



MARAKI DIGITAL

SPECIAL EDITION · COMPREHENSIVE COMBINED EDITION

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Does Galatians 5:21 Condemn Music?

Scripture, Tradition, and the Witness of the World's Bibles

From the Editor

ውድ አንባቢዎቼ — Dear Readers,

This Special Edition is a combined and comprehensive treatment of a question that has stirred quiet confusion in our community for generations — Ethiopian and Eritrean believers, both Orthodox and Pentecostal, in Addis, in Asmara, and across the diaspora from DC to Stockholm to Toronto: Does the Bible — specifically Galatians 5:21 — say that being a musician is a sin?

The Amharic translation lists ዘፋኝነት (zefagninet, "musicianship") in Paul's catalog of "works of the flesh" alongside drunkenness and idolatry. Some preachers cite this verse to condemn secular music outright. Many faithful readers have wrestled with it: How can the same God who inspired Saint Yared (ቅዱስ ያሬድ) — whose hymns we sing every Sunday — call music a sin? How can the harp of King David, the timbrels of Miriam, the songs of Moses and Deborah, all stand condemned in a single Pauline verse?

This edition combines two earlier Maraki Digital studies into a single comprehensive work. It walks through Scripture itself — in Amharic, the language of our own Bibles — to show what God commands and celebrates regarding music. It then surveys how the world's Bibles in dozens of languages, across more than six centuries of translation history, have rendered the Greek word at issue. The evidence converges to a single conclusion: the Bible does not condemn music. The problem in Galatians 5:21 is not what God said, but how a Greek word for drunken revelry came to be rendered in Amharic with a word that has, over the centuries, narrowed in meaning to mean simply "singing."

I have included Amharic verses directly in the text so you can read them with your own eyes, without consulting another Bible. I have also included full tables showing how more than two dozen English Bible translations across six centuries — and the standard Bibles of Latin, French, Spanish, Korean, Chinese, Arabic, Tigrinya, Afan Oromo, and other major Christian

linguistic communities — have rendered the disputed word. Read the evidence. Weigh it for yourself. And if you know a young Ethiopian musician who has been told their gift is a sin, give them this edition. They deserve to see what every other Christian community in the world has known for two thousand years.

በፍቅርና በዜማ — *In love and in song,*

Abnet A. Tessema

Editor & Host, Maraki Digital

Part One: The Question Before Us

Galatians 5:21 appears, in Paul's catalog of "works of the flesh," with an Amharic word that troubles careful readers. Let us begin by setting the verse before us in both Amharic and English, exactly as our Bibles render it:

ገላትያ (Galatians) 5:21 — አዲሱ መደበኛ ትርጉም

ምቀኛነት፣ ስካር፣ ዘፋኝነት፣ እንዲሁም እነዚህን የመሰለው ነው። አስቀድሜ እንዳልሁ፣ አሁንም አስጠነቅቃችኋለሁ፤ በእንዲህ ሁኔታ የሚኖሩ ሁሉ የእግዚአብሔርን መንግሥት አይወርሱም።

Envy, drunkenness, ዘፋኝነት ("musicianship"), and things like these. I warn you, as I warned you before, that those who do such things will not inherit the Kingdom of God.

The Greek word Paul actually wrote here is *kōmos* (*kōmos*). In classical Greek lexicons it means a drunken festal procession — the kind of riotous nighttime parade that surrounded the worship of Bacchus, with wine, lewd behavior, and yes, noise and music as features of the larger debauchery. The English Bible translates it "revelry," "carousing," or in older versions "orgies." The focus is on drunken excess, not on music.

But the Amharic translators chose *ዘፋኝነት* — a word that today means simply "being a singer" or "the practice of music-making." That single translation choice has produced enormous confusion. Many sincere believers, reading their Amharic Bibles, conclude that God forbids music itself. They look at musicians, including Christian musicians, with suspicion. Some refuse to listen to songs about love, country, mountains, mothers, or rivers — believing that any song not about God or heaven is sinful.

Generations of Ethiopian believers have grown up under the shadow of this teaching. Parents have forbidden their children to learn instruments. Young musicians have abandoned their callings. Choirs have been silenced. The damage is real and measurable.

