

A STUDY OF THE GREEK WORD "PSALMOS"

Ephesians 5:19

INTRODUCTION

- A. An argument that some make in favor of musical instruments in worship comes from the use of the Greek noun "psalmos," translated "psalm," and from its verb form "psallo," translated "making melody," both of which are used in EP 5:19.
1. "In psalms" – psalmois – noun, dative, plural, masculine.
 2. "Making melody" – psallontes – verb, present active participle, nominative, plural, masculine.
- B. Psalmos – the noun. Used 7 times in the NT. 3 times it refers to the book of Psalms – LK 20:42; 24:44; Acts 1:20); once it refers to the 2nd psalm – Acts 13:33; once to a song in 1 CO 14:26; and in CO 3:16 and EP 5:19.
- C. Psallo – the verb. Used 5 times in the NT. RO 15:9; 1 CO 14:15 twice; JA 5:13 and EP 5:19.
- D. Thayer (p. 675) states that an early meaning of the verb "psallo" was "to play on a stringed instrument, to play the harp."
1. The original meaning of the noun "psalmos" was "a striking, twanging, specifically, a striking the chords of a musical instrument." (Ibid).
 2. A psalm (psalmos) is defined as a sacred song originally designed to be sung with instrumental accompaniment.
 3. Therefore, some have concluded that the NT authorizes the use of musical instruments.

DISCUSSION

I. THE GREEK VERB – PSALLO.

- A. EP 5:19 – "making melody" – present active participle nominative masculine plural.
- B. The verb "psallo" passed through very clear changes in its meaning throughout the centuries of the OT and up to the time of the apostles.
1. The earliest meaning of psallo – 900 BC – "to rub, wipe; to handle, touch," and "to pluck off, pull out" – Thayer, p. 675. Note it had nothing to do with musical instruments.
 2. 5th century BC, "psallo" came to mean, "to cause to vibrate by touching, to twang...to touch or strike the chord, to twang the strings of a musical instrument so that they gently vibrate; and absolutely, to play on a stringed instrument, to play the harp, etc." – Thayer p. 675.
 3. By the time of the LXX – 3rd century – the most common use of "psallo" was "to sing to the music of the harp" – Thayer p. 675. The point being that "psallo" no longer meant exclusively to play on a musical instrument, but it also included singing.
 4. By NT times, "psallo" came to mean to sing with the voice exclusively without reference to instrumental accompaniment. Thayer states that its meaning is "in the New Testament, to sing a hymn, to celebrate the praises of God in song, James 5:13 (R.V. sing praise)." (p. 675).
 5. "Psallo" is used exclusively to refer to singing in the NT. It is used figuratively and translated as "making melody," in EP 5:19.
- C. Other lexicographers confirm that by the time of the NT, "psallo" had come to refer exclusively to singing without musical accompaniment.
1. Vine's – p. 730 – "to twitch, to twang" then "to play a stringed instrument with the fingers," and hence, in the Sept., "to sing with a harp, sing psalms," denotes in the NT, "to sing a hymn, sing praise," in Eph. 5:19, "making melody."
 2. Harold K. Moulton, The Analytical Greek Lexicon Revised defines "psallo" – "to move by a touch, to twitch; to touch, strike the strings or chords of an instrument; absolutely, to play on a stringed instrument; to sing to music; in New Testament, to sing praises (Rom. 15:9, 1 Cor. 14:15, Eph. 5:19, et al)." (p.441).
 3. E. A. Sophocles – Professor of Greek at Harvard University for 38 years, states in his lexicon, which covers the period of 146 BC to AD 1100 that the only meaning of "psallo" is "to chant, sing religious hymns."
 4. James Hope Moulton and George Milligan, The Vocabulary of the Greek Testament, p.697, "but in the New Testament, as in James 5:13, "sing a hymn."
 5. The Theological Dictionary of the New Testament (Abridged) states in reference to EP 5:19, "psallontes does not now denote literally playing on a stringed instrument." (pp. 1225-1226).

The 10 Volume set states, "When we come to the New Testament, its literal association with musical instruments has fallen away." (Vol. 8, pp. 490, 493-493, 499).

6. G. Abbot-Smith, A Manual of Greek Lexicon of the New Testament, p. 487, "...in the New Testament, to sing a hymn, sing praise."
 7. Arndt and Gingrich, A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament, p. 891, note that the historical facts of the rejection of musical instruments in both the synagogue ("Pharisaic aversion") and by the Church Fathers ("resistance to mystery cults") shed light on the meaning of this verb in the New Testament. They state that those who would use it to refer to musical instruments "may be relying too much on the earliest meaning of psallo."
- D. Therefore, one can see the development of "psallo" over the centuries is very clear.
1. In most ancient meanings it meant to play on a stringed instrument.
 2. By the LXX it meant to play on a stringed instrument along with singing.
 3. By the NT times its association with musical instruments had faded away. It referred exclusively to singing with the human voice.

II. THE GREEK NOUN – PSALMOS.

- A. EP 5:19 – "psalms" – CO 3:16 "psalms".
- B. Original meaning, "the touch of the chords of a stringed instrument." May one conclude that this is the authority for instrumental music in worship?
 1. No!
 2. The noun "psalmos" underwent a similar etymological development over time as did its verb form.
 3. Harold K. Moulton gives the meaning of the noun as an "impulse, touch, of the chords of a stringed instrument; in New Testament, a sacred song, psalm, 1 Cor. 14:26, Eph. 5:19." p. 441. Note that there was no reference to a musical instrument. Since this is the meaning if one were to go back and used the original meaning it would mean you could only use a "stringed instrument."
- C. The words "psallo" and "psalmos" were to be done "in the heart."

III. OTHER POINTS TO CONSIDER.

- A. The meaning of "psallo" must ultimately be determined from its usage in the NT. When one considers how this verb is used in other passages of the NT, it becomes clear that its meaning must be "to sing" and not "to play on a stringed instrument."
 1. Take the earlier meaning of "psallo" – "to play on a stringed instrument," and place it in the verses where this verb is used.
 2. EP 5:19; 1 CO 14:15; JA 5:13.
- B. It is an historic fact that the Church Fathers vehemently rejected the use of musical instruments in the worship of the church. These men were masters of the Greek language. They understood that the word referred to singing with the voice alone.
- C. In EP 5:19, the participle form of the verb "psallo" retains the imperative character of the main verb, "be filled." (Dana & Mantey, A Manual of Grammar of the Greek New Testament, p. 229; A. T. Robertson, A Grammar of the Greek New Testament, p. 945-946).
 1. What does this mean?
 2. It means that it carries the force of an apostolic command. Cf. CO 3:16.
 3. Since "speaking," "singing," and "making melody," are participles that carry the force of the imperative; this means that they are commands that must be performed. This would mean that every Christian must not only speak and sing, but they must also play on his/her musical instrument with his/her heart.

CONCLUSION

- A. From all of the above arguments, we conclude that Paul's use of the verb "psallo" and its noun "psalmos" in EP 5:19 have no reference to musical instruments, but to the vocal singing.
- B. 1 PE 4:11.