Exegesis of Psalm 150:
Ways of Praising God

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Introduction

I grew up attending a Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod (WELS) church during the 1970’s and 80’s\(^1\). Worship, in its expression, was in full REM sleep. By that time the “1941 hymnal” was elderly by hymnal standards (as evidenced by the newly minted red colored supplement\(^2\) that had snuggled itself next to the blue hymnal in the pew rack). Page 5 and 15 were more than just familiar; they were the unflinching foundation of worship form that, one or the other, appeared every Sunday. I can’t remember ever seeing a bulletin insert for use during worship. Every word we spoke or note we sang came straight out of the hymnal.

And I worshipped at a congregation on the cutting edge.

Except during the summer, the choir sang every Sunday. From time to time they would sing an appropriate anthem, but in the main they functioned liturgically, regularly singing the gradual and the introit. At one point in time, if memory serves me, the congregation boasted more than a dozen organists, most of them professionally trained. On festive occasions, a brass instrument or two would play along with a hymn, and I seem to recall a flute playing now and again.

Even with so many musical gifts within the membership\(^3\) and with the WELS teacher training college only a few miles up the road (packed with students who could play a variety of instruments), 95% of the worship music consisted of singing accompanied by the organ. We heard neither keyboard nor piano, no guitar, no timpani, no oboe, and no handbells. No one ever danced (at least not in the sanctuary), although the children always processed and recessed for the Christmas Eve service\(^4\).

Times have changed. A hymnal, no longer known by the date of its publication, but commonly referred to as CW, came along and woke a sleeping giant. Now, there is a keyboard in the front of my old home church, instrumentalists from the college play regularly, and on a Sunday a few years back the congregation was led entirely in liturgy and song by a guitar. In the congregation I serve, God’s people have been assisted in worship by brass quintet, guitar quartet, piano, handbells, oboe, bongos, cymbals, and dulcimer. Not only have the children processed for their Christmas service, but the adult choir once entered the sanctuary in rhythmic possession to an African tune\(^5\).

The breadth of gifts we use to assist, or even lead, us in our corporate worship and praise has widened in the forty years I have been a part of the church militant. But how wide can we go?

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\(^1\) St. John’s Lutheran Church in New Ulm, MN
\(^2\) A Service of the Word. Authorized by the Commission on Worship of the WELS. Graphic Arts Center DMLC, New Ulm, MN
\(^3\) I can recall the pipe organ giving up in mid hymn one Sunday morning. Nonetheless, the congregation didn’t skip a beat, but continued to sing on, in full-throated four part harmony.
\(^4\) It seems the children’s service can always get away with more than regular corporate worship can. One year we even used “props” (gasp!), but no one said a word. And, by the way, it was truly a “Christmas Eve” service – always held on Christmas Eve.
\(^5\) The “stunt” was well received and even prompted an elderly gentleman, who was, indeed, young at heart, to say, “I like that new choir director. He’s got the devil in his eyes.”
Have we embarked on a path of acceptance with little or no room for caution or restraint? Will (or has) worship become a free-for-all at which every expression imaginable, whether sacred or profane, is deemed worthy? In how many different ways can we praise our Creator, Redeemer, and Sanctifier? Do the Scriptures support the wider expression of our worship that we see in our sanctuaries today?

In the grand doxology of the Psalms, Psalm 150, we get a six verse blast of praise that opens wide the possibilities of our worship\(^6\). As we walk through this delightful ending to the “hymnal of the Old Testament”\(^7\), we will explore the divine insights it gives into the different ways we can praise God. In so doing, we hope to give some guidance for the discussion that the above questions raise. However, our purpose is more than just academic. May our study of Psalm 150 truly inspire our hearts, voices, hands, and feet to “Praise the LORD!”

Setting the Stage

Psalm 150 forms a fitting close to the book once described as “the anatomy of all parts of the soul.”\(^8\) After reflecting on the blessings of the righteous and the curses of the wicked, manifested in the great gifts of God to man and the great acts of God for man, and expressed in the unvarnished honesty of the book’s heartfelt words, the book of the Psalms begins its climb of praise to God in the first of the “hallel” psalms, Psalm 104 (near the end of Book IV). The crescendo continues throughout Book V of the Psalms (which appears organized on the basis of “the themes of thanksgiving and praise rather than authorship.”\(^9\)) until it reaches its climax in the doxologies of Psalms 146-150. Although not considered part of the Great Hallel (that is reserved for Psalms 119-136), each of these psalms begins and ends with the invitation, “praise the LORD.” In its final words, the Book of the Psalms throws off all fetters and resolves to “praise the LORD” or “praise him” no less than twelve times (thirteen if one counts the “praise God” of verse one) in Psalm 150.

At first blush, it might seem as though an exegesis of this entire doxological section would provide insights into the different ways of praising God. But on closer examination, we see that, with the exception of one verse in Psalm 147 (7) and one verse in Psalm 149 (3), Psalms 146-149 focus on the why and who but not the how of our praise. Psalm 146 prays the God who protects while Psalm 147 praises the God who provides. In Psalm 148 all creation – animate and inanimate, believers or unbelievers – are encouraged to praise the LORD, while Psalm 149 urges praise to the LORD from God’s people alone.

\(^6\) Note that I have specifically left the word “worship” without a modifier. Though the imperative “Praise the LORD” is plural, that does not necessarily imply that this psalm was directed toward corporate worship (an obvious plural setting). We will note in our exegesis that some of the instruments mentioned were not prescribed for use in the corporate worship at the Temple, but were used only on festive occasions or even privately. The encouragement to “Praise the LORD” may be public or private.

\(^7\) If someone could find the primary source for who first called the Psalms by this title, I would be appreciative.