So the question this edition will examine is simple: Does the rest of the Bible support that reading? If God truly forbids music about earthly matters, we should expect the Bible to say so consistently. If, on the other hand, the Bible commands, celebrates, and even institutionalizes music — including music about earthly matters — then the issue with Galatians 5:21 is a translation issue, not a divine prohibition.

Let the Amharic Bible itself be our first witness. Then let the world's Bibles confirm what our own Scriptures already show.

Part Two: God Commands Music

When Scripture speaks of music, it does not merely permit — it commands. And the commands come from God Himself.

1. God Commands Moses to Make Silver Trumpets

Long before David, before the Temple, before the Psalms — in the wilderness with Moses — God Himself instructed that musical instruments be made and used. This is not a suggestion. It is a direct divine command, recorded in the Book of Numbers, included in the Torah, accepted in the Ge'ez canon, and read in our churches:

ጉልቀ (Numbers) 10:1-2, 9-10

እግዚአብሔርም ሙሴን እንዲህ ብሎ ተናገረው። ሁለት የብር መለኮቶች አጠፍጥፈህ ለአንተ አድርግ፤ ማኅበሩን ለመጥራት ከሰፈራቸውም ለማስጓዝ ይሁኑልህ። ... በሚገፋችሁም ጠላት ላይ በምድራችሁ ወደ ሰልፍ ስትወጡ ከፍ ባለ ድምፅ መለኮቶቹን ገፉ፤ በእግዚአብሔርም በአምላካችሁ ፊት ትታሰባላችሁ። ከጠላቶቻችሁም ትድናላችሁ። ደግሞ በደስታችሁ ቀን፣ በበዓላታችሁም ዘመን፣ በወርም መባቻ፣ በሚቃጠል መሥዋዕታችሁና በደኅንነት መሥዋዕታችሁ ላይ መለኮቶቹን ገፉ፤ እነርሱም በአምላካችሁ ፊት ለመታሰቢያ ይሆኑላችኋል፤ እኔ እግዚአብሔር አምላካችሁ ነኝ።

And the LORD spoke to Moses, saying: Make for yourself two silver trumpets... When you go to war in your land against the enemy who oppresses you, you shall sound the trumpets, and you shall be remembered before the LORD your God, and you will be saved from your enemies. Also in your day of joy, and in your appointed feasts, and on the new moons of your months, you shall sound the trumpets... I am the LORD your God.

Note carefully: God commands music for war (a national/earthly matter), for festivals (joy), for new moons (the cycle of time), and for offerings. The trumpets are not only for sacred matters — they are for war, joy, and time itself. *እግዚአብሔር አምላካችሁ ነኝ* — "I am the LORD your God."

2. King David Establishes 4,000 Levites as Musicians

David did not invent musical worship out of personal preference. He institutionalized it as a state office, by royal and prophetic decree, with named musicians, named instruments, and a hereditary priesthood of song. This is not background detail — Scripture devotes entire chapters of 1 Chronicles to it. Every Ethiopian Christian who venerates ቅዱስ ዳዊት the Psalmist (qiddus Dawit) is venerating the founder of the world's first organized sacred music institution.

1ኛ ዜና መዋዕል (1 Chronicles) 15:16

ዳዊትም በዜማ ዕቃ በመሰንቆና በበገና በጸናጽልም እንዲያዘሙ፥ ድምፃቸውንም በደስታ ከፍ እንዲያደርጉ መዘምራትን ወንድሞቻቸውን ይሾሙ ዘንድ ለሌዋውያን አለቆች ተናገረ።

And David spoke to the chiefs of the Levites to appoint their kinsmen the singers, with instruments of music — lyres and harps and cymbals — to raise sounds of joy.

1ኛ ዜና መዋዕል (1 Chronicles) 23:5

አራቱ ሺህም ለምስጋና በተሠሩት በዜማ ዕቃዎች እግዚአብሔርን ያመሰግኑ ነበር።

And four thousand praised the LORD with the musical instruments which I made [said David] for giving praise.

Read that again: FOUR THOUSAND professional musicians, employed full-time, by royal decree, for the service of God. Plus 288 trained as expert musicians (1 Chronicles 25:7). If music were a sin, this would be the largest collective sin in the Old Testament — and David, the man after God's own heart, would be its chief enabler.

