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›I will solve my riddle to the music of the lyre‹ (Psalm 49:4). How ›Lyrical‹ is Hebrew Psalmody?

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Abstract: This paper discusses biblical poetry in relation to the ancient Greek-Latin tradition of lyric poetry. Since the Greek word ›lyric‹ and the Hebrew word ›psalterion‹ each have musical connotations, there must be some connection between biblical psalmody and lyric poetry. Indeed, the liturgical superscriptions of many psalms and the numerous hints to musical instruments and singing within them suggest that many texts were originally used for accompaniment to music and so could be seen as ›lyric poetry‹ in the strictest sense. There are, of course, key differences between ancient and biblical lyric poetry. Hebrew poems are formally marked not so much by metre or rhyme as by more general conventions of sonority and word-play, perhaps to facilitate memorisation. Furthermore, Hebrew poetry is particularly recognizable by its balanced expression of thought, a ›parallelism‹ which includes repeated or contrasting ideas and figurative language. This feature is also evident in some Hebrew prose: this ›blurring of the boundaries‹ between prose and poetry is another feature which distinguishes biblical poetry from ancient Greek or Latin lyric poetry. One other distinctive feature of psalmody is that, although rooted in the liturgy of the first Temple (950–587 BCE), and developing in the liturgy of the second Temple period, it continued to thrive even after the fall of the Temple in 70 CE. The liturgical use of the psalms resulted in its continual prominence throughout Jewish and Christian history; and because the essence of Hebrew poetry is more dependent on sense than sound this has also enabled a rich tradition of translation. So Hebrew psalmody is ›re-invented‹ through the several Greek, Latin, and Aramaic versions, as well as through the many languages of the early modern period, right up to the contemporary vernacular. In this sense psalmody is unusual: unlike ancient classical poetry it provides an ongoing and living tradition for a community of faith.

Keywords: musical accompaniment, performance, differentiation between prose and poetry, sound patterns, liturgical use

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As Professor of the Hebrew Bible at the University of Oxford, this project offers a particular challenge. My specialism means that I start with a Semitic understanding of poetry: inevitably this is very different from how colleagues working in Classical Studies and, more recently, in Literary Studies, understand ›lyrical poetry‹. This paper is an attempt to work through these somewhat challenging hermeneutical issues.

Given that my own concerns are with the ancient Near East, I shall focus, initially, on an ancient understanding of ›lyrical poetry‹. I am therefore assuming that, taken from the Greek *lyrikós*, this originally denoted poetry written to accompany the lyre. The title of my paper suggests a connection between biblical and classical poetry in this respect. In the Greek, *lyrikós* suggests a stringed instrument of two resonating boards; the strings were probably strummed with a plectrum. *Lyrikós*, however, belongs to larger family of instruments, including the *chithara* and the *barbitós*; the Septuagint translation of the Hebrew term only uses *chithara* and never *lyrikós*. A preference is for the term *psalterion*: the word ›Psalter‹ means, literally, songs to be sung to ›the psaltery‹. The Greek verb *psallō* – ›to pluck, pull, touch sharply‹ – suggests the *psalterion* was an instrument whose strings were plucked with the fingers.


The most common stringed instrument referred to in Hebrew is *kinnor*; in English this word is always translated as either ›harp‹ or ›lyre‹. The same Hebrew word is also found in 1 Sam. 16:16 and 23, when David plays this instrument to soothe Saul in his moments of madness. The King James Version (1611), the New International Version (1984), and the New Revised Standard Version (1989) all translate Ps. 49:4 as ›to the music of the harp‹. By contrast, the Revised Standard Version (1952), the Tanakh of the Jewish Publication Society (1985) and the English Standard Version (2001) translate it as ›the music of the lyre‹. So in English, too, there is some confusion about what instrument is being referred to here. Given the many examples of stringed instruments in the ancient Near East, it is hardly surprising that the psalmists, too, were not alluding to one single type of stringed instrument (cf. Eaton 1984, 73–76).¹

This is borne out when we look at the Psalms: *kinnor* is used frequently here (for example, as well as in Psalm 49:4, in Pss. 33:2; 43:4; 81:2; 92:4; 98:5; and 147:7).² However, in most of these references (i. e. other than in Pss. 43:4 and 147:7) *kinnor* is also paired with other words, especially *nevel*. So in Ps. 33:2 we

1 Cf., for example, http://www.britishmuseum.org/research/collection_online/collection_object_details.aspx?objectId=368337&partId=1&searchText=lyre&place=33937|76457|33899|41021&page=1. (14.12.2016).

