

Module 6 - Using Psalms in Worship

This module will provide you with a historical perspective and information about where psalms may be used in worship and what repertoire there is available.

Background and History

The church with psalms must shout, no door can keep them out!
George Herbert

Although described as 'The Psalms of David' in the Book of Common Prayer, we now know that authorship of many psalms dates back further to the early years of Israelite monarchy and would have been regularly used in the worship taking place in the First Temple at Jerusalem built by King Solomon before 900BC.

It is thought that the texts would have been intended to be sung with instrumental accompaniment and indeed, when printed in the bible, psalms 75 and 76 instruct the 'choirmaster' as to which tune to use and if strings are to be played. Fifty seven of the psalms are entitled *mizmor* (Greek for *psalms* which means a song accompanied by strings). Within the psalms themselves are numerous references to singing and playing 'on instruments of ten strings'. The lute, harp, trumpet and cymbals are commonly mentioned as taking part in forms of worship.

Use of psalms by the early church grew naturally from Synagogue and Second Temple use and Jesus and his disciples were attending worship in the Synagogue regularly (Lk.4). In Acts 3.1, Peter and John went 'up to the temple at the hour of prayer, the ninth hour'. At the Last Supper, Jesus and those present sang the *Hallel*, psalms 113-118 sung as a whole at great Jewish festivals and especially at Passover with the text 'When Israel came out of Egypt' from psalm 114. Jesus' personal knowledge of the psalms was poignantly demonstrated at his death with his use of words from psalms 22 and 31, 'My God my God, why have you forsaken me' and 'Into thy hands I commend my spirit'. The adoption and singing by the early church of what would be familiar texts would be quite natural as the psalms contain prophetic references to the Messiah.

The texts which were used regularly by Jesus and his followers were of course written in Hebrew. It is useful to know where our translations come from and how close they are to the original texts.

- Original language Hebrew.
- Early authors translated the psalms from Hebrew into Greek.
- Later authors translated from Greek into Latin.
- St. Jerome translated the psalms from Hebrew into Latin for the 'Vulgate' version, missing out the Greek route.
- Miles Coverdale translated the psalms from the traditional Latin into English for the Great Bible of 1539.
- Joseph Gelineau translated the psalms from Hebrew into French for the Jerusalem Bible.
- The Grail Psalter translated Gelineau's French into English.

So which translation gives the clearest and most accurate reading? Without learning Hebrew, how do we know we are singing the same thing as Christ and the early Apostles?

The added difficulty for liturgical translators is that they are working with a text that is meant to be sung. The construction of Hebrew metre and use of [parallelism](#) means that this has to be retained so that a completely accurate rendering of the meaning of the words is not possible. It becomes a juggling act, on the one hand the meaning of the words, on the other, the style of delivery. Gelineau wrote:

'the translation of the poem cannot be made simply by a faithful rendering of its meaning. The whole character of the original language must be conveyed ... special attention was paid to the rhythmic structure of the poetry of the psalms, and this allowed a sung or recited psalmody to be fashioned on the basis of the analogy between the Hebrew tonic rhythm and that of our modern language.'
(The Psalms, A New Translation, Collins 1966, pp.9-10).

In other words, Gelineau felt that the rhythms in our modern languages was close to those found in Hebrew. His musical settings are built around a repetitive rhythm generated by the words.

Compare a few psalm verses from Coverdale (Book of Common Prayer), and the Jerusalem Bible.

You will see the difference between the Jerusalem which uses a fairly direct translation from Hebrew to French (to English) with the more indirect BCP version from Hebrew to Greek to Latin to 17th century English!

As mentioned above, translators also have had to deal with maintaining the 'rhythm of meaning' – Parallelism. In any single verse the thought of the second line is parallel to, or echoes the first.

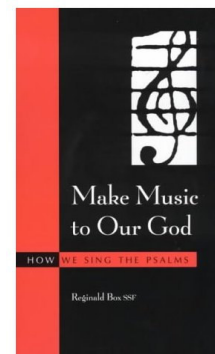
Examples:

*Day unto day takes up the story,
Night unto night shows forth the message.* Psalm 19

*O praise the Lord all you nations,
Acclaim him all you peoples.* Psalm 117.

From the fourth century, the psalms in Latin became part of the daily routine of prayer for monastic communities and remain so to this day. Benedict required his order to recite the whole psalter every week in the style of Rome and some ascetics recited it every day. The adoption of the *Gloria Patri* at the end of each psalm dates from around this time and denotes that the psalms were to be treated as referring to Christ and his Kingdom and not as hymns from the Old Testament.