3. The Temple's Dedication: God's Glory Descends in Response to Music

Perhaps the single most decisive passage in all of Scripture on the question of music. When Solomon dedicated the Temple, the priests blew trumpets, the Levites played and sang — and the very glory of God filled the house. The text is unambiguous: God responded to the music with His presence.

2ኛ ዜና መዋዕል (2 Chronicles) 5:12-14

መዘምራንም የነበሩት ሌዋውያን ሁሉ፥ አሳፍና ኤማን ኤዶታምም ልጆቻቸውም ወንድሞቻቸውም፥ ጥሩ በፍታ ለብሰው ጸናጽልና በገና መሰንቆም እየመቱ በመሠዊያው አጠገብ በመሥራቅ በኩል ቆመው ነበር ከእነርሱም ጋር መቶ ሀያ ካህናት መለከት ይነፉ ነበር። ... የእግዚአብሔርም ቤት በደመና ሞላ፤ ካህናቱም በደመናው ምክንያት ቆመው ያገለግሉ ዘንድ አልቻሉም፤ የእግዚአብሔር ክብር የእግዚአብሔርን ቤት ሞልቶ ነበርና።

All the Levitical singers — Asaph, Heman, Jeduthun, their sons and kinsmen, arrayed in fine linen, with cymbals, harps, and lyres — stood east of the altar with 120 priests sounding trumpets... and the house of the LORD was filled with a cloud, so that the priests could not stand to minister, for the glory of the LORD filled the house of God.

Stop here. Consider what this means. 120 trumpets. Cymbals. Harps. Lyres. A choir of Levites. And the response from heaven? የእግዚአብሔር ክብር የእግዚአብሔርን ቤት ሞላ — the glory of the LORD filled the house. If God hated music, this is the moment He would have struck them down. Instead, He honored their music with His own presence.

Part Three: The Closing Word of the Psalter — Psalm 150

If God had any reservation about music, He would not have closed the Book of Psalms — the largest book of the Bible, the songbook of Israel and of the Church — with a chapter that is, from beginning to end, a divine command to praise Him with every imaginable instrument.

And here is the moment we must read the Amharic with extra care, because something extraordinary appears in the text — something that, by itself, settles the question of Galatians 5:21:

መዝሙረ ዳዊት (Psalm) 150

ሃሌ ሉያ። እግዚአብሔርን በመቅደሱ አመስግኑት፤ በኃይሉ ጠፈር አመስግኑት። በችሎቱ አመስግኑት፤ በታላቅነቱ ብዛት አመስግኑት። በመለከት ድምፅ አመስግኑት፤ በበገናና በመሰንቆ አመስግኑት። በከበሮና በዘፈን አመስግኑት፤ በአውታርና በእምቢልታ አመስግኑት። ድምፁ መልካም በሆነ ጸናጽል

አመስግኑት፤ እልልታ ባለው ጸናጽል አመስግኑት። እስትንፋስ ያለው ሁሉ እግዚአብሔርን ያመስግን። ሃሌ ሉያ።

Hallelujah! Praise God in His sanctuary; praise Him in His mighty firmament. Praise Him for His mighty acts; praise Him according to His excellent greatness. Praise Him with the sound of the trumpet; praise Him with the harp and the lyre. Praise Him with timbrel and dance/song; praise Him with stringed instruments and pipes. Praise Him with sounding cymbals; praise Him with crashing cymbals. Let everything that has breath praise the LORD. Hallelujah!

⚠ **Look closely at verse 4:**

በከበሮና በዘፈን አመስግኑት

"Praise Him with timbrel and ዘፈን (zefen — song / dance / festal music)."

This is the same Amharic root word — ዘፈን — that becomes **ዘፋኝነት** ("musicianship") in Galatians 5:21, where it is condemned as a "work of the flesh." Yet here, in Psalm 150, the very same Amharic Bible commands us to praise God with ዘፈን.

If ዘፈን is a sin, then Psalm 150 is commanding us to sin — and the Bible contradicts itself. Scripture cannot contradict itself. Therefore the Galatians translation cannot mean what it appears to mean.

