

# Servants' NEWS

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## Singing the Psalms

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**Psalms are most expressive and poetic in Hebrew, and there is great value in singing them in their original language. This could have been what Paul, Peter, etc., in some New Testament scriptures, were referring to.**

### **Scriptures from the New Testament**

I have only taken quotes from the New Testament and made comments on these scriptures. Of course, there are many more scriptures about singing the Psalms in the Old Testament, especially in the Psalms themselves. In the first two scriptures quoted below, “Psalms”, “Hymns” and “Spiritual Songs” all refer to the titles that were used in the Psalms, originally in Hebrew, then translated to Greek. The Psalm titles in Hebrew are meant to be sung, and they are part of the overall structure of the poem. To add to or take away from them is detrimental to the musical/poetical structure of the Psalm.

“And be not drunk with wine, wherein is excess; but be filled with the Spirit; speaking to yourselves in **Psalms and Hymns and Spiritual Songs, singing and making melody** in your heart to the Lord” (Eph 5:18–19).

“Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly in all wisdom; teaching and admonishing one another in **Psalms and Hymns and Spiritual Songs**, singing with grace in your hearts to the Lord” (Col 3:16).

“Is any among you afflicted? Let him pray. Is any merry? Let him **sing Psalms**” (James 5:13).

“And when they had **sung a Hymn**, they went out to the mount of Olives” (John 26:30).

The original Greek says they “psalmodized”, or something to that effect in English. Many have concluded that they sang the Great Hallel (Psalms 113–118), that being

part of the Jewish Passover service, and Psalm 118 is often thought to be that part if only one were sung. Psalms 113 and 114 are usually sung earlier in the evening.

“What is the conclusion then? I will pray with the spirit, and I will also pray with the understanding, **I will sing with the spirit, and I will also sing with the understanding**” (1Cor 14:15).

Singing with understanding is essential. Each word is so special that leaving out even one word changes/distorts the meaning. I think singing the original Psalms in Hebrew helps me to sing with understanding (please see more about this topic in the section “About Translations”).



“For both He who sanctifies and those who

are being sanctified are all of one, for which reason He is not ashamed to call them brethren, saying: ‘I will declare Your name to My brethren; in the midst of the assembly I will sing praise to You’” (Heb 2:11–12).

This scripture refers back to Psalm 22. The Book of Psalms, in Hebrew, is called *Tehilim*, meaning “Praises”. Had David wanted to specifically underline “psalm-singing”, he could have used the Hebrew word *zamar* (to sing Psalms). However, he did use the word *halal* (to praise), as his verb root. The verb *halal* is found at the beginning of many Psalms, and David’s praises were almost certainly musical, of the sort found in the Book of Psalms. So this is most likely a reference to psalmody.

“And at midnight Paul and Silas prayed, and sang praises to God, and the prisoners heard them” (Acts 16:25).

What could they have possibly been singing? We know that they knew the Psalms well because 23 different Psalms are quoted throughout the book of Acts, and there seems to be considerable evidence that the Hebrew Psalm melodies were still being sung in the Temple at the time; however, not in the cantillation-type style in the synagogues today. So if the Christians visited the Temple and if they participated in the liturgy there, they may have even known the melodies indicated by the *te amim* (Hebrew musical notation in the Bible), by heart.

They did not have a church hymnbook other than the Psalms at the time, and I speculate that possibly even the Christians who were previously gentiles learned to sing the Psalms in Hebrew from the Christians who were previously Jews.

## **In Search of Psalm Singers**

Are there any Christians on earth even singing the Psalms? We know that the Jews still chant them, but I cannot find any group of Christians really singing entire Psalms out of the Bible, even out of translated versions.

Mainstream Christianity these days has no melodic system that would enable it to sing all of the Psalms in a passable way, at least not in the vernacular. Otherwise, unless one belongs to a really “liturgical” church, or one that uses one of the old metrical Psalters (some of which cover most, if not all, the Psalms), one has no hope of singing all the Psalms in services, in or out of the vernacular.

When verses from the Psalms are quoted in songs, they are often extremely edited: things are added in that were never in the Psalms, and essential things are often taken out. Metrically rewritten psalms have also sometimes been so altered, that they are very poor renditions of the Psalms, even when compared to Psalms in translation form.

I don't think that we Christians are singing what we should be singing, that is, the Psalms. And in most countries other than the USA, almost everyone sings songs in other languages, for example, in German speaking countries, songs are often sung in English, French sometimes, Italian once in a while, and even in Hebrew occasionally, but alas, not Psalms. But why not? Why not Psalms in Hebrew?