2 The NRSV will be used for numbering, versification and translation unless otherwise stated.

read ›sing praises upon the lyre (*kinnor*) and upon the ten-stringed harp (*benevel-’asor*)‹. Psalm 92:3 refers to a ten-stringed instrument (*’ale-’asor*) which is probably a harp (*’ale-**navel***) and another instrument called a sweet-sounding lyre (*’ale higgayon be**kinnor***). Psalm 81:2 refers to a melodious lyre (***kinnor** na’im*) and harp (*’im-**navel***). Psalm 108:2 reads ›Awake O harp (*hannevel*) and lyre (*we**kinnor***)!‹ Psalm 98:5 reads, literally, ›sing praises with the lyre, with the lyre‹: the word *kinnor* is used twice.

So *kinnor* and *nevel* must have been similar stringed instruments: each is described as ›sweet-sounding‹ and as having ten strings.³ We gain further insights from the Greek and Latin translations. The Greek (LXX) and the Latin (V) usually translate *kinnor* as *chithara* and *cithara* respectively: in Ps. 43:4⁴ and 147:7 this is combined with the verb *psallō* in Greek and *psallo* in Latin: so this suggests that *kinnor* was a type of psaltery. Again, in Ps. 81:3⁵ *kinnor* is translated as *psaltērion/psalterium*, whilst *nevel* is read as *chitharas*  *chithara*. However, the reverse is the case in Ps. 33:2⁶: *kinnor* is now translated as *en chithara* and *in cithara* but *nevel* is now read as *en psaltēriō* and *in psalterio*; this is also the case in Ps. 91:4 and in Ps. 108:3.⁷ We might surmise that, in biblical Greek, *psaltērion* became the overall term for all stringed instruments accompanying the psalms, perhaps as *lyrikos* had a similar function in ancient Classical culture.

So we can start from the assumption that the Psalms comprised lyrical poetry, in all its variety, and that many psalms were sung to a stringed instrument. This assumption allows our argument to progress in two stages. Firstly, I shall examine Hebrew poetic conventions, in order to see whether Hebrew poetry differs from other ancient Classical conventions. Secondly, I shall assess both the musicality and the performance of the psalms, in order to ascertain whether psalmody was performed in a similar way to poetry in the rest of the ancient world.

³ It is possible that *kinnor* referred only to the wooden soundboard, and *nevel*, which also can mean a ›skin bottle‹, referred to a leather skin which could have been passed over the wooden soundboard.

⁴ The Greek and Latin numbering of psalmody here is 42:4.

⁵ The Greek and Latin numbering is 80:3.

⁶ The Greek and Latin numbering is 32:2.

⁷ The Greek and Latin numbering is 107:3.

1 Poetic Conventions

1.1 Sound

Hebrew poetry has no recognisable metre, and not even any consistent interplay of stressed (long) and unstressed (short) syllables. There is however an adherence to rhythm, but this is more dependent upon the repetition (or contrast) of various elements in a particular psalm.