The exuberance of Psalm 150 reveals the restraint that the Psalm-writer or Psalm-compiler has shown in these final psalms leading up to the final stanza. The “praise,” formerly reserved only for the beginning and end of the psalm, now spreads itself throughout. At its farthest reach only four words separate the Hallelujah’s from each other, and that only once. Otherwise, the psalmist can only spill two words from his mouth before an Hallelujah comes jutting out in spontaneous (or perhaps, extremely measured) praise. Spurgeon’s description of this psalm is as breath-taking as the mountain scene he seeks to depict, “We have now reached the last summit of the mountain chain of Psalms. It rises high into the clear azure, and its brow is bathed in the sunlight of the eternal world of worship, it is a rapture. The poet prophet is full of inspiration and enthusiasm. He slays not to argue, to teach, to explain; but cries with burning words, ‘Praise him, Praise him, Praise ye the LORD.’”10 Derek Kidner is no less delighted with God’s inspired doxology, “Its brevity is stimulating. There can be no fear of flagging; besides, all has been said, and we can give ourselves to a sustained fortissimo of response.”11 Psalm 150 is the greatest “praise song” ever written.

We have seen where Psalm 150 fits as the final piece in the puzzle of the Psalms. But how do the pieces of the psalm itself fit together? A quick read in the English, with headings added, makes the transparent outline of Psalm 150 easy to see:

\[\text{PS 150:1} \text{ Praise the LORD.}\]

\textbf{Where?}
\begin{align*}
\text{Praise God in his sanctuary;} \\
\text{praise him in his mighty heavens.}
\end{align*}

\textbf{Why?}
\begin{align*}
\text{PS 150:2} \text{ Praise him for his acts of power;} \\
\text{praise him for his surpassing greatness.}
\end{align*}

\textbf{How?}
\begin{align*}
\text{PS 150:3} \text{ Praise him with the sounding of the trumpet,} \\
\text{praise him with the harp and lyre,} \\
\text{PS 150:4} \text{ praise him with tambourine and dancing,} \\
\text{praise him with the strings and flute,} \\
\text{PS 150:5} \text{ praise him with the clash of cymbals,} \\
\text{praise him with resounding cymbals.}
\end{align*}

\textbf{Who?}
\begin{align*}
\text{PS 150:6} \text{ Let everything that has breath praise the LORD.} \\
\text{Praise the LORD.}^{12} \text{ (emphasis added to highlight the theme of “praise”)}
\end{align*}

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Psalm 150

Translation: Praise the LORD! Praise God in his holiness. Praise him in the expanse of his might.

We meet up with the most important word or phrase in this entire psalm right at the beginning, “ההלל יהוה בנשמת בatcher ההללוהו בענליה ובללתו לה.” Hallelujah, like the words hosanna and selah, has moved straight from the Hebrew into English. This call to praise appears 24 times in the Psalms (though never in any of David’s psalms) and four times in chapter nineteen of John’s Revelations. Today it is a popular expression of spontaneous or planned praise in both word and song. Worshippers using Christian Worship: A Lutheran Hymnal still sing alleluia within the verse of the day and as a festive refrain in many well-liked Easter hymns. Since a little less than half of the words of this psalm are hallelujah, when we have come to grips with this phrase we will have finished half of the exegesis of Psalm 150!

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14 With as popular as “hallelujah” is today, we might have expected to see it more often in the Scriptures.

15 Is there a difference between “alleluia” and “hallelujah”? Essentially, no. Since Greeks lack the letter “h” as a standalone letter, but use only the “rough breathing mark,” Greek transliteration dropped the “h” sound. Later German translators replaced the “y” or “i” with their “j”. “Hallelujah” would appear closer to the original Hebrew. It is interesting to note, however, that the Catholic Encyclopedia states, “Alleluia, not Hallelujah, is the traditional Christian and proper English form of transcription.” Written by T.J. O’Mahony. Transcribed by Donald J. Boon. The Catholic Encyclopedia, Volume I. Published 1907. New York: Robert Appleton Company. Nihil Obstat, March 1, 1907. Remy Lafont, S.T.D., Censor. Imprimatur. +John Cardinal Farley, Archbishop of New York
In form, the verb is a piel masculine plural imperative of הָלַל. This root has two basic meanings, the one “to shine,” the other “to praise or boast.” Context makes it obvious that the second meaning of “praise or boast” is meant here. Leonard J. Coppes, in his article on הָלַל in the Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament offers this comment on the meaning of this root, “This root connotes being sincerely and deeply thankful for and/or satisfied in lauding a superior quality(ies) or great, great act(s) of the object... The most frequent use of our root relates to praising the God of Israel.”

Praise is, therefore, a first commandment issue; “You shall have NO OTHER GODS BEFORE ME.” At the very head of the will God intended for all mankind of all times, God made the positions clear: He is the creator and we (and everything else) are the created. Luther grasped the astounding import of those seven (or eight) words when he wrote, “We should fear, love and trust in God above all things.” Fear, love and trust; that’s how we show our praise. Keeping the first commandment is the way we inferiors (the created) show sincere and deep thanks for the great acts of our superior (the Creator). No one else gets the credit or glory for being God; not the sun, moon or stars; not the money in our bank account; not the person that we married nor the person they married! “Jehovah, the one God, should be the one object of our adoration,” Spurgeon penned, “to give the least particle of his honor to another is shameful treason; to refuse to render it to him is heartless robbery.” Psalms 146 and 147 already contemplated this praise we owe the powerful God who provides and protects.

Praise, however, is more than just honor to the LORD “because He is good.” We also praise the LORD “for his mercy endures forever.” Our awe can be nothing but sincere when we come to realize the great power God exudes in preserving this universe even for a second. But our thanks is deep (read “from the heart”) only when we have come to know the boundless love of God in forgiving not only the sins I committed today, indeed not only forgiving all the sins I have or ever will commit, but ultimately that God in Christ has forgiven me the sinner that I am. And this he has already finished for the entire world! That the Creator would deign to become one of the created to save the lost creation is far and away the greatest act history has ever recorded. Our hearts long to say something great to God and about God to the world. We want to praise him for his great act of salvation. Psalms 148 and 149 anticipate this praise of grace.