## **About the Language of the Psalms**

Paul says in 1 Corinthians 14:19, “yet in the church I would rather speak five words with my understanding, that I may teach others also, than ten thousand words in a tongue.” If everything were in Hebrew, people would not be able to understand it (the service would sound beautiful but people would not learn much from it). I'm not advocating switching religious services to Hebrew!

And to make sure that there is understanding, is the reason why I sing the Psalms privately and also perform them publicly using a transliteration/ translation with an overhead projector (a computer projector would be nice too!), in order that the words can be followed in Hebrew and their meaning can be understood in the current language, whatever that may be. (Some of these in German are posted at my website.) I have done a 1:1 correspondence to the best of my limited ability, in order to make it as clear as possible for the non-Hebrew speaker. So it is sort of like both speaking in tongues and providing the interpretation at the same time.

I do not want to take the attitude of “if you were as spiritual as I am you would take the time to learn to understand Hebrew, too”. That is simply not the case. However, I can much more appreciate references to the original Hebrew when I read them in

articles, commentaries, etc., and I feel that this learning is important. It would be wonderful to have many more believers who understand Hebrew. This is why, the longer I do this project, the more excited I get about it. Learning Hebrew by singing the Psalms is a side benefit, which comes practically unexpectedly.

At first, before I tried it, I thought that singing in Hebrew would not be meaningful to me, and as I mentioned, I do have to use a transliteration as well as a translation in order to understand the meanings of the words that I am singing. and I also have learned a few word roots and word meanings as an enjoyable hobby. However, extra study aside, by using a translation along with a transliteration, even I, as a non-Hebrew speaker can appreciate and understand the Hebrew.

We are dealing with 2,000+ different Hebrew words used throughout the entire book of Psalms, and many of these are closely related to each other, belonging together in “word families”. So this means that there are considerably fewer than 2,000 “families” of word meanings, and learning words in groups reduces the number of new meanings to learn. There are also many similarities between Hebrew and English, and other languages, as the paths of migration of the Hebrew roots through other languages show.

Putting these numbers of words into perspective, all beginning foreign language students must acquire a working vocabulary of at least 1,000 words, before they can speak a language on the most basic level. Fluent speakers in their own mother tongue may be familiar with as many as 50,000 words! So perhaps learning the meanings of 2,000 words is not such a difficult task, especially when one is singing and enjoying the Psalms in Hebrew!

I was recently discussing singing Psalms in Hebrew with another (German-speaking) believer, and he quoted me Psalm 133 in Hebrew, in fact, even translating into German what it meant! I was amazed. “Ah, we learned that in boy scout camp,” he told me. If Psalm 133, then why not all the Psalms? I see it as entirely feasible.

## About Translations

It is inevitable, no matter how diligent the translation, that something will be lost—and gained!—in translation. That is simply the nature of human language. Even in trying to convey the emotions felt in one musical language in the terms of another, this consideration comes into play.

Singing the Psalms in their original language enables us to be closer to the original text, even though we, if we are non-Hebrew speakers as I am, may still need to experience it additionally through a translation/transliteration version.

The musical expression of the Psalms cannot be moved from one language to another, as the rhythm and word placement is different, therefore, the musical sense would be lost. (Referring to the *te amim*, musical markings in the Hebrew text itself.)

Metrical rewrites of the Psalms are even more altered than translations. Modern

metrical hymnody therefore, is a compromise. Its chief fault is the loss of melodic, verbal and rhythmic flexibility, to the detriment of the meaning of the words.

We must face the reality that whenever we try to put the original texts of the Bible into modern terms, verbal and/or musical, we are really creating a new work.

Writers put the stamp of their own personality on the musical work thus created.

Many of the (original Hebrew) Psalms, by their mere structure, don't lend themselves to metrical hymnody as they stand. Psalms 24, 29 and 96 are among the most magnificent in the Bible; yet their structure lacks the kind of repetition that would enable them to fit into a metrical, repeated-verse formula (at least without the most severe editing). Many Psalms can be crammed into a metrical format, but only if edited structurally first. (Psalm 98 is more repetitive in some ways than Psalm 96. At the other extreme is Psalm 136, which is repetitive indeed.)

## **Personal Background**

After many years of prayerful searching and questioning about my responsibility as a Christian musician, I have come to believe that I need learn to sing the Psalms in Hebrew, and to make this music available to others.