So Hebrew poets were certainly not oblivious to the sonority of a poem: the musical associations make this clear. Psalm 117:1 is a good example. Here, in just two lines of Hebrew, we can see three clear stresses: I have emphasised these in bold type in the transliteration below; the same three stresses are also emphasised in bold in the English (NRSV) translation.

halelû 'et- 'ador  l-g' 
Praise the **Lord**, all you **nations**!
 šabbeḥûḥû kol-h  mîm
 Extol **him**, all you **peoples**!⁸

Although the Hebrew has no obvious rhyme, this example illustrates the repetition of sounds and an interest in word-play. Even without a knowledge of Hebrew it is possible to see the repetition of **-îm** and **-îm** at the end of each line, and the use of **-û** and **ḥûḥû** in the first word of each line. Hebrew poetry is also very compact. In the first line of Psalm 117, three words in Hebrew need six in the English translation; and in the second line, in effect two words were needed for the five in English. Poetry omits certain words which would normally be present in prose – for example, the definite article, the relative pronoun, and even the definite object.

The balance of sound is also evident in line forms (cf. the discussion of ›parallelism‹, below). Usually these occur in two lines (›bicolā‹), sometimes in three (›tricola‹). Psalm 27:14 is a good example of the tricola form:

Wait for the Lord;
 be strong, and let your heart take courage;
 wait for the Lord!

Given that a good deal of biblical poetry – even outside the Psalms – was for performative purposes, the repetition, both in terms of rhythm and of line forms, is for ease of recall. The 3:3 stress, as seen in Psalm 117, is that used frequently in

⁸ This and the following example have been taken from Gillingham 1994, 58sq. and 27 respectively.

hymns. Another device is a 3:2 stress, mainly used in laments, perhaps expressing grief in the way that the second line ends more abruptly. Sometimes each line has four stresses (4:4), as in Ps. 46:6, and sometimes two (2:2), used throughout most of Psalm 29. But stress is not the same as metre: Hebrew poetry is much more flexible, and it is rare that a Hebrew poem adheres consistently to the same stress-formula throughout.⁹

1.2 Sense

The essence of Hebrew poetry is that it communicates a *balanced expression of thought*: this is what makes its scope quite broad, because some Hebrew prose also contains evidence of binary thinking. This balance comprises word-pairing, whereby the repetition or the contrasting use of a word intensifies the imagery and the meaning. However, just as Hebrew poetry does not apply rigid rules of sonority, nor does it apply strict rules for the balance of sense. Various types of ›parallelism‹ are used, and these can occur in the same psalm, as seen below (cf. Gillingham 1994, 69–71). The most obvious is when the same idea is repeated twice: this is termed ›synonymous parallelism‹.

For example, Ps. 31:10 offers an illustration of two uses of synonymous parallelism in the same verse, in what we might term an AA/BB form:

For my **life** is spent with **sorrow**, and my **years** with **sighing**;
my strength fails because of my **misery**, and **my bones waste away**.

By contrast, verse 11 uses a more synthetic form, which might be termed AAA/B:

I am the **scorn** of all my **adversaries**,
 a **horror** to my **neighbours**,
 an **object of dread** to my **acquaintances**;
 those who see me in the street flee from me.

Verse 13 is a more complex development, so that the form might be termed as A/B/CC.

For I hear the whispering of many
 – terror all around! –
 as they **scheme** together **against me**,
 as they **plot** to **take my life**.

⁹ On the different types of stress in Hebrew psalmody, cf. Gillingham 1994, 59–68; cf. also Kugel 1981; Watson 2004; Berlin 2008.

Some forms of parallelism use contrasting ideas rather than repetitions; this occurs many times in the book of Proverbs, and is called ›antithetic parallelism‹. In addition, several psalms use parallelism in a very flexible way. Psalms 87 and 122 are examples, as also Psalm 23, ›The Lord is my Shepherd‹, which balances its ideas in such a variable way that parts of it could be presented as prose. Take for example the first and fourth verses of Psalm 23, which even in terms of ›balance of sense‹ could not be read in binary lines:

1. The Lord is my shepherd,
I shall not want...
4. Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death
I fear no evil;
For thou art with me;
Thy rod and thy staff, they comfort me.¹⁰

