

# When The Psalmists Say, "Praise The Lord!"

by Ron Allen

I thought of the praise of God while watching the 1992 Summer Olympics. And I thought about sissies. One of the most familiar phrasings in the Book of Psalms is also one of the most misunderstood. This is the expression "Praise the Lord!," as in the opening and closing words of Psalm 117.

For many secular people, these words are simply "Bible talk" or "preacher talk." The words mean little at all. For a large number of Christians for whom these words ought to have great meaning, it appears these words are merely an expected part of Christian vocabulary. It seems the expression may be used by some Christians with little thought to the real meaning of the words. The words "Praise the Lord!" for them form something of a Christian "hiccup" that punctuates conversation, or is a "filler" in casual speech where another person might simply say "you know."

The words "Praise the Lord," along with the Hebrew original "Hallelujah," play a central role in many of our songs and choruses. Incidentally, I am occasionally asked why it is sometimes "Hallelujah" and sometimes "Alleluia." The difference is the result of transliteration from Hebrew (which has an "h" letter) to Greek (which has no "h" letter; see Revelation 19:3. As important as these words are in our hymnody, I still suspect many people do not understand their intended impact. Let me explain just a bit of Hebrew grammar. The word "Hallelujah" is made up of two elements. The first is the verb "praise" that is represented by the element "Hallelu." The verb is an imperative, a command. When the psalmists say, "Praise the Lord!," they are not giving an interjection, or a comment, they are making a command. They are saying, "Do it!" That is, "PRAISE Him!" Further, the particular nuance of this word for praise in the Bible is that of "joyful boasting."

The second element of the term "Hallelujah" is a shortened form of a divine name. "Yah" ("jah") is short for "Yahweh," the great name of God that is celebrated in Scripture. Indeed, in Psalm 117:1 the Hebrew original that is translated "Praise the Lord" has the name written out fully.

By "praise," the psalmists have in mind a specific type of response to God that is vocal and public in nature. In the mind of the psalmists, there was no thought of "silent praise" or of "quiet, personal praise." Praise is a biblical word, and needs to be defined biblically. There are a score of words in the Psalms that may each be translated by "praise," but they all have these two things in common: Biblical praise is done aloud, and is done in the presence of others.

Today, we hear sometimes of people being instructed to praise God in private devotions or to praise Him in silent prayer. These are understandable sentiments (and who would wish to speak against such things!), but they are not what the psalmists had in mind. Biblical praise is a public, vocal declaration of the wonder and majesty, the kindness and grace, the holiness and power, of the living, triune God of Scripture.

Praise of God may be done in words or in song. It certainly may be accompanied by action, by posture, by clashing cymbals, and triumphant brass. But the praise of God is not a delicate little thing done by effete people behind the doors of their closed prayer closets. It is a bold declaration in the midst of a world that may not even care that God is alive, that He is good, and that He is king.

It is time for the people of God to come out from their (prayer) closets and to make their voices heard in bold declaration of the reality of the living God. In one of his psalms, David says he will sing praises to the Lord "before the gods" (Psalm 138:1). By this, David meant that he would go even to the locations of idolatrous worship and there declare his faith in Yahweh, the only true God.

The 1992 Summer Olympics will have many memories for vast numbers of people throughout the world. One memory I think I will treasure was the response of Trent Dimas when he realized he had won a medal as a gymnast on the high bar. He flung himself into the arms of his jubilant coach Ed Burch. They shouted, danced, and hugged. And up in the stands, the parents of Trent Dimas seemed to be beside themselves with joy. Trent's father had poured his life into his two sons' gymnastic ambitions. And now his son Trent had won the gold medal in a gymnastics event--the first American to do this in non-boycotted games since 1932! The father shouted, jumped, laughed, and cried. I suspect all parents watching him must have shared his joy. The father was praising his son. He was allowed to say to all the world, "That's my boy!"

And we "are allowed" to say before all the world, "The Lord is our Father."

Perhaps the next time you are encouraged to respond to the person and acts of God, you may put a little more zip into it.

"Praise the Lord!"

Sissies need not respond.

