

NEW SONG I PSALM 149:1-5

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The 18th Century New England church lived through unprecedented growth and devastating schism ignited in the flames of revival fueled by a *new song*. I will sketch the contours of this fascinating time period that is not as dissimilar to our own time as we might think by drawing from two authors – George M. Marsden, *Jonathan Edwards, A Life*, (Yale University Press, 2003) and Mark A. Noll, *The Old Religion in a New World*, (Eerdmans, 2002).

The major difficulty for eighteenth-century American Protestants was the reality of religious pluralism... By the mid-eighteenth century the European pattern was breaking down fast. Not only were Baptists, Presbyterians, Methodists, and others seeking their own space in Congregationalist Massachusetts and Anglican Virginia, in the middle colonies of New York, New Jersey, and Pennsylvania, so many different Protestant groups had taken root that it had become a practical impossibility to favor any one of them over the others... In 1700, Congregationalists and Anglicans constituted almost two-thirds of all churches in the thirteen colonies; by 1780 the proportion of Congregational and Anglican was reduced to approximately one-third. It was not that these two seventeenth-century denominations had stopped growing. The number of Congregationalist churches, for example, increased from 146 in 1700 to 749 in 1780. It was, rather, that the number of other churches was growing much faster. Noll, 50

In this shifting ecclesiastical situation, a major change occurred in the character of Protestantism... The new element is usually identified as “pietism” on the Continent or as “evangelicalism” for Britain and North America. The essence of pietism was a movement away from formal, outward, and established religion to personal, inward, and heartfelt religion. In the American colonies, the coming of evangelicalism sparked a religious revival... It was a general movement toward a more personal, emotional, inward, and experiential religion that fed upon dramatic preaching occasions featuring George Whitefield and his many imitators (including Congregationalist, Jonathan Edwards). In simplest terms, the shift marked the passing of Puritanism and the rise of evangelicalism as the dominant Protestant expression in America. In this new form, loyalty to a particular church was less important than a vibrant religion of the heart. In fact, groups inspired by Whitefield’s kind of preaching created fragmentation in New England’s traditionally unified churches. The careful theological writing of Jonathan Edwards both explained the dynamics of the revival and encouraged the fragmentation of the church... this new form of Protestantism was much more attuned to the expanding, market-oriented societies of the eighteenth century than to the ideals of stable church establishments from Europe... Religious bodies that stressed freedom from state control, or that relied on their own initiative rather than state connections, flourished. A new form of hymnody, with fresh melodies and direct, affecting lyrics, rejuvenated corporate worship. Noll, 51-54

New England congregational singing had become chaotic and dissonant. Seventeenth-century Puritans had strictly followed the anti-Anglican principle that nothing would be part of public worship except what was commanded in Scripture. Like others of the Reformed, they would sing only literally translated biblical psalms. Although many Puritans owned musical instruments, they would not think of using them in the meetinghouse [church]. As though to

underscore the point that music was incidental to words, they published the metric psalms without musical notes. Congregations sang to any one of a number of familiar psalm tunes. A precentor, or leading singer, would “set the tune” by singing at least the first line, and the congregation would then join in. Over the years the collective memory of the tunes evolved or devolved. Further, members of the congregation sang variations on the original notes as it pleased them, whereas today this might be regarded as a wonderful folk tradition, by the early eighteenth century the near chaos seemed appalling to those attuned to the refined musical standards of the day... One early proponent of reform wrote in 1721 that “the tunes are now miserably tortured and twisted and quavered . . . it sounds in the ear of a good judge like five hundred different tunes roared out at the same time with perpetual interferences with one another.” Marsden, 143

In the meantime, English dissenters had been reforming sacred singing for nearly a generation. The leading figure was Isaac Watts. Watts argued that it was not necessary to use exact biblical words, only that hymns and spiritual songs be based on Scriptural themes. On this principle he wrote hymns for private devotional use, publishing them as *Hymns and Spiritual Songs* in 1707... By the time Edwards was a young man Watts’ hymns were being used in New England for family devotions and neighborhood social meetings, and he certainly was familiar with Watts. Marsden, 144