The use of ›balance of sense‹ depends upon a vast store of vivid figurative language, including metaphors, analogies, mythical expressions, and frequent personifications of nature. For example, God is seen as rock, fortress, dwelling-place, shepherd, farmer, warrior, mother, and king, whilst the floods clap their hands and the mountains skip like rams (cf. Gillingham 1994, 204sq.; cf. also Brown 2002). Although these features are also found in Hebrew prose, they occur more frequently in poetry, along with other features discussed above, such as bicola, tricola, rhythmic stress, different forms of parallelism, and a compact form of expression. So in terms of the poetry of the Hebrew Bible, the difference between presenting, in translation, a text in poetry or in prose can be a challenge. Genesis 1, for example, which is usually presented in prose, could easily be represented in poetic line-forms taking up the repetitions and binary expressions in its sevenfold account of creation; whereas Psalm 23, offered above, which we normally assume to be poetry because we sing it as such, could in fact be written out without line forms and so could appear on the page as prose. This ›blurring of the boundaries‹ between prose and poetry is a distinctive feature of Semitic poetry: it is very different from a more classical understanding of poetry, for example composed in Greek or Latin. Hebrew poetry is not as interested in metre as in rhythm; the balance of sense is as important – sometimes more so – than the balance of sound.

¹⁰ On Psalm 23, cf. Kugel 1981 in Gillingham 1994, 75. It is the metrical adaptations of this psalm into English which makes us think of it having a clear metre: cf. for example ›The King of Love my Shepherd is‹ by H. W. Baker (1868).

2 Musicality and Performance

2.1 Music

As well as the references to stringed instruments in the body of a psalm, other clues to the use of music are in the liturgical superscriptions. These give information about the musical type of a psalm, the tune to accompany it, the instruments to be used, and the role of the leader of worship. For example, fifty-five psalms have the title *lamenatstseha*, usually translated ›to/by/for the choirmaster‹. As for psalm types, the most common is *mizmor*, occurring some fifty-seven times; this is translated in the Greek as *psalmos* – i. e. a song to (stringed) music.¹¹ It is used thirty-five times in psalms with Davidic headings, suggesting that even personally designated psalms were used for public accompaniment to music. Another common term is *shir*, meaning, more generally, ›song‹, which is found in the superscriptions some thirty times, thirteen alongside *mizmor*.

Several psalm headings suggest the use of well-known tunes; these include a strange expression ›Do not destroy‹ in Psalms 57, 58, 59 and 75 and ›According to the Lilies (of the Covenant)‹ in Psalms 45, 60, 69 and 80. Psalm 22, ›On the Hind of Dawn‹ and Psalm 56, ›To the Dove of the Distant Terebinths‹ also suggest hymn tunes.¹²

Many of the psalm titles indicating a musical accompaniment refer to stringed instruments. These include the heading *bineginoth* in Psalms 4, 6, 54, 55, 61, 67 and 76, and the heading *al-hashsheminith* in Psalms 6 and 12, each indicating an eight-stringed instrument. The Gittith (*haggitith*) suggests an instrument associated with either the Philistine city, Gath, or the wine harvest, as in Psalms 8, 81 and 84. Occasionally wind instruments are also intimated: one of the headings to Psalm 5, a lament, is *el-hannehiloth* and this suggests a flute, common in Babylonian laments; similarly *al-mahalath* over Psalms 53 and 88, both laments, intimates an accompaniment by a different kind of flute.

A second clue to the musical performance is in the references to singing within the psalms themselves. These are too numerous to mention, and include psalms whose forms and contents are as various as Pss. 7:17; 18:49; 27:6; 47:2; 5:7, 8; 61:5; 66:4; 68:25sq.; 89:2; 95:2; 98:1, 4, 6; 105:1sq.; 103:1, 3; and 138:1sq.¹³

¹¹ The root of this noun is *zamar*, meaning ›to sing praises‹, usually to musical accompaniment (Pss. 81:2 and 98:5).

¹² There is obviously some debate about these headings, which even by the time of the Greek and Latin translations were not properly understood.

¹³ Cf. Smith 1990, 181, who argues that at least 109 psalms have references to singing in worship.