To praise the LORD is to recognize with head, heart and hands that he alone is God. With the head we acknowledge that though the world speaks of “gods” there is but one God and He gets

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17 Stay tuned, however, because it may not be as obvious as we think – or perhaps some have not bothered searching out the context. See footnote 29.
18 Harris, op. cit., page 217
19 Spurgeon, op. cit., page 463.
20 Psalm 118. In this one brief sentence, known and prayed by Christians around the world and recognized by many outside the Church, God has placed a wonderful interplay of Law and Gospel. “Good” is a legal word, underscoring God's perfection. “Love” or “mercy” is a word of grace, highlighting God's forgiving nature. Thanks be to God that it is his “love” that endures forever!
all the glory of the divine. With the heart we trust that only the LORD God provides for body and life and saves the soul for eternity. With the hands we live and move according to his will in thanksgiving for his gifts.

Praise of God is not optional; it is imperative (thus the mood). God had said through the prophet, “Bring my sons from afar and my daughters from the ends of the earth – everyone who is called by my name, whom I created for my glory, whom I formed and made.” (emphasis added). 21 Through his power and grace God compels our praise, but through the psalmist he also asks for it, as though it were a necessity from those who call themselves God’s children.

Praise is both compelled and compelling. In almost every instance the praise of the LORD is accompanied by great joy and delight. Is this not the point of our discussing this Psalm? We are not looking for ways to be sad and distraught, but for appropriate way to express the joy we feel at God’s sovereignty and salvation. Singing, trumpets, dancing and cymbals are instruments of delight not depression.

Finally, praise, at least the praise enjoined by this psalm, is a corporate activity. Each imperative is plural. Coppes opines on this point, “This shows us, as does the use of the psalms in the worship, that praise of Jehovah was especially, though by no means uniquely (Ps 146:1), congregational... Such praise was an essential element of formal public worship.” 22 “Praise and worship” as a formal worship style, may be relatively new, but praise has always been part of the corporate worship of God. However, far from being a mere repetition of the word “praise,” this and other psalms give our praise content and motivation. Gathered together in corporate worship to hear again about the great acts of God, God’s people cannot help but respond, “Hallelujah! Praise the LORD!”

The second half of our song of praise is יהוה. This is the object of our praise. It is a shortened form of the more common יְהֹוָה, used most often in poetry. Commonly called the tetragrammaton, it is the personal name by which God himself wanted to be known. 23 יְהֹוָה is a mysterious name, unknown in any other religion of Old Testament times and unduplicated since. Etymologically, is this name a close relative of the verb “to be” or “to exist”? It can hardly be argued that the similarity in consonants between the tetragrammaton and the verb “to be” is coincidental. God’s play on words when he advised Moses to refer to God as “I AM” seems to strongly connect יהוה with the concepts involved in the verb “to be.” But it may be no more than that, a play on words or paronomasia. We are better off finding the significance of the name יהוה from God’s own description of himself and from the context of Scripture than from some fancy etymology.

21 Isaiah 43:6,7
22 Harris, op. cit., page 501.
23 Exodus 34:6ff.
Moses wanted to see God nude; God in all his glory. That, however, was more than any sinful human being could handle. But God did let Moses see his backside. Tucked behind a rock God passed by and “proclaimed his name.” “The L ORD, the L ORD, the compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness, maintaining love to thousands, and forgiving wickedness, rebellion and sin. Yet he does not leave the guilty unpunished; he punishes the children and their children for the sin of the fathers to the third and fourth generation.”

The twin towers of Law and Gospel jump off God’s lips and strike fear, love and trust into our hearts. In the first place and with a preponderance of words, God explains that his name stresses his grace. In how many different ways does God have to define his grace? Compassionate, gracious, “long of nose,” abounding in love and faithfulness, forgiving… all these words fill our hearts with relief at the mercy of God toward desperate sinners. But, as C.S. Lewis would remind us, “Aslan is not a tame lion.” God’s mercy is not to be mocked. As his final thought, and with much fewer and less passionate words, God reminds us that those who reject him will suffer the consequence.

A more curt explanation, but ever so much more sublime, is the one God gave to Moses earlier at the burning bush. There God simply said, “‘I AM WHO I AM. This is what you are to say to the Israelites: ‘I AM has sent me to you.’” God also said to Moses, “Say to the Israelites, ‘The L ORD, the God of your fathers—the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac and the God of Jacob—has sent me to you.’ This is my name forever, the name by which I am to be remembered from generation to generation.” Only God can say that “he exists” of himself. He is not dependent upon anyone or anything else in order to exist. If everything else went away, God would still be. By contrast, you and I “are” only because “He is.” We are entirely dependent upon God for everything, a truth even the pagans sense, as Paul once quoted them to say, “For in him we live and move and have our being.” As some of your own poets have said, ‘We are his offspring.’

From this, theologians have developed this two-fold significance of the name יְהֹוָה: God is absolutely independent and constant. He is the God of free and faithful love. Dr. Gustav Oehler, late professor of theology at the Evangelical Theological Seminary in Tübingen, described these dual truths in his book *Theology of the Old Testament*:

1. Inasmuch as God is just what He is, and so determines Himself in the historical manifestation of His existence, instead of being determined by anything outside of Him, the name carries us into the sphere of the divine freedom. It expresses quite generally the absolute independence of God in His dominion. Through this factor of its meaning the name Jehovah is connected with El-shaddai.