For a superb in-depth study of the development of use of the psalms, read '[Make Music to our God](#)' by Br. Reginald SSF. A review by Andrew Burnham appears at the end of this module.



Singing the Psalms

Psalmody, which is native in Jewish and Christian liturgical worship, recedes as composed music expands. (Aidan Kavanagh)

Is there a role for psalmody in today's worship? Are the psalms being marginalized by other music? Do the difficulties associated with traditional psalm singing prevent their wider use?

It is useful to have a general idea about the association of certain psalms with particular seasons of the year or which accompany certain passages from the Bible. The present Cathedral pattern, based on the monastic Liturgy of the Hours, of fixing certain psalms to each day of the month differs to the three-year lectionary pattern which selects psalms to complement the OT and NT readings.

Look at any two examples of linking a psalm with readings from your lectionary and decide why these particular psalms were chosen and how they help to link or comment on the readings.

PSALM TYPES

There are three general types of psalm, the hymn (*ṯhillīm*), the lament and the thanksgiving. The pre-eminent title of hymn was given as a title for all psalms at a later date.

Hymns

These generally begin with a call to sing the praises of God. Actual praise of God follows and a conclusion often leads back to opening material. Psalms belonging to this group are: 8, 19, 29, 33, 65, 67, 100, 103-105, 111, 113, 114, 135, 136, 145-150.

Lament

Almost a third of the psalms fall into this class. There are community laments (44, 74, 79,80,83) and personal laments of the individual (3,5,7,13,17,etc.).

Thanksgiving

This class relates closely to both the hymn and lament groups. There are again both community and individual thanksgiving psalms.

Associated themes:

Gathering psalm	Psalm 122
Love	Psalm 89
Lament	Psalm 114
Anger	Psalm 2
Despair	Psalm 22
God's Word in the law	Psalm 119
Betrayal	Psalm 142
Hope	Psalm 33
Joy	Psalm 100
Creation	Psalm 19
Harvest	Psalm 65
Praise	Psalm 150
Easter	Psalm 118

Rule and power of the King	Psalm 2
Coronation	Psalm 110
Royal Wedding	Psalm 45

NUMBERING OF PSALMS

Protestant and Jewish translations and recent Catholic translations like the NAB follow the numbering in the Hebrew (the Masoretic Text). In this system, Psalm 23 is the 'shepherd' psalm ("The Lord is my shepherd"). Older Catholic translations and some recent Catholic translations follow the numbering in the [Septuagint](#) and [Vulgate](#). In this system, Psalm 22 is the 'shepherd' psalm.

You can easily find out which system a translation uses by determining whether the 'shepherd' psalm is Psalm 23 or Psalm 22.

Here is how the psalms in the two systems correspond.

Hebrew	Greek	Comment
1	= 1	From 1 to 8, the numbers are identical.
8	= 8	
9	= 9A	9-10 becomes Psalm 9 in Greek.
10	= 9B	
11	= 10	From 11 to 113, the number in
113	= 112	Greek is the Hebrew number minus one.
114	= 113A	114-115 become 113 in Greek.
115	= 113B	
116	= 114-115	116 splits into 114-115 in Greek.
117	= 116	From 117 to 146, the number in
146	= 145	Greek is the Hebrew number minus one.
147	= 146-147	147 splits into 146-147 in Greek.
148	= 148	
149	= 149	From 148 to 150, the numbers are identical.
150	= 150	

This confusion about Psalm numbering comes about because the Roman Catholic Church, since the official approval of the Latin Bible (Vulgate) in the 6th century, has followed the numbering and division of the Psalms employed by the Greek translation of the Scriptures (the *Septuagint*). The versions of the Bible used by other Christian traditions follow the division and numbering of the Psalms in the Hebrew text.

Psalms 9 and 10 in the Hebrew text are combined into one Psalm in the Greek/Latin Bible, so from Psalm 9 onwards, the Roman Catholic Psalm numbers are one less than those in other versions. Because Psalm 147 of the Jewish Psalms is split into two separate Psalms in the Catholic system, the total number of Psalms in both finishes up being the same -150. However, only the first 8 and the last 3 Psalms agree in numbering!

Because the popular sung settings of "The Lord Is My Shepherd" came out of the Reformed (Protestant) tradition, they were always referred to as Psalm 23, and many Catholics assumed, quite understandably, that this was the same for everyone. This area of difference between the Churches is being rectified as new, ecumenical Scripture translations come into use in the Catholic Church.