When I was a teenager, I had heard that the Psalms were originally created to be sung. I tried to sing them, along with playing the guitar. This effort was not successful. I just bored myself. After I came into contact with WCG (the Worldwide Church of God) I thought that WCG was great, because the hymns were Psalm rewrites. That was a lot closer to singing the Psalms than anything else I had ever seen before.

However, within the last 5 years, I started comparing these rewrites with translations, and found much lacking. So about a year ago, I started "through-texting" translations of the Book of Psalms, to music. I completed the whole book of Psalms in German (Elberfelder version) but again, unsatisfactory—first of all, I do not totally understand the Psalms (there is much depth and layered meanings in them, and it would take more than a human lifetime to really totally understand all the aspects of the Psalms!). Second of all, the format of modern music 3/4 or 4/4 does not lend itself to singing prose, unless you hold certain syllables longer than others. Also, in order to fit uneven-length lines to a melody that will be reused for multiple verses, it is necessary to sustain some syllables across multiple notes. Even when an extremely skilled writer sets the Psalms to music, the question is, can anybody else except an extremely skilled musician sing them?

It was totally unexpected to me that I would end up singing the Psalms in Hebrew. I originally wanted to sing the Psalms, in whatever language using whatever translation (this was always unclear, so I would go from one language to another and one translation to another; I speak English and German, a little Spanish, and understand also some French). My Psalm-Team member suggested that I do it in Hebrew. I thought it was a crazy idea. I had learned the letters 20 years ago, so had a

slight idea of how much work that would be. I quickly dismissed the idea for the most part, especially once I tried to find a transliteration (and found a dozen different transliteration versions for the same Hebrew word! Not to mention a dozen sets of rules as to how the Hebrew letters should be transliterated into English!), and was satisfied with thinking that perhaps I would get to singing the Psalms in Hebrew... someday.

Within the past few months, I have come to the point where I believe that the only way that it is even possible to really sing the Psalms is in Hebrew, because I learned of the *te amim*, the musical indications in the Hebrew text, which were added by the Masorites, based on the way that the Psalms were sung from the time of David or perhaps earlier. This is a way to sing the Psalms that I find musically pleasing.

As a result of singing the Psalms, I feel a lot closer to the entire Bible, both Old and New Testaments. I never tire of singing the Psalms. I've started posting files of the music on my website (midi audio format, alas, only instrumental, and PDF files of the music notation), as well as transliterations and translations (text files of the librettos) for different languages. I am somewhat consumed with this project, and have already had a chance to perform Psalms four times. One of these times, if men had been able to control it, I wouldn't have been allowed to sing. But it was under extraordinary conditions that I was able to sing.

So there you have it, these are my reasons for singing the Psalms in Hebrew.

## **Disclaimer**

I am not a Hebrew or Greek scholar, and I am understanding these scriptures to the best of my ability at this time. (Some of my comments are based on the work of others, who are specialists.) I do not judge people who do not agree with my viewpoint.

## **About the Music**

I want to make it perfectly clear that the way I am singing the Psalms is thoroughly described in the book: *Music of the Bible Revealed*, by **Susanne Haik-Vantoura**, and that I neither invented nor discovered this method of music indication, this way of singing the Psalms.

In fact, I believe that this is the way King David sung the Psalms, and I also believe that it is genuinely of God and therefore should not be commercialized, and that the music, as I believe that it is from God, should be in the public domain, and available to all, without private profit-making and commercialization.

Examples of music can be found on the Internet. Psalms 67 and 82:

[www.geocities.com/atl04/MP3S](http://www.geocities.com/atl04/MP3S)

I also want thank our Philippine brethren for their encouragement, and to mention that they are also very interested in singing the Psalms in Hebrew, here is a link to

their special page on their music:

[www.skyinet.net/~maxzen/music.htm](http://www.skyinet.net/~maxzen/music.htm)

They have also written some very interesting articles about music and the Psalms, which I hope that they will be posting on their website soon.

Special thanks to Norman Edwards for encouraging me to write this article, I have incorporated some of his comments. And many thanks to my Psalm team member, David Ison, for all his encouragement. He has been composing his own beautiful music to the Psalms for quite some time, and encouraged me to learn Hebrew. His website is:

[www.hebrewpsalms.org](http://www.hebrewpsalms.org)

Psalms set to music:

[audios.dtison.net/dtison/hebrew/psalms](http://audios.dtison.net/dtison/hebrew/psalms)

Psalm narrations in Hebrew:

[audios.dtison.net/dtison/hebrew/narrations](http://audios.dtison.net/dtison/hebrew/narrations)

It may not be essential that everyone sing Psalms in Hebrew, but God has great variety and I think that He wants some people to expand and relearn to sing the Psalms the way they used to be done.