2. When, in virtue of His absolute independence, God in all His dominion asserts Himself as that which He is, the name further conveys the idea of the absolute

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24 Exodus 34:6,7
25 Exodus 3:14,15
26 Acts 17:28
Immutability of God, in virtue whereof He in all things, in words as in deeds, is essentially in agreement with Himself, and remains self-consistent. Where this second factor is put in special relation to the divine decree of election, and the promises that flow therefrom, as is the case in Exodus 3:13ff, 5:2ff, the name implies the invariable faithfulness of God, which side of the notion of Jehovah is specially emphasized in the Old Testament, to awake confidence on God.27

This is the “Jah” whom we praise. He is the LORD, who in freedom chose an unknown nation called Isreal to be “my people.” He is the LORD, who in freedom chose tiny Bethlehem as the Savior’s birthplace. He is the LORD, who in freedom chose the Virgin Mary to be the “God-bearer.” He is the LORD, who in freedom chose you and me (really, who are we in the grand scheme of things) to be his children, even his messengers to the world. He is the LORD, who in faithfulness promised Adam and Eve a reversal of fortunes and delivered. He is the LORD, who in faithfulness promised Abraham a land, a nation and a Savior and delivered. He is the LORD, who in faithfulness promised to rise from death of his own accord and delivered. He is the LORD, who in faithfulness promised that Christ, delivered through the Gospel in Word and Sacrament, cleanses us from all sin and delivered.

We’re half done! “Hallelujah!” This one-word sermon comprises half of the message of Psalm 150. By it we walk the path laid out by the first and greatest commandment, “Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength.”28 In bringing honor to God with all of who we are because He is all of who He is, we express on the outside the fear, love and trust that flows on the inside. With joy we bring our individual accolades together in corporate worship of the Creator and Redeemer of us all.

“Hallelujah!” This word is at one and the same time an admonition to those around us to join in the celebration of God’s freedom and faithfulness executed on our behalf and a clear note of praise in and of itself, acknowledging that God is worthy of our glory and that our worship is worthwhile.

Our discussion has run long, but it needed to for this one phrase comprises the bulk of what this psalm intends to teach. “Praise the LORD” is more than just a cue for the choir to sing; it is more than an exclamation to be shouted when good things happen; it is more than a benign filler for a song. “Praise” clearly defines our role. “LORD” clearly defines God’s role. Now that we understand more clearly what the psalm is asking of us, we can better examine the where, why, how and who.29

28 Mark 12:30
29 The exegesis of Hallelujah may have seemed unduly long (though it was by no means exhaustive), but we want to be sure we speak from a position of knowledge instead of ignorance. The old saying ‘a little knowledge is a dangerous thing’ is true especially in matters of theology and, dare I say, linguistics. A case in point (that prompted our longer study of this one word) from a weblog: “This famous exclamation of joy stems from the word halal, plus the particle u, meaning ’and’ or ‘with’, and jah, which is short for Yahweh, the Name of God. The verb halal means ’to shine,’ and since the people of Biblical times did not have flashlights, this verb is most often ascribed to stars. This makes Daniel 12:3 even more interesting than it already was. Hallelujah means: shine with God!” The article goes on to even more frightful misunderstandings as it explores a rabbi’s explanation of the shortened name for
The first and last hallelujahs serve as bookends for the psalm (not unlike Psalms 146-149). After the title “Praise the LORD,” the psalm begins in earnest, answering the question of where to praise the LORD. Except he throws us a curve. Not הַלְּלוּיָהוּ, but the psalmist writes הַלְּלוּיָהוּ, “Praise God!”

Here stands the other great name for God “El” or its longer form “Elohim.” If יְהֹוָה emphasizes God’s freedom and faithfulness to save, הַלְּלוּיָהוּ accentuates his raw power. Oehler compares and contrasts them this way:

In general, all universally cosmical action of God, going out toward the heathen as well as toward Israel in the creation and preservation of the world, is traced to El or Elohim; to Jehovah, on the other hand, is traced every divine act which is connected with the theocratic revelation and guidance, and which bears on the heathen only in as far as their history stands in relation to the aim of the divine kingdom. It follows from this, that the historical display of the divine essence lies essentially in the idea of Jehovah; whereas, on the contrary, Elohim, as such, is subject to no historical process… Elohim, as such, remains transcendent to the world of phenomena; Jehovah, on the contrary, enters into the phenomena of space and time, in order to manifest Himself to mankind; a difference which appears at once in the relation of Gen. 1:1 sqq. to 2:4 sqq.30

All glory, laud and honor is due not only to the God who intervened in time and space to save a sinful world (Jehovah), but to that same God who is also above and beyond our time and space (El). The God who acted out the scenes of the Second Article is still the God whose might we confess in the First Article. Both actions deserve our praise. But why change from הַלְּלוּיָהוּ to הַלְּלוּיָהוּ? Since no Word of God falls to the pages of Holy Writ without malice of intent, what was God’s intent in stressing his might over his mercy? Perhaps the clue lies in the “where” that follows, “in his holiness and in the expanse of his might.” God’s transcendence demands that his praise be sung not only by the wee little people he saved on earth, but also by the gigantic universe that tumbles far beyond our observation. That is the realm of Elohim! Even the way the psalmist describes earthly praise strikes a note of majesty, “in his holiness.”

The psalmist answers “where” with two curious phrases, “in his holiness” and “in the expanse of his might.” The NIV translation of “sanctuary” is already interpretive, since the word קָדוֹשׁ designates “the nature of that which belongs to the sphere of the sacred and which is distinct

God as this, “as long as evil exists in the world - as long as Amalek has not been destroyed - God’s Name is incomplete, containing only two letters.” It wouldn’t be so scary, were it not for the handful of responses that thanked the author for his marvelous insights. For more go to: http://gracewalk.wordpress.com/2007/01/26/hallelujah-what-does-it-mean/

30 Oehler, op. cit., page 99.
from the common\textsuperscript{31},” while another word, \textit{ןֵצֶרְתָּא}, means “sanctuary.” However, it hardly makes sense to praise God “in” (ב) something that describes a characteristic and not a physical place. The poetic parallelism of the Hebrews helps us solve the riddle. The first part of this verse is either contrasted or compared with the second. There the imagery is less obfuscated, the “expanse of his might” is an obvious reference to the universe above us. Certainly all would agree that the skies above proclaim God’s holiness, in which case the psalmist would be comparing, not contrasting the images. However, it seems more likely that the reference to “his holiness” as a place would lead the typical Hebrew to think of God’s earthly presence as contained above the mercy-seat, quartered either in the Tabernacle or in the Temple. “Sanctuary” wouldn’t be a bad word since it still retains a vestige of holiness from its Latin root “sanctus.”