**RONALD B. ALLEN is professor of Hebrew Scripture at Western Baptist Seminary, Portland, Oregon. This article was originally published in Worship Leader magazine. Copyright 1992 by CCM Communications, Nashville, Tenn., U.S.A. All rights reserved.**

# What Counts In Music Is The Divine Sentiment

by Ron Allen

This is the second article in a series on the meaning of the Name of God in the Old Testament. The issue is of great importance for the worshipping community, for the Book of Psalms repeatedly commands true believers to praise the Name of the Lord.

Despite repeated emphasis on the importance of the Name of God in all parts of the Hebrew Bible, many people today are confused. They may have seen the word Yahweh, but they think the Name of God is Jehovah. It is a shocking thing for people to discover that Jehovah is neither the Name of God, nor even a real Hebrew word! Imagine this! Great hymn writers from the time of the Reformation to today have intended to bring glory to God by using His Name in song, but they have been using a term that has no inherent meaning, no association with the praises of the Lord by ancient Israel, no connection with the revelation of His Name on Mount Sinai. This is one of the great ironies in our faith.

## **The Mystery of His Name**

Here is how it came about: When the biblical writers penned the Word of God in ancient times, the written Hebrew language did not have vowel signs. The consonants were sufficient clues to the words so long as Hebrew was a living language. However, when Hebrew was no longer in daily use, people had more and more difficulty reading the Bible.

The Hebrew scholars who developed the system of representing vowels by dots and dashes, most under consonants, did not invent the vowels, per se, as is sometimes thought. The vowels were always a part of the language. The scholars just developed a system of notating vowels along with the consonantal alphabet that had been used for well over 2,000 years.

There is one more factor to this mystery. Despite the biblical emphasis on the need to employ the divine Name as a joyful response to His wonder, Jewish people, over time, developed a hesitation to speak the Name aloud. This practice likely began in reverence, out of respect for the third commandment. But over time, it became more of a superstition.

We believe this was a gradual process. Perhaps the first step was to suggest that the Name of God should be used only in worship. Then perhaps the demand was made that the divine Name was to be used only by priests. By the time of the New Testament period, the only one who was to pronounce the divine Name was the high priest, and he could say it only once a year, on the holiest day of all, the Day of Atonement.

## **Substitution and Error**

My point is this: The most important Name in all the Hebrew Bible, the Name of God, was not pronounced by God's people. Instead, Hebrew readers substituted another wonderful word, 'Adonay, meaning "[My exalted] Lord." Thus, to this day, everyone who learns to read the Hebrew Scripture is taught not to say the divine Name, but to substitute a different term altogether.

To assure this substitution was always made, Jewish scholars put the vowels of the word 'Adonay with the consonants for the divine Name!

And now the mystery comes full circle. At the time of the Reformation, Christian scholars began to study Hebrew again, something that had been neglected for centuries. Then around 1520, Galatius became the culprit of a critical error. He thought that the vowels printed with the letters of the divine Name belonged with that word. He did not understand that they pointed to another word altogether.

The error is not unlike taking the consonants of my first name (RNLD) and the vowels of my last name (a, e) and fusing them to form a new word, RaNeLD.

The four consonants of the divine Name (Y, H, W, H) mistakenly were fused with the vowels of 'Adonay to form a new word. [The first vowel appears to be an "a" but is a modified half-vowel, simply a short "e" following a letter other than the aleph (') of 'Adonay.] Thus, the vowel-values for 'Adonay are: e-o-a.

Two more little details: the Germans sound their "j" as a "y," and they sound their "w" as a "v." Thus JeHoVaH is a hybrid of the vowels of 'Adonay, and the consonants (YHWH, or JHVH) of the divine Name.

## **First-Name Basis**

Jehovah, then, is not God's Name! It is simply a mistake. When I see this word in an old hymn such as "Guide Me O Thou Great Jehovah," I generally sing it along with the congregation, for like the "thou," the "Jehovah" was written in good conscience in an earlier time. But I have no more patience with current hymn and chorus writers who continue to use a word which is clearly not God's Name.