SINGING THE PSALMS

Musical styles and methods of performance

We are able to use a wide variety of styles that can be arranged under the following headings:

Plainsong/plainchant (modern editions available or use original notation)
Book of Common Prayer – Coverdale 1549 – chanted ('Anglican Chant')
Psalm Songs (through-composed and often responsorial)
Psalms in strophic/metrical form – hymns – started at Reformation
Taizé settings
Iona settings (Wild Goose Publications)
Responsorial Psalms
Chanted psalms using modern translations (Common Worship/LTP)
Anglican Chant for congregation and choir (John Bertalot)
Contemporary Monastic style (Reginald Box)

You will need to search for examples of these styles yourself and by doing this you will come upon a large amount of material that you may not have known about. Make a start by visiting [David Lee's helpful website](#) .

If you are able to visit [Sarum College Library](#), you will be able to browse through a wide collection of psalm music styles. You may be able to access a good liturgical bookshop where they stock a range of psalters with music. Or it is a matter of using an inter-library loan service.

The place of psalmody in worship

How do we see the use of the psalm within our revised liturgies?

Do we see the role of the psalm as an integral part of the Liturgy of the Word?

As a response to the first reading in a Eucharistic liturgy and a link between OT and NT readings, can we make more use of the seasonal and thematic content of psalms?

Does the music that is used to sing a psalm have to convey the mood of the text?

Which style of psalm singing is more suited to?

- i) A Eucharistic liturgy
- ii) The daily office – evensong.
- iii) A family service.

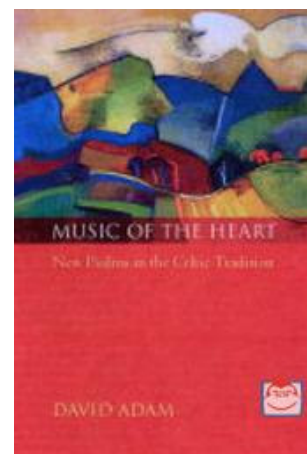
..... and why?

Think about how psalms can be used at various points during a Eucharistic liturgy.

How do you use Psalms in the worship in your church?

How could you introduce more psalm singing into your church?

Is there a place for Modern psalms such as those by [David Adam](#)?



Consider the following statements:

A psalm implies serenity of soul; it is the author of peace. A psalm forms friendships, unites those separated, conciliates those at enmity. A psalm is a city of refuge from the demons; a means of inducing help from the angels, a weapon in fears by night, a rest from toils by day, a safe-guard for infants, an adornment for those at the height of their vigour, a consolation for the elders, a most fitting ornament for women. It peoples the solitudes, it rids the market place of excesses; it is the elementary exposition of beginners, the improvement of those advancing, the solid support of the perfect, the voice of the Church. It brightens the feast days; it creates a sorrow which is in accordance with God. For a psalm calls forth a tear even from a heart of stone. A psalm is the work of the angels, a heavenly institution, the spiritual incense.

Basil 4th Century

I believe the reason that the psalms still have such a hold on us is because we're all still wandering through deserts, still crossing rivers, still walking through valleys of the shadow of death, still seeking promised lands.

William Ferris

The Church knew what the Psalmist knew: Music praises God. Music is well or better able to praise Him than the building of a church and all its decoration; it is the Church's greatest ornament.

Igor Stravinsky

In an era of history, when the ending of the Cold War and global awareness of international disorders have not ensured that the world is safer or less hungry, or its wealthy inhabitants more fulfilled, it may be that we have to learn to use psalms in ways that will ensure our present day apprehensions and pains are offered to God as earnestly as our most exuberant praise.

John Bell

To finish this module, try writing your own short psalm to express an emotion or liturgical action.

Further recommended material

[Make Music to our God](#) How we sing the Psalms, by Br. Reginald SSF
SPCK 1996

[Common Worship Today](#) – ed Earey, Harper Collins 2001

[Out of the depths](#) – Bernard Anderson, Westminster Press 1983

[The Psalms](#) - Artur Weiser, SCM 1962

[The Liturgy today and tomorrow](#) – Gelineau, DLT 1978

[Ways of Singing the Psalms](#), Robin Leaver (ed.) Collins

[Responsorial Psalms](#), Norman Warren (ed.) HarperCollins, 1994

[The Book of Praises](#), David Preston (ed.) Carey Publications, 1986

[The Psalter 1998](#), A draft text for Common Worship (CHP 1998)

Music Resources

Common Worship Psalter (RSCM) 2002

Psalm Songs Vols 1-3 ed David Ogden and Alan Smith

Psalm Praise – Harper Collins

Psalms of Patience, Protest and praise – Bell (Wild Goose)

Sunday Psalms – Mayhew

Psalms and Music for the Eucharist – ed Humphrey and Forrester (McCrimmons)

A diversion!