My website link:

[www.geocities.com/atl04](http://www.geocities.com/atl04)

## **My plans for the Near Future:**

I am tentatively planning a tour in the US for the summer of 2004 (July-August), as well as making CDs available at production costs (or free if my personal funds will allow.)

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# Hebrew Melody Source

**by John Wheeler**

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The source of the Hebrew Melodies referred to in Susan Owen's article is the

musical notation found in the Hebrew Bible, *te`amim*.

Since 1982, I've been involved with the work of Suzanne Haik-Vantoura (now deceased), who has deciphered the original musical meaning of the *te`amim*. Her work is entitled (in English) *The Music of the Bible Revealed*. In 1991 I became the editor and co-publisher of the English translation of her original French book (2nd ed., 1978). I have written numerous articles and done many lectures and performances concerning her music over the years—even performing certain Psalms and “prosodic” texts in Hebrew to harp accompaniment for Special Music, weddings and talent shows.

Since the entire Hebrew Masoretic Text is annotated with two systems of *te`amim* (one for Psalms, Proverbs and the body of Job, another for the prologue and epilogue of Job and the rest of the biblical books), Mme. Haik-Vantoura's work encompasses much more than the Psalms. Before her death, she and her assistants had published some 5,000 verses— about one fourth of Hebrew Scripture—in score form. Mrs. Owen works from the melodies published in the out-of-print two-volume set *Les 150 Psaumes*, and to some extent from the accompanied scores that accompany several albums that Mme. Haik-Vantoura made.

It would take many paragraphs (such as you will find on my website) to spell out the full significance of Mme. Haik-Vantoura's discovery. In brief, the notation comes down to us via a specific family of Second Temple priests: the Elders of Bathyra, whom many Jewish scholars identify with the Herodians of the NT. The Masoretes who received it (via the Karaites) understood its significance but not its actual meaning, and reinterpreted it according to the norms of their time. Others have sought to decipher the notation independently over the centuries, but they have failed in that they too have tried to read their own ideas into the notation. Only Haik-Vantoura has used the right starting premise (the *te`amim* are musical) and the right standard of comparison (the Hebrew verbal syntax) necessary to reconstruct the musical theory behind the notation.

Structurally, music and words form an integrated whole; they had to be created and transmitted together. That means the entire Hebrew Bible “from Moses to Malachi” is an immense vocal score, and that we can hear today something very close to the melodies that the biblical authors themselves wrote for their own words. In the context of ancient history, that is not as staggering a proposition as it may first seem; in antiquity, virtually *every* sacred author was a “poet-composer”. Moreover, originally even the Torah could be sung to plucked string accompaniment (cf. the Hebrew of Psalm 119:54).

I started in my research of Mme. Haik-Vantoura's work so many years ago because I wanted to know: 1) what did the original music of the Psalms sound like? 2) is there such a thing as a biblical, universal standard of what is “good” in music? I got answers to these questions beyond my wildest dreams. But the music itself has another, overriding purpose: 3) it clarifies the syntax and expounds the meaning of the words it supports, thus giving the sense of the often-ambiguous Hebrew text. In

so doing, it convey's God's heart toward man and man's heart toward God in a way the words alone could never do.

**Like Susan, I would not say that the Church of God is required to conduct its services in biblical Hebrew and Aramaic to the ancient tunes.** The New Testament was originally meant to be *read* aloud, and in Greek. Many languages were spoken by those called to the early Church. In modern times it is necessary to have musical forms adaptable (more or less) to different languages, and we know that the early Church had to take similar measures in its own day. (The Church was much more familiar with the folk music of the synagogue—which is so adaptable—than with the classical music of the Temple—which is not.) But it is worth the effort (for those who can exert it) to learn the original melodic system and enough of the original language to be able to recite the texts with understanding. I have gained many a priceless insight over the years by this means, not least of which being insights into the personalities of the biblical authors (and indeed of God Himself, especially as portrayed by the Torah).

Much more information is available on my website:

[www.kingdavidsharp.org](http://www.kingdavidsharp.org)

The site includes recordings, musical scores and articles entitled:

A History of the Musical Accents  
 Attempts to Decipher the Accents  
 Haïk-Vantoura's Deciphering Key  
 "The Hands of David"  
 The Biblical Chironomy  
 "Thy Statutes Have Been My Songs"  
 The Biblical Musical Instruments  
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