God’s presence at the Temple is what made it a holy place; even a holy of holies. The Temple was not a place for the profane, but detailed rituals guarded who could enter, with an intense narrowing of the scope the closer one got to the Holy Place. Even the animals that were presented for bloody sacrifice (a picture that conjures up images less than holy) were presented before the Lord and “set apart” for their holy use. But here the psalmist tells us that sounds other than bleating animals were to fill the place where God lived. The Temple was also the place for God’s people to lift their voices and instruments in praise.

God no longer lives above the mercy-seat. His gracious presence ascended to the heavens, leaving us with his promise to be with us on earth wherever God’s people gather in his name. That happens most regularly in the corporate gathering of God’s people in whatever sanctuaries they use for worship. With the Gospel as their focus, God’s people “praise the LORD” at worship with hands, feet and voice. Praise is not only proper, but encouraged in God’s house, with the kinds of variety the psalmist will soon employ.

Who knows where the praise of God begins? If it starts with his people on earth and ascends upward, our melodies of praise are soon harmonized by the heavens; indeed, “let heaven and nature sing!” is how the psalmist says it. \textit{לְאִלָּהוֹר בְּרוּ chí נָתָן} pictures stamping, as with the feet, and the subsequent results of that stamping.\textsuperscript{32} The word is less concerned with the product than with the spreading effect of the stamping. For that reason “expanse” is preferable to “firmament.” The psalmist calls the sky an “expanse of his might.” Either the heavens are a product of God’s almighty power or the heavens themselves reflect God’s power in their own might. Either way, the psalmist leaves us with a transcendence in the skies corresponding to the “holiness” of the sanctuary on earth. Everything in the wide open space above us joins with the creation under our feet in praise toward the God who made it all.

Psalm 150: 2

\textsuperscript{31} Harris, op. cit., page 787.
\textsuperscript{32} Harris, op. cit., page 867.
Translation: Praise him for his victorious strength; praise him for the abundance of his greatness.

From the “where” of our praise we turn to the “why.”

In the second half of this verse, the preposition changes from ב to כ, the only time it changes in the next four verses. Some have theorized that because of the similarity of these two consonants the second preposition was originally also a ב improperly transcribed. However, the sense of the כ “according to” is not out of place. ב in the first half of the verse is usually translated “in”, although the more natural “for” in our English is acceptable (in verses three through five it will take on the nuance of “with”). Kidner suggests a sense in which “in” can be understood, “In 2a it clearly means for, but we can get a feel of its primary sense of ‘in’ by remembering our own expression ‘to rejoice in’ – e.g., to rejoice in ‘his mighty deeds,’ somewhat as in this verse.”

The psalmist describes our motive for praise in three words that paint with a broad brush, “strength” and “abundant greatness.” The first, בעבדרת, deals with God’s incomprehensible acts on our behalf, while the second, אֲלֵדֶרֶת בָּרוּךְ, concerns itself with who God is in himself.

בעבדרת comes from the same root from which we get the word גּוֹר, sometimes translated “hero” or “mighty warrior.” It is a military word describing the strength and vitality of the successful warrior. And that God is! He appeared already in the Garden as the one who would crush Satan’s power. Israel reveled under the protection of the billowing cloud and the blazing fire. Joshua saw the “commander of the army of the LORD” before the walls of Jericho fell. Isaiah prophesied about the mighty God who searched for someone to save his people, but could find no one capable but himself. Jesus came and fought all our enemies with perfect confidence in his heavenly Father and complete humility to the cross. All our enemies lie dead – Satan, crushed; sins, forgiven; death, defeated. Success belongs to our hero. He is the Sabaoth Lord who holds the field forever.

However, God is more than what he does. Beyond the benefits we receive from his great acts on our behalf, God is to be praised for who he is, בָּרוּךְ, in accordance with the

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33 Bruce Waltke and M. O’Connor mention in An Introduction to Biblical Hebrew Syntax “the diversity of the senses of (B) is remarkable.” (page 196). They go on to identify 36 different nuances in six different categories.
34 Kidner, op. cit., page 491.
35 Harris, op. cit., page 148.
36 Exodus 14ff
37 Joshua 5:13ff
38 Isaiah 59:16ff
“abundance of his greatness.” The “greatness” in this word never refers to being numerous, but to being great in size and importance. Indeed, God is not abundant in number, as though he were many gods, but he is high and lofty, alone magnificent in his deity. We sing it the Gloria in Excelsis, “…we give thanks to you, for your great glory…” Praise God simply for being God. Give him credit for being bigger and better than we are. Remember this “why” ought to make a difference in our praise. Spurgeon suggests, “There is nothing little about God, and there is nothing great apart from him. If we were always careful to make our worship fit and appropriate for our great Lord how much better should we sing! How much more reverently should we adore!”

Psalm 150: 3-5

Translation: Praise him with the blowing of the ram’s horn; praise him the harp and lyre. Praise him with the hand drum and dancing; praise him the strings and flute. Praise him with the cymbals that sound; praise him with cymbals that crash.

The psalmist has instructed us about “where” and “why” we ought to praise the LORD. The next three verses tell us “how.” The “how” is predominantly with musical or rhythmic instruments, although there is the one reference to dancing. The psalmist has organized the “how” in two sets of four instruments with the dancing nestled in the middle.