Below is a copy of the BCP (Coverdale) Psalm 46.

Count to the 46th word from the start.

Count to the 46th word from the end.

These two words make up the name of who we think was working with [Miles Coverdale](#) as the co-author of this translation. This is how he left his signature in 1539!

Psalm 46. *Deus noster refugium*

1. God is our hope and strength : a very present help in trouble.
2. Therefore will we not fear, though the earth be moved : and though the hills be carried into the midst of the sea;
3. Though the waters thereof rage and swell : and though the mountains shake at the tempest of the same.
4. The rivers of the flood thereof shall make glad the city of God : the holy place of the tabernacle of the most Highest.
5. God is in the midst of her, therefore shall she not be removed : God shall help her, and that right early.
6. The heathen make much ado, and the kingdoms are moved : but God hath shewed his voice, and the earth shall melt away.
7. The Lord of hosts is with us : the God of Jacob is our refuge.
8. O come hither, and behold the works of the Lord : what destruction he hath brought upon the earth.
9. He maketh wars to cease in all the world : he breaketh the bow, and knappeth the spear assunder, and burneth the chariots in the fire.
10. Be still then, and know that I am God : I will be exalted among the heathen, and will be exalted in the earth.
11. The Lord of hosts is with us : the God of Jacob is our refuge.

Written work for this module

If you are presenting a written piece after working through this module, focus on how you use psalms at your church and how you might develop the use of psalmody in different ways. Email your work to be registered to rcfielding@googlemail.com and this will then contribute to receiving your certificate. You will also receive a brief and positive commentary on your work.

David Ogden 2003
Revised Robert Fielding 2006, 2010

A review of Make Music to our God by Andrew Burnham

Make music to our God: How we sing the Psalms,
Reginald Box SSF, SPCK, 1996, ISBN 0-281-04932-7.

PSALM SINGING has never been the same in the Church of England since the Parish Communion killed off Mattins and the Forsythe Saga killed off suburban Evensong. There have been new psalters available - the Revised Psalter and the Grail in the '60s, Frost-McIntosh and the American ECUSA Psalter in the '80s, the ICEL Psalter in the '90s. There have been schemes for re-instating the psalms and use of the responsorial psalm has become widespread. However we are still not quite back to the position where the psalm is regarded as being as important as any of the other biblical readings. Such was the importance of psalmody in Mattins and Evensong and such is its importance in the Roman Mass. The ASB did half the job: it gave us psalms for the Eucharist but the compilers balked at laying out the psalms in the lectionary according to any one method. The result has been that the psalter has not been used as well as it might have been.

Submitted for the Lambeth Diploma of Theology in 1990, Br Reginald Box's thesis was published at the suggestion of the examiners. Indeed Professor Raymond Warren, who contributes a foreword, had suggested to Br Reginald that a book on the music of the psalms was needed. The historical survey in *Make Music to our God* is thorough with detailed explanations of the different pointing systems used to set psalms to Anglican Chant, a good account of the metrical psalm repertoire, an exploration of Anglican plainsong and of various experimental methods of psalm setting. The point which Br Reginald makes well is that many of the historical systems were for choral use: elaborate methods of chanting were possible because choirs had the time and skill to perfect them.

The survey is no less interesting when it examines what simple methods are available for modern use. It is no longer to be presupposed that a choir is available or that, where there is a choir, congregations are prepared to delegate psalm singing. Though Br Reginald pays due attention to Gelineau and Dom Gregory Murray, his hero is a man called John Crowdy who published *A Free-Chant Service for Morning Prayer* and *A Recitation Service for Evening Prayer* 130 years ago. The system, found also by accident or design in the work of several other composers, derives equally from the chords of Anglican Chant or from the unison tone of Gregorian Chant. What you get is four reciting notes, one for each half verse of the two-verse unit, each followed by a single ending note. Inflection is therefore simple: dump the last available syllable on the ending note; sing the rest on each of the recitatives in turn.

Responsorial psalmody has many of the virtues of Box's simple systems. It is unfortunate that so much responsorial psalmody is said rather than sung and that congregations are often required to retain in the short term memory up to ten words. Revisions of the lectionary are likely to contain shorter responses but, ideally, responses should be read rather than memorised and preferably sung. The most exciting bits of psalm singing I have heard outside choral evensong have been when congregations have had a good response to sing and choir and organ have contributed a beautiful chant in any one of the traditional styles, Anglican chant, plainsong, responsorial. At its best - and "best" need not mean "elaborate" - such psalm singing is as moving as any part of the sacred liturgy.

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