References to the tambourine (81:2; 149:1 and 150:4), to the trumpet or *shofar* (47:5; 81:3 and 150:3) and to the cymbals (150:5) further confirm that psalmody was very much a musical performance.¹⁴ Just as the Jewish Torah was about the prescription of rituals and sacrifices for worship, with more reference to what is ›done‹ than to music and singing, the Psalter, with minimal interest in priestly cultic legislation, focussed more on the words and how they should be sung.

2.2 Performance

If lyric poetry in ancient Greece dates from about the eighth century, this period broadly corresponds with the development of psalmody in ancient Israel. The origins and development of Greek lyrical poetry, often set in the milieu of the polis, suggest a broad remit, having associations with politics, warfare, athletic activities, drinking, love, money, youth, old age, death, the heroic past, and the gods. Hebrew poetry outside psalmody also gives evidence of diverse interests, but it is unclear whether this is always connected with musical accompaniment. We read of working songs (Num. 21:17sq.), drinking songs (Isa. 22:13), blessings (Gen. 14:19sq.), curses (Gen. 9:26sq.), and funeral dirges (2 Sam. 1:19–27). The Book of Jashar seems to have been a collection of war poetry (1 Sam. 1:18). A collection of (probably oral) love songs has been incorporated in Song of Songs, and in parts of Proverbs we find collections of aphoristic sayings from family life: these are concerned with everyday issues such as money, drinking, sexual relations, work, youth and old age. More intellectual and reflective poetry, on the problem of suffering and of growing old, is found in the books of Job and Ecclesiastes. These examples testify to the diverse concerns shared by Classical and Hebrew poets. However, they also highlight, by contrast, that the musical context of psalmody was primarily liturgical. Although this too deals with matters of warfare (44, 74, 79), of love and marriage (45), of injustice and innocent suffering (73) and on the possibility of life beyond death (16, 49) such topics were usually sung in the context of worship.

So singing was a vital part of psalmody, not only in its origins but in its later development. Although it is impossible to date any psalm with certainty, the very earliest psalms were more probably used in communal settings, being linked to the royal liturgy of the first Temple (950–587 BCE). By the sixth century a number of psalms (of which the best known is 137, ›By the Waters of Babylon we sat down and wept‹) were used to sing about the loss of land, king and Temple, at that time

¹⁴ Psalm 150 offers the best insights into the use of music in ancient Israel.

from a non-sacrificial setting, as the Jews were in exile in Babylon. From about 518 BCE onwards, back in the land but under Persian rule, many more personal psalms were brought into the Psalter. Around this time superscriptions were added to many of the psalms, particularly in the first part of the Psalter. A vast number of these were musical, as we have seen. Alongside the official Temple cultus, psalmody also was used in smaller, more familial settings, and, by the third century, psalms would have been sung and recited in the nascent synagogues in diaspora communities (cf. Gerstenberger 1988).

Even by New Testament times the singing of the psalms played a vital part in Jewish worship, alongside the readings from the Law: it was only after the final destruction of the Temple in 70 CE that, as a sign of mourning, singing psalms to musical accompaniment was eventually banned in Jewish communities. Conversely, at about the same time the practice of psalm-singing started to develop in the (non-sacrificial) liturgies of Christian churches (cf. for example Eph. 5:19 and Col. 3:16). Several early church fathers, in both the eastern and western traditions of Christendom, were resistant to the use of musical accompaniment because they saw it as imitating pagan practices. One of the most cited is Clement of Alexandria, in the late second century, who requires that ›the pipe should be left to the shepherd, the flute to the men who are in fear of gods and intent on idol worshipping‹.¹⁵ John Chrysostom, writing in the fourth century, was even more forthright:

David formerly sang songs, also today we sing hymns. He had a lyre with lifeless strings, the church has a lyre with living strings. Our tongues are the strings of the lyre with a different tone indeed but much more in accordance with piety. Here there is no need for the cithara, or for stretched strings, or for the plectrum, or for art, or for any instrument; but, if you like, you may yourself become a cithara, mortifying the members of the flesh and making a full harmony of mind and body. For when the flesh no longer lusts against the Spirit, but has submitted to its orders and has been led at length into the best and most admirable path, then will you create a spiritual melody.¹⁶