Here is a cursory look at the instruments of Psalm 150:

1. **שופר** – A curved musical instrument made of the horn of a ram. Though not the exclusive word for this type of instrument, it is the word used most often (יִֽבְלָֽךְ is also used, from which we derive the word “jubilee”). Trumpet would be a misleading translation, as today we think of trumpets being made out of some kind of metal. A straight metal horn in Hebrew was called a חצץ. The **שופר** was used at times of national importance, at Sinai, at the arrival of the new moon and New Year, at the start of the Year of Jubilee, and at the announcing of a new king. It was also used as a signal in battle, famously so against Jericho and Midian. The **שופר** not the חצץ was used in worship in the Temple. In Psalm 150 the **שופר** is modified by the construct הבּקְעָת meaning “blow, clap, strike, sound, or blast.”

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39 Harris, op. cit., page 151.
41 Spurgeon, op. cit., page 463.
42 Harris, op. cit., page 951.
2. נבל – A harp, lyre or zither. There is no consensus on exactly what distinguished the נבל from other stringed instruments, especially the חנור. Did it have ten, twelve or twenty strings? Were the strings tied across a sounding box or on a sounding board? Was the sounding board perpendicular to the strings or parallel? No one knows for sure. Prof. John Brug points out that the NIV translation can’t even keep the difference straight, “The NIV appropriately translates נבל as ‘harp’ in Psalm 150:3 and several other passages… (Unfortunately, the NIV has translated נבל as ‘lyre’ and חנור as “harp” in these three passages [Psalms 33:2; 92:3; 144:9], the exact opposite of its better translations in Psalm 150:3. Thus the NIV fails to distinguish these two instruments consistently.)” Of greater interest is the predominate presence of the נבל in the worship of the Temple.

3. חנור – Much the same can be said of the חנור as was said about the נבל, with its meaning leaning more toward the lyre than the harp. The ambiguity of what we know about these stringed instruments is reflected in the description of חנור in the Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament, “A musical instrument having strings and a wooden frame.” However, based on its use in the Bible, the Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament insightfully adds, “Commonly associated with joy and gladness.” The חנור was played, for instance, by the sons of the prophets and at the return of the ark. It is the first musical instrument mentioned in the Scriptures and was used in the Temple worship.

4. תְּמִי – The common word for small drum. It may have been the size and shape of a modern tambourine, but without the small cymbals around its edge. It often appears in joyous contexts, such as the entrance of the ark into Jerusalem. It is not mentioned, however, as one of the instruments used in the Temple.

5. מִּשָּׁת – String used for string instruments. In Psalm 150 it seems to describe the general class of stringed instruments.

6. נִבְנֶה – No one seems to know the root from which this word comes. It ranges from a root meaning “breathing or blowing,” describing the action by which the sound

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44 Harris, op. cit., page 447.
45 Ibid.
46 1 Samuel 10:5
47 2 Samuel 6:5.
was made, to “have inordinate affection,” because of its sensuous or appealing tones. Most commentators suggest that the instrument resembled a pipe in some way, either as a single pipe like a flute, or with multiple pipes like our modern day bagpipe. In one instance the LXX translated the word ὀργανόν from which the Vulgate translated organo, from which the KJV ended up with “organ.” Flute seems to be the best understanding of the word. It is not mentioned in the list of instruments used in the Temple.

7. תְּלַלְתְּלָה - cymbals. The word sounds onomatopoetic תְּלַלְתְּלָה, from a root meaning “tingle, whirl, quiver, or buzz.” The תְּלַלְתְּלָה played an important part in Temple worship, laying down the rhythm for the Temple orchestra, much like our drums do today. In Psalm 150 the cymbals are distinguished as being כָּפָלְתָּן, “cymbals of sound,” and מַרְמָר (from the root “shout, raise a sound or cry out”) “cymbals that crash.” Again, no one can say with certainty what the distinction means, but it seems to describe, on the one hand, smaller cymbals or cymbals played with a light touch (just making a “sound”), and on the other hand, larger cymbals or cymbals crashed together (making a loud “crash”).

Obviously, it is difficult, if not impossible, to identify with precision or perfect accuracy the various musical instruments mentioned in the Bible generally and in this Psalm specifically. Although archeology has uncovered both pictures and fragments of ancient musical instruments throughout the ancient world, there is little archeological evidence of the instruments used in Israel at the specific time this Psalm was written. The passage of both time and space is significant in historical research. What is uncovered, for instance, in ancient Israel ca. 1000 B.C. may be similar to but not identical to something else uncovered in Egypt ca. 1400 B.C., much like the sackbut from 1700 A.D. is similar to but not identical to the trombone from 2000 A.D. Complicating the issue is the distance, both linguistically and musically, from which we are viewing this Psalm. Is it a lyre or a harp, a harp or a lyre? That may have seemed an easy question to answer sitting in Jerusalem in 1000 B.C., just like distinguishing between an oboe and an English horn might seem easy today, but it is not so easy sitting thousands of years in the future. And even if we can approximate the name with the actual instrument, we have no concept of what the music those instruments played may have sounded like.

Musicologists, using the Hornbostel-Sachs system of classification, have grouped musical instruments into four major groups:

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49 Brug, op. cit., page 515.
50 I hesitate to give an answer for fear of being accused a lyre!
51 The English horn is larger than an oboe and plays richer tones in the lower register. My point is, however, that perhaps 1000 years from now, will people know that the English horn was neither English nor a horn. The word English is a mistranslation of a French word, angle, and the instrument is a woodwind not brass.
1. Idiophones - sound is primarily produced by the actual body of the instrument vibrating, rather than a string, membrane, or column of air. In essence, this group includes all percussion instruments apart from drums, as well as some other instruments.

2. Membranophones - sound is primarily produced by the vibration of a tightly stretched membrane. This group includes all drums and kazoos.

3. Chordophones - sound is primarily produced by the vibration of a string or strings. This group includes all instruments generally called string instruments in the west, as well as many (but not all) keyboard instruments, such as pianos and harpsichords.