Psalm 149 Says the Same Thing

Lest anyone think Psalm 150:4 is an isolated case, the Psalter repeats the command one chapter earlier:

መዝሙረ ዳዊት (Psalm) 149:1, 3

ሃሌ ሉያ። ለእግዚአብሔር አዲሱን ቅኔ ተቀኙለት፤ ምስጋናው በቅዱሳኑ ጉባኤ ነው። ... ስሙን በዘፈን ያመስግኑ። በከበሮና በመሰንቆም ይዘምሩለት።

Hallelujah! Sing to the LORD a new song, His praise in the assembly of the saints... Let them praise His name with ዘፈን (zefen — dance/song); let them sing praise to Him with timbrel and lyre.

Two consecutive Psalms. Both use **ሠፈን** as a positive command for praising God. The same Amharic root the Galatians translator marked as a deadly sin is here marked as holy worship. **The contradiction is not in Scripture — it is in the translation.**

Part Four: Songs About Earthly Things — Mountains, Rivers, Country, Love

If God forbade music about "earthly" subjects — love, mountains, rivers, country, mother and father — then He has, by His own hand, included such songs inside His own Word. This single fact, attested in every Bible canon (Catholic, Orthodox, Protestant, and Ethiopian Tewahedo) settles the matter.

1. Song of Songs — A Whole Book of Love Poetry

The Ethiopian Orthodox Church reads መኃልየ መኃልይ ዘሰሎሞን (the Song of Songs of Solomon) as canonical Scripture. The Andemta tradition reads it allegorically as Christ and the Church — but the literal text is, beyond dispute, a love song between two human lovers. It contains references to mountains (Lebanon, Carmel, Gilead), gardens, vineyards, the human body, perfume, fruit, and erotic longing. The Holy Spirit Himself preserved it inside His sacred canon. If God hated love songs about earthly subjects, He would not have inspired one — and He certainly would not have placed it in Scripture for all generations.

መኃልየ መኃልይ ዘሰሎሞን (Song of Songs) 2:10-13

ወዳጄ ተናገረኝ እንዲህም አለኝ። ውዴ ሆይ፥ ተነሺ፥ ውበቴም ሆይ፥ ነዩ፤ እነሆ፥ ክረምቱ አልፎአልና፥ ዝናቡ ሄዶአልና። አበቦች በምድር ላይ ተገለጡ፤ የዜማም ዘመን ደረሰ፤ የቁርዬዎም ደምፅ በምድራችን ተሰማ።

My beloved spoke and said to me: Rise up, my love, my fair one, and come away. For lo, the winter is past, the rain is over and gone. The flowers appear on the earth; the time of singing has come, and the voice of the turtledove is heard in our land.

ዘመን ዜማ — "the time of singing." A line of love poetry, set to a season of nature, included in our sacred Bible. The man in the song calls his beloved with imagery of mountains and rain and turtledoves — earthly things, every one. And God preserved this song forever.

2. The Song of Moses — Celebrating Earthly Deliverance

After the Red Sea, Moses and the Israelites sang a song of victory. It is preserved in Exodus 15. It celebrates a military deliverance — a national, earthly, political event. Miriam led the women in dance with timbrels.

ዘጸአት (Exodus) 15:20-21

የአሮንም እናት ነቢይትዋ ማርያም ከበሮ በእጅዋ ያዘች፤ ሴቶችም ሁሉ ከበሮ ይዘው እየዘፈኑ ተከተሉአት። ማርያምም መለሰችላቸው እንዲህ ሰትል። እጅግ ከፍ ከፍ ብሎአልና ለእግዚአብሔር ዘምሩ፤ ፈረሱንና ፈረሰኛውን በባሕር ጣላቸው።

Then Miriam the prophetess, the sister of Aaron, took a timbrel in her hand, and all the women followed her with timbrels and dances. And Miriam sang to them: Sing to the LORD, for He has triumphed gloriously! The horse and his rider He has thrown into the sea.

Moses' sister sang and danced — and the Bible records it not as sin but as a sacred celebration. This is a song about a nation, a deliverance, a sea, horses, and an enemy drowned. Earthly events, sung with timbrels.

3. Songs of Lament — David's Mourning for Saul and Jonathan

After Saul and Jonathan died in battle, David wrote a song of mourning — and commanded that it be taught to all of Judah. This is a song for fallen friends and a fallen king. Pure human grief, set to music, and the Bible records it with reverence.