At the same time that hymns were being introduced to New England, so was “regular” singing, or singing in parts. Music was not taught at seventeenth-century Harvard, and so musical literacy had been low. In 1713 the first of a number of schools for music and dancing opened in Boston, primarily for women... With enthusiasm for the symmetries of eighteenth-century harmonies sweeping sophisticated Boston, the town’s clergy took the lead in calling for an end to the pandemonium of psalm singing at meeting. By 1722 Congregational minister Cotton Mather introduced the new singing into Sunday worship. Soon the reform turned into the “singing controversy.” Throughout the 1720’s New Englanders hotly debated the subject, and in many outlying areas the debate continued decades later. The Boston clergy used the power of the press, publishing numerous defenses of the superiority of “regular” singing and providing instruction on singing by note and in three-part harmony. Colman, the Mathers, Prince, Cooper, and Joseph Sewall all endorsed the new way... By the time Jonathan visited there in 1731 he was already an enthusiast for the beauties of regular singing. Marsden, 144-145

Perhaps the most helpful analogy for understanding [the Congregational minister] Jonathan Edwards’ view of excellence and beauty is to music. One of his favorite terms was “harmony,” which he often used as synonymous with “proportion.” Reflecting eighteenth-century views of music, he considered how musical harmonies are inherent in various proper relationships of notes to each other... To fully appreciate this analogy [between Spiritual and musical harmonies] one should recall that Edwards was writing at the time when J. S. Bach (1685-1750) was at the height of his creative powers... Though Bach was Lutheran and German, he and Edwards were working in similar worlds of discourse where ineffable beauties that pointed to the divine were found in the harmonies of complex relationships. Bach had a keen sense of the fervent affective meanings of biblical texts. Marsden, 79

The precise terminological distinctions between the three words discussed here, **hymnos**, **psalmos**, and **ode**, are not closely defined. **Hymnos** probably had a religious significance right from the beginning, as a technical term for festive psalms of praise, and for liturgical calls and recitations. **Ode** had occasional secular reference, but, at least in the biblical Greek period, it generally indicated a particular kind of song concerned with lamentation or joy. **Psalmos**, equally used with occasional secular reference, denoted originally a variety of instrumental music, then also the vocal accompaniment. Following on from the LXX, **psalmos** in the NT probably refers to the aspect of early Christian worship which, both in form and content, was closely modelled on the temple hymns of the OT and late Judaistic periods. 668

Song = hymnos

Classical Greek Literature: **hymnos**, of uncertain origin, is something sung, a song. The word appears from Homer onwards in secular Greek. **Hymnos** is a general word used to include the most varied poetical forms. 668

Old Testament: In the LXX the verb is found 71 times and the noun 28 times. The verb translates Hebrew **zamar**, to praise; also to sing or praise with instrumental accompaniment, at 1 Chr 16:9; Isa 12:5; Hebrew **yadah**, confess, praise, at Neh 12:24; Isa 12:4; 25:1; **yada**, cause to be known, at 2 Chr 23:13; **ranan**, cry for joy, at Prov 1:20; 8:3; and **sir** at Ps 65:13; 137:3; Isa 40:2. 668

New Testament: **hymnos** (noun) occurs in the NT only in Eph 5:19 and Col 3:16; **hymneo** (verb) only in Mat 16:30 (see Mk 14:26; Acts 16:25; Heb 2:12). The participle **hymnesantes**, “when they had sung a hymn” (Mat 26:30 and Mk 14:26) is generally understood by commentators to refer to the singing of the Hallel psalm at the close of the Passover meal prior to drinking the fourth cup. 669

