended a synonymous understanding of these three terms may or may not have had in mind this exact formulation of one source containing multiple kinds of songs but their instinct to understand Paul’s Greek word in terms of their scriptural background was certainly more exegetically grounded than those who read modern meanings into Paul’s language. Their arguments, when charitably read, certainly have a semblance to the lexical data presented here when their critics do not reduce the point by an *ad absurdum* fallacy.

This essay’s argument has been that there are significant exegetical factors that need exploration to properly understand Paul’s reference to psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs. The point has not been to settle the question with any exhaustive conclusions but to bring forth a newer, fuller presentation of the biblical data with which we must reckon exegetically. The data shows extensive intra-canonical links between Paul’s own phrasing and the Septuagint Psalter. Further studies must press deeper into the interpretation of this data. The presentation itself, however, demonstrates Scripture’s riches to capture our imagination and to help us sing praises to the Lord. ■