4. Aerophones - sound is primarily produced by vibrating air. The instrument itself does not vibrate, and there are no vibrating strings or membranes.52

The psalmist mentions instruments from each classification, the cymbals (idiophone), hand drums or tambourine (membranophone), harp, lyre, and strings (chordophone), and the ram’s horn and flute (aerophone). This is no mere coincidence. The psalmists encourages praise from the entire spectrum of instruments available. How wide can we go in our praise of God? The psalmist seems to indicate, as wide as God has given his gifts, or as Kidner advises, “The answer to the question ‘how?’ is: ‘with everything you have!’”53 Yes, let all God’s gifts be used in praise of Him who created, preserves, and saved us!

We can examine the list of instruments in Psalm 150 not only by their musical classification, but also by their general use in life. Israel played the ram’s horn on occasions of national festivity, announcing, for instance, the Year of Jubilee54 or the New Moon festivals55.Israel accompanied its joyous celebrations of victory with “timbrel and dancing.” Flutes, pipes and harps could be heard during simple occasions within family life56.

The instruments of Psalm 150 also span a variety of inherent uses. The ram’s horn is loud, while the flute and strings are soft. The cymbals keep a monotone beat, while the harp and lyre play a melody. Each one, however, is generally coupled with joy. These are not instruments upon which one plays a dirge; these are instruments with which to “praise the L ORD.”

In other words, instruments deemed appropriate at a wide variety of occasions and with all sorts of inherent qualities can be employed in praise of the L ORD.

53 Kidner, op. cit., page 491.
54 Leviticus 25:9
55 Psalm 81:3
56 Genesis 31:27, Job 21:12; 30:31
We have a word and a verse to go before we reach a few general conclusions. The word in verses three through five that we have not examined is יִלְּחָמֵן, the one word that does not describe an instrument. It means “dancing” and comes from הָלַם, whose basic concept is “whirling around in circular movements.” David is the famous dancer from the Scriptures. He danced before the ark when it was brought into Jerusalem. But David was obviously not the only dancer in Israel, for both Psalm 149 and 150 urge God’s people to dance in praise of the LORD. Dancing is a natural expression of joy! Watch your favorite team score the winning touchdown in the championship game and just try to stay still. You can’t! Your joy brings you to your feet and puts your hands together. You probably even jump around or even do a dance! Singing is joy with the voice. Playing an instrument is joy with the hands. Dancing is joy with the feet!

Psalm 150:6

לכל נשמשה חהלל יהוה.

Translation: Let everything that breathes praise the LORD. Praise the LORD.

For the first time, the verb יִלְּחָמֵן is not in the imperative, rather it is imperfect with a jussive sense of “let.” The verse answers the final question of praise, namely the “who.” The answer is לכל נשמשה! Not just every person, but every living thing! From the root נשמש, which means “to pant,” the noun describes more than what we do with our respiratory system; it signifies the “breath of life.” In the very last exuberant gasps that the psalmist has left, he hails the entire animate world to join the praise of the one who not only created this world, but will finally release it all from the bondage of decay humankind brought on it by its sin.

And so we have circled back to where we began, יִלְּחָמֵן “praise the LORD!” God has given us ample reason to acclaim him as the King of Kings and Lord of Lords. He is the one whose infinitely creative mind brought the entire universe into being – and still preserves it with daily abundance. He is the one who masterfully planned and carried out the plot to save sinners through Christ. He is the only being with the freedom and faithfulness to be both just and the justifier. We, his creatures, acknowledge him, the Creator! In the awe of creation, with the joy of redemption, and by the power of sanctification, we “Praise the LORD!”

Conclusions

We asked some penetrating questions early on about the breadth and depth of our praise of God and have examined Psalm 150 for our guidance. What conclusions can we draw from our study, coupled with the broader understanding of the Scriptures, about ways of praising God?

57 Harris, op. cit., page 270. (also “to writhe in labor pains”)
58 Harris, op. cit., page 605.
Perhaps we ought to ask some other questions before we answer the foregoing. What do we mean by “praising God”? Do we mean just the public praise of God in corporate worship? Do we mean to include the private praise of God that we express at home, at work and at play? Is our praise limited to what we express outwardly or ought we to include what goes on in the heart? These are important questions whose answers will guide us in one direction or another.

Let’s start with the last one first. Is our praise limited to what we express outwardly or ought we to include what goes on in the heart? Perhaps you see where this is going. If we are only interested in the variety and creativity of the outward expression of our praise, then we have missed the point of what it means to “praise the Lord.” Even pagans can play music and dance, and in many cases, probably better than God’s people can. That is, if you are only going to judge it by its external quality. But, as well as the unbeliever may play, sing or dance, he is not “praising the Lord.” By definition, he is not sincerely and deeply thankful for God’s great acts of salvation, which is part and parcel of what it means to praise God. Nor does the unbeliever acknowledge or trust that God in his freedom and faithfulness has forgiven him his sins, which is what means that he is “the Lord.” Certainly God has invited the world to join in praising him (vs. 6), and has made that possible through Christ, but the unbeliever has not heeded the invitation. Hiring the best organist, singers or praise band, without regard for their confession of faith, may draw crowds that sit in awe of their ability, but it is not a “way of praising God.”

With God, the end never justifies the means, but he always takes motive into consideration. Flip back a few pages in the Psalms and you find the kind of worshipper God is looking for, “Who may ascend the hill of the Lord? Who may stand in his holy place? He who has clean hands and a pure heart…”

God is not interested in the mere outward but wants the heart. And where do sin-stained people find such pure hearts? Turn to yet another Psalm, “Create in me a pure heart, O God, and renew a steadfast spirit within me. Do not cast me from your presence or take your Holy Spirit from me. Restore to me the joy of your salvation and grant me a willing spirit, to sustain me.”