If you had made the mistake I mentioned above with my name, RaNeLD, after awhile, I would say something about the funny error and ask you to use "Ron" or "Allen." As for the word "Jehovah," enough is enough. It is a mistake that has been around for nearly 500 years. It is about time we got on a first-Name basis with the Lord of Glory.

**His Name is Yahweh.**

## **The Irony of the Divine Name**

**by Ron Allen**

In my last two columns, I wrote about the ways in which the musicians of ancient Israel used and adapted musical instruments and musical forms of their neighbors for the sublime purpose of bringing praise to the Lord (Yahweh) in temple worship in Jerusalem.

These ideas may be disturbing to some readers. Many Christians have been led to believe, or have simply assumed, that since there is something so distinct in the content and purpose of sacred music, it must also be distinct in form and manner from other music as well.

Yet, as the Christian who writes edifying books draws from the same broad word stock and uses the same grammatical conventions as the writer of "worldly" literature, and as the Christian who paints religious themes draws from the same knowledge of form and texture and uses the same media as the painter of "secular" themes, so the Christian who composes spiritual music does not first have to invent "Christian instruments" or develop a "Christian theory of musical scales and harmonies."

Since this seems to be self-evident, why do so many "older" Christians (i.e., people my age and upward!) tend to have a resistance to contemporary Christian music?

I think that one reason has to do with associations we may have made in our growing up. When I was a boy growing up in the 1950's, there was very little that compares to the making of contemporary Christian music as we experience it today. If songs of faith in God were to be given much play on the radio, they might have had to be fairly bland and sweetly sentimental. In those days, songs of faith had to compete for airtime on the same programs that played the records of Nat "King" Cole and Johnny Ray. To be successful, they had to compete with other songs on the "Hit Parade." My own father, Barclay Allen (whose story I tell in my book "Lord of Song: The Messiah Revealed in the Psalms" (Multnomah, 1985), had to fight to keep the name Jesus in his testimony song, "I Found a Friend" (written in 1953, and still sung in every Billy Graham crusade by George Beverly Shea!). More common in those days were songs like "I Believe," which suggested a vague faith in God, but did so in the context of sentimentality (faith that a flower grows for every rain drop that falls). Such songs led a generation of spiritually minded people to speak disparagingly of popular contemporary Christian music as compromising and inane.

Those were the days when John Peterson's songs were "on the edge" and when Ralph Carmichael's work was "beyond the pale." (Only worldly music has the stress on the second and fourth beat, a friend reported.) Such a thing as "Christian rock" was still a long ways off, but would be indescribably shocking to many when it would appear.

Sadly, many who formed the sacred opinions in the 1950's "slept through the revolution" in popular Christian music. And many who hold these opinions are the pastors and the "main guard" in older, established churches. For them, all new music is suspect. It appears to me that the best approach for all of us is to focus a new on the music. To paraphrase an ad for an old-time breakfast cereal, we need to hear it again, for the first time. When we listen, we should listen not just to the (passing) convention of musical expression, but to the words, to their meaning, and their significance.

Are the words significant, or mere sentimentality? Are the words biblical or banal? Does the message of the song speak clearly a needed and necessary truth about the Triune God of Scripture, about ourselves, or our relationships and duties as believing people?

Then we may also ask questions concerning suitability and purpose. Music that appeals to today's teenagers may not work for Sunday morning worship services in a retirement community. But deeply spiritual young people may also have something to say about some of the songs their parents and grandparents like. Frankly, some of "our" music may only be comfortable, yet not deeply significant. There is a lot of "I Believe"-type music that still is regarded as the "real thing" by folks who have not examined the texts as rigorously as they might. One thing we do know from the psalms of Israel. Whatever the music forms of a given age may be (and they continue to change), there may be something in music that is offered in integrity as true worship to the Lord that is more than just a pleasing thing to a passing generation. The true music of the worship of God is regarded by Him as good, pleasant, and beautiful.

**Praise the Lord!**

**For it is good to sing praises to our God;**

**For it is pleasant, and praise is beautiful."**

**--Psalm 147:1 (NKJV)**

In the best sense, our music to the Lord is not so much an issue of human sentimentality, as it is a matter of divine sentiment.