Acts 16:25 records how, after being beaten and imprisoned at Philippi, “about midnight Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns to God and the prisoners were listening to them.”...Hebrews 2:12 gives to Ps 22:22 a christological significance as an illustration of the solidarity of the speaker with the people of God: “saying, ‘I will proclaim thy name to my brethren, in the midst of the congregation I will praise thee.’” The Psalm was cited by Jesus on the cross (Mk 15:34 and Mat 27:46. “Practically the whole of the lament to which the first part of the psalm is devoted was used in the Church from very early times as the *testimonium* of the crucifixion of Christ; not only is it expressly quoted, but its language has been worked into the very fabric of the New Testament passion narratives, especially in the First and Fourth Gospels [C. H. Dodd, *According to the Scriptures*]. 670

Psalm, a sacred song = psalmos

In secular Greek **psallo** [verb] is used from Homer onwards, originally meaning to pluck hair, to twang a bow string, and then pluck a harp, or any other stringed instrument. 671

In the *Old Testament* **psallo** and **psalmos** stand generally for Hebrew **zamar** or **nagan**, also for **sir** (Greek, **ode**). Generally it is the Psalms of our Psalter that are meant (2 Sam 23:1)... This accords with the received meaning of Hebrew **sir** or **mizmor**, song, which is used in the headings to 49 Psalms, mostly with the addition of **to David**. 671

In the *New Testament* two basic meanings can be ascertained. (a) **psalmos** stands for the Psalms of the OT; or “The Writings”, of which the Psalms, as the first document in this division, represent. (b) More generally **psalmos** means a hymn of praise, and **psallo**, to sing a spiritual or sacred song... A hymn of praise, or the singing of praises, is a typical manifestation, either of the Spirit of God in his present activity in the community of the baptized (Eph 5:18 ff.’ Col 3:16), or of God himself (1 Cor 14:254 f.). 671

Song = ode

In the LXX the verb occurs 66 times rendering chiefly the Hebrew **sir** [Ps 149:1]... The noun occurs 87 times mainly for **sir** and **sirah**. 672-673

New Testament: In the NT **ode** and **ado** occur only 4 times in the Pauline writings and 6 times in Revelation, with both noun and verb together in Rev. (cf. Eph 5:19; Col 3:16; Rev 5:9; 14:3; 15:3)... “And they sang a new song, saying, ‘Worthy art thou to take the scroll and to open its seals, for thou was slain and by thy blood didst ransom men for God from every tribe and tongue and people and nation.’” 673

In Revelation the whole creation – in heaven, on earth, and below the earth – acknowledges, as of right, the lordship of the Lamb in their eschatological paean of praise. 674

Songs clearly formed a central part of early Christian liturgy, as had already been the case in the worship of the OT community and of the later Jewish temple. The Pauline writings twice allude to songs in discussion of man’s spiritual activity. Rather than be drunk with wine, the Ephesians Christians are urged to “be filled with the Spirit, addressing one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody to the Lord with all your heart, always and for everything giving thanks in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ to God the Father” (Eph 5:18 ff.). These would doubtless include the OT Psalms which the NT writers often freely quoted but would evidently include also Christian hymns. O. Cullmann regards Rev 5:9, 12 f.; 12:10 ff.; 19:1 f.; 19:6 as among the oldest of Christian songs; he also places the Odes of Solomon in this period. Perhaps the earliest Christian hymn is contained in Phil 2:6-11 which Paul cites in support of his plea to the Philippians to have the mind of Christ. This may have been a pre-Pauline hymn or something which Paul had composed himself and was also known to his readers. 674

Colossians 3:16 likewise sees singing as a means of edification and praise: “Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly, as you teach and admonish one another in all wisdom, and as you sing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs with thankfulness in your hearts to God.” Whilst pointing out that it is impossible to differentiate exactly between the three terms used here, E. Lohse says that, “Taken together, they describe the full range of singing which the Spirit prompts.” 675