God creates in us a pure heart. He does so by his Spirit. He does it in Christ. He does it by his great act of salvation which he accomplished by his free and faithful love. He does it because he is the Lord. He is both the creator of our faith and the object of our faith; he is both the creator of our praise and the object of our praise. Only believers get that. Only believers sincerely and deeply thank God for saving them. Only believers can truly “praise the Lord.”

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59 Psalm 24:3,4
60 Didn’t God get fed up with the mere external worship of his people, even asking them not to bring any more sacrifices? (Isaiah 1)
61 Even the place of our worship may be considered an external, as Jesus explained to the Samaritan woman, “Believe me, woman, a time is coming when you will worship the Father neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem. You Samaritans worship what you do not know; we worship what we do know, for salvation is from the Jews. Yet a time is coming and has now come when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for they are the kind of worshipers the Father seeks. God is spirit, and his worshipers must worship in spirit and in truth.” (John 4:21-24). Spirit and truth, those are heart issues.
62 Psalm 51:10-12
If our motive for asking about different ways we can praise God only wants to open the door for using the best and brightest *this world* has to offer, Psalm 150 does not offer such justification.

Perhaps the larger and more practical questions are these: What do we mean by “praising God”? Do we mean just the public praise of God in corporate worship? Do we mean to include the private praise of God that we express at home, at work and at play? We ask the public vs. private question because what may be acceptable in private worship may not always be edifying or beneficial in public worship. With intent, we noted throughout this paper the various instruments and expressions of worship that were used in the Temple and those that were not. We are too far removed from David’s time to know the reasons David had for including some instruments in Temple worship while excluding others. But it seems significant that the psalm-writer included in his “how” list some things that his audience would immediately recognize as Temple-worthy and some things that were not. The writer of Psalm 150 does not appear to be giving a list of approved instruments for corporate worship. His vision is much broader. He understands that praise in specific, if not worship in general, encompasses both our public and private life, or as Paul said, “So whether you eat or drink or whatever you do, do it all for the glory of God.” I suspect, if asked whether he had public or private worship in mind when he wrote the psalm, the psalm-writer would say “Yes! Praise the LORD with your entire life, both in public worship and in private devotion.” Prof. Brug offers this measured application in his commentary on this psalm, “The Lord should be praised joyfully. Israel’s music was jubilant and exciting. It used a full range of musical instruments, and on festive occasions, dance was a part of the religious celebration of the community. Nothing in Scripture suggests that religious music and worship should be limited to the somber or that certain instruments are inherently inappropriate for worship. God should be praised joyfully with everything we have.”

The sky is the limit in our private devotional life. But the simple listing of possibilities for the “how” of our praise in Psalm 150, be they in the privacy of our home or in the openness of our sanctuaries, does not, however, condone or support their use in every case of public worship. Something other than appealing to a list needs to come into play when exploring different expressions of praise within our corporate worship.

In truth, God has opened the gates of our praise wide open. Psalm 150 does legitimize the use of the full range of instruments and even dancing as ways of praising God. The member who barked, “the guitar has no place in our church,” after a guitar first made its way into worship at the congregation I serve, was misguided. So was the gentleman who claimed he was about to “throw that honky-tonk piano out of the sanctuary” when we used it on three successive Advent services. The guitar and piano are as much God’s gifts as the harp and cymbals, and organ for that matter.

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63 1 Corinthians 10:31  
64 Brug, op. cit., page 515.
But what about adding some electricity to that guitar and a drum set to that cymbal? What about that lady who took a dance class and wants to incorporate what she’s learned into the worship life of the congregation? “Liturgical dancing” and “praise bands” would seem to fit under the umbrella sprung by Psalm 150. But here, as also with those who objected to the guitar and piano, we need to consider Paul’s balancing act, “You may be giving thanks well enough, but the other man is not edified.” In context, Paul is speaking about the charismatic gift of tongues. Most certainly this was a gift from God, to be used in worship. But even this gift from God was of no value to the corporate body if there was no one to interpret the tongues. Without an interpreter the tongues were all just a bunch of noise. The congregation may have been entertained by a spectacle, but it was not edified by a message. Note, however, that Paul does not judge the tongues as valueless. He acknowledges that praise of God may be going on, “You may be giving thanks well enough...” But what may have had value in private was not beneficial in public.

Though they may have considered a more compassionate way of saying it, perhaps both gentlemen who objected to new instruments in our worship were just trying to tell me they were not edified. They couldn’t reflect on the message because the medium got in the way. It takes time, patience and education before we can be edified by that which is new or which feels different to our personal musical taste buds. For me, guitar and piano were very edifying, but I may have other things I need to grow in. I’m not sure how I would react to liturgical dance. But, then again, I wasn’t sure how I would react to a processional, until I experienced it. And now I hope to begin the practice at the congregation I serve. But I don’t want it every Sunday. Some things are appreciated more in their restraint than in their freedom; when we “Just Don’t Do It” from time to time, than when we “Just Do It” at every opportunity. So, too, there will always be expressions of praise that please our God but belong in our private devotion.

Psalm 150 lays a broad foundation from which we can pick and choose an almost inexhaustible variety of ways to praise God. But not everything that’s on the menu may be good for the body of Christ at this place in this time. “‘Everything is permissible’--but not everything is beneficial. ‘Everything is permissible’--but not everything is constructive. Nobody should seek his own good, but the good of others.”

My home church has come a long way in 40 years. And I’m sure it will continue to move along the continuum of praise as the Gospel moves God’s people in their time and their circumstance to “Praise the LORD” with the gifts he’s given them. But whether my worship looks like 1941 or 1993 or 1000 B.C., let this be its common theme: “Praise the LORD! Praise him for his acts of power; praise him for his surpassing greatness. Praise the LORD!”

Soli Deo Gloria

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65 Lest you think “liturgical dance” only a fringe idea, even as I research this Psalm, a catalog from Spiritual Expressions™, a company that specializes in worship dancewear, arrived in the mail.

66 1 Corinthians 14:17

67 1 Corinthians 10:23, 24
Works Consulted

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