# **The Devil's Instruments Have A Long History Of Sacred Usage**

**by Ron Allen**

The player was youngish. His hair was a little long, and there seemed to be something shiny hanging from one of his ear lobes. He was about to play an offertory on his tenor saxophone. Just as he raised his instrument to his lips, several people heard a woman whisper a bit too loudly from her pew, "That's the devil's instrument." It doesn't have to be a saxophone or a young man with an earring to elicit this response. For many well-intentioned Christians in "traditional churches" (however that phrase may be defined!), there is the sense that some musical instruments do not belong in the church, because they belong to the devil.

But here is an interesting question: "What is a 'Christian'--that is, an appropriate--instrument?" Before you answer too quickly with "the organ," let me make an observation from the Book of Psalms. So far as we are able to determine, the instruments that the priests and musicians of ancient Israel used in their worship of God were not instruments of their own invention. None of their instruments was.

## **THE NAME GAME**

Have you ever noticed that there is something unusual about the names of musical instruments? They usually retain the names they had in their cultures of origin. The Italians have given us many modern instruments, as well as their names: the piano (forte) and the celesta, as well as the strings: the violin, the viola, the cello, etc. The sitar is east Indian, and the names of many drums (bongos, timbales) show their origin and development in the Latin (Hispanic) cultures of South America. Ah, yes, the Saxophone and the Sousaphone are American instruments whose names betray their creators.

Similarly, the instruments of the Bible have their names, and these often betray their origin. Perhaps the sh'phar, or ram's horn, is the most well-known instrument associated with ancient Israel. Scholars have traced the Hebrew name for this instrument back to an Akkadian word (the language of ancient Babylon), and in turn to an even more ancient Sumerian word (the non-Semitic precursors to the Semites in Mesopotamia). Animal horns have been played by many peoples in islands, jungles, and other regions the world over. This was an instrument that Israel also learned to play, and it became associated with the holiest convocation of all, the Day of Atonement (Yom Kippur). Here was a "devil's instrument" that was used in the most holy worship of Yahweh.

Another instrument that is associated with David is the lyre or harp (Hebrew kinn'kinn<sup>TM</sup>rr). But here again, this is not an invention of Israel. The word kinn'r (or forms of it) have been found in texts from the mid-third millennium B.C. at ancient Ebla, as well as among the Canaanites (attested at Ugarit) and the Babylonians (Akkadian again). "David's harp" has a long history of (mis)use in pagan circles before it became so dearly associated with the making of music to the Lord in ancient Israel.

Similarly, the Hebrew words for cymbals and tambourines, for drums and flutes, for oboes and clarinets, are found in literatures (and in some cases in illustrations) in nations from Egypt to Ethiopia, from Nubia to Greece. Each of these became "the Lord's instruments" as they were used by the people of God in His holy worship. My point is that Israel was not an innovator in the fashioning of instruments, nor, necessarily, have been the musicians of the church. They, and we, do not need to be the inventors of an instrument to make it a "sacred horn." It is the use to which the instrument is placed that marks it out. The same model of saxophone that is played in a jazz band, a sleazy strip joint, or a symphony orchestra may also be used in the worship of God.

We may paraphrase a well-known saying that has been attributed to the great theologian and musician Martin Luther. He (or someone) is reported to have argued, when challenged on certain types of music used in the worship of God, "Why should the devil have all the good tunes?" We may add, "Why should the devil have all the good instruments?"

So what makes an instrument an instrument of the devil? The fact that a Christian has not yet learned to play it in praise of God! So, to the lady in the pew, forget the shiny thing in the young man's ear and the unusual curve of the instrument in his hands. Listen to the fellow play. Then ask, Was it for the Lord? If so, the devil has lost another horn!

**Praise the LORD with the harp;  
Make melody to Him with a saxophone!  
--Psalm 33:2 (amended)**

**RONALD B. ALLEN is professor of Hebrew Scripture at Western Baptist Seminary, Portland, Oregon. This article was first published in Worship Leader magazine. Copyright 1992 by CCM Communications, Nashville, Tenn., U.S.A. All rights reserved.**