It is not surprising that Chrysostom's Commentary on the Psalms totally ignores the musical headings. This is quite different from later third century commentators such as Athanasius of Alexandria, and fourth century commentators such as Hilary of Poitiers: here the ethos is that musical accompaniment to psalmody gave rise to a ›well-ordered heart‹ (Athanasius). So whether in Greek or Latin, and whether in monastic or cathedral communities, the singing of the psalms, usually

¹⁵ Cf. <http://www.earlychristianwritings.com/text/clement-instructor-book2.html> (14.12.2016).

¹⁶ Taken from Biddings 2010, 97; the reference is to Chrysostom's sermon on Psalm 41, some time between 381 and 389 CE.

accompanied to music, continued in Christian communities across Asia Minor and present-day Europe, East and West, beginning with early Christendom and continuing throughout the Middle Ages (cf. Gillingham 2008, 40–55; cf. also Andreopoulos/Casiday/Harrison 2011, 216sq. and 282–286).

Until the middle of the sixteenth century, throughout Christendom, the close relationship between psalmody and singing, often to musical accompaniment, continued. However, at this time, throughout western Europe, psalmody (like ancient Greek ›lyrical‹ poetry) began to take on new forms, without reference to music, as poets sought to re-capture the essence of ancient poetry in their vernacular (cf. Hamlin 2004; Austern/McBride/Orvis 2011). By the end of the sixteenth century, psalmody *in liturgy* was a highly popular English medium, often paraphrased to create an easily memorable metrical form: Coverdale, Sternhold and Hopkins, John Daye, Archbishop Parker are obvious examples of specifically English translations (cf. Gillingham 2008, 146–155). The popularity of the psalms in the vernacular thus inspired others to create psalmody *as literature*, demonstrating how the psalms could become good English poetry: poets such as Thomas Wyatt, Philip and Mary Sidney, Francis Bacon, Henry Vaughan, John Donne, John Milton and George Herbert each showed how translating the psalms was as much a literary exercise as a liturgical one (cf. *ibid.*, 168–180).

Despite all this, the link between psalmody and music continued in other settings, especially in music for the royal court, and through the popular genre of metrical psalmody in the vernacular within the reformed churches. And when in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries psalmody, again detached from its liturgical context, was dramatized for the theatre or concert hall, it was actually its accompaniment to music which promoted its popularity, as seen in the works on the Psalms of, for example, Handel, Mendelssohn and Brahms, and of Elgar, Grieg, Stravinsky and Bernstein (cf. *ibid.*, 188 and 222–226). Furthermore, by the seventeenth century Jewish psalm-singing to musical accompaniment also experienced a revival, as seen for example in the works of Salamone Rossi, who as a Jew worked between the royal court of Mantua and the Jewish ghetto in its suburbs. Rossi circumvented the ban on singing to musical instruments by composing his psalms – reflecting so clearly the influence of his Christian colleagues at Mantua such as Monteverdi – not for the synagogue, but for use outside it (cf. *ibid.*, 165sq.).

It is interesting to compare this with the resurgence, from the sixteenth century onwards, of lyrical poetry from the ancient Classical world. Here musical accompaniment became increasingly less significant than experimentation with a more sophisticated kind of ›lyric‹ tradition, with its main focus on the form of the poem and the controlled expression of personal thoughts and feelings. So there is a sense in which only the biblical performance of psalmody, even in its secular as

well as its sacred settings, has continued to be used with musical accompaniment until the present day (cf. *ibid.*, 254–266 and 298–307). One might therefore conclude that if ›lyrical‹ meant, originally, poetry to be sung to music, psalmody, from its Hebrew origins to its Greek and Latin translations and so to our vernacular, is ›lyrical‹ in the most consistent and pervasive way of all.

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