2ኛ ሳሙኤል (2 Samuel) 1:17-19

ዳዊትም በሳኦልና በልጁ በዮናታን ላይ ይህን ሙሽ አወረደ፤ የይሁዳ ልጆች የቀሰት መዝሙር አድርገው እንዲማሩትም አዘዘ፤ ... የእስራኤል ክብር በተራራዎቿ ላይ ተገድሎአል፤ ኃያላን እንዴት ወደቀ!

And David lamented with this lamentation over Saul and over Jonathan his son, and he ordered that the children of Judah be taught the Song of the Bow... The glory of Israel is slain upon thy high places: how are the mighty fallen!

4. The Songs of Zion — Country, Exile, and Diaspora

This passage is exquisite for our diaspora community. It is a song about country, about exile, about longing for a homeland. Every Ethiopian and Eritrean who has wept in DC or Atlanta or Frankfurt remembering Addis or Asmara has lived this Psalm. The harp on the willow — that is our story. And it is in the Bible, sung as Scripture.

መዝሙር ዳዊት (Psalm) 137:1-4

በባቢሎን ወንዞች አጠገብ፤ በዚያ ተቀመጥን አለቀስንም፤ ጽዮንንም ባሰብናት ጊዜ። በዚያም ባሉ ዛፎች ላይ መሰንቆችንን ሰቀልን። የሚረኩንም በዚያ የመዝሙርን ቃል ጠየቁን፤ የወሰዱንም። ከጽዮን መዝሙር ዘምሩልን አሉ። የእግዚአብሔርን ቅኔ በባዕድ ምድር እንዴት እንዘምራለን?

By the rivers of Babylon, there we sat down, yes, we wept when we remembered Zion. We hung our harps upon the willows in the midst of it. For there those who carried us away captive asked of us a song... saying, Sing us one of the songs of Zion! How shall we sing the LORD's song in a foreign land?

5. Lamentations — A Song of Grief for a City

The book of Lamentations (ሰቆቃው ኤርምያስ) is, by its own structure, an acrostic song of mourning over a fallen city. Five chapters. Five poems. Inspired Scripture. The subject is not heaven, not God's holiness in the abstract — it is the destruction of Jerusalem, the suffering of a people, the grief of a nation. An earthly subject, in song, in the Bible.

Part Five: Jesus, Paul, and the Music of the New Covenant

If music belonged only to the Old Testament era and was discontinued under the New Covenant, perhaps a case might be made. But the New Testament — including the very letters of Paul, the same Paul who wrote Galatians — affirms music repeatedly.

Jesus Himself Sang Hymns

የሚቴዎስ ወንጌል (Matthew) 26:30

መዝሙርም ከዘመሩ በኋላ ወደ ደብረ ዘይት ወጡ።

And when they had sung a hymn, they went out to the Mount of Olives.

On the night of His betrayal, before the crucifixion, Jesus sang. With the disciples. The Lord of heaven Himself sang a hymn. This is the model for all who follow Him.

Paul Commands Singing — In the Same Letters Where He Lists Sins

Here is the most decisive evidence of all. Paul — the very apostle who wrote Galatians 5:21 — also wrote Ephesians and Colossians. In those letters, addressed to churches just like the one in Galatia, Paul does not merely permit music. He commands it:

ኤፌሶን (Ephesians) 5:18-19

በመንፈስ እንጂ በወይን ጠጅ አትስከሩ ይህ ማባከን ነውና፤ ነገር ግን እርስ በርሳችሁ በመዝሙርና በዝማሬ በመንፈሳዊም ቅኔ ተነጋገሩ፤ ለጌታ በልባችሁ ተቀኙና ዘምሩ።

And do not be drunk with wine, in which is dissipation, but be filled with the Spirit, speaking to one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody in your heart to the Lord.

ቆላስይስ (Colossians) 3:16

የክርስቶስ ቃል በሙላት ይኑርባችሁ፤ ... በመዝሙርና በዝማሬ በመንፈሳዊም ቅኔ በልባችሁ ለእግዚአብሔር በምስጋና ዘምሩ።

Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly... singing with grace in your hearts to the Lord with psalms and hymns and spiritual songs.

Read these together. In Ephesians 5, Paul places singing in direct contrast to drunkenness — exactly the contrast he is making in Galatians 5:21. Drunkenness is the sin. Singing is the alternative. Paul is not condemning music in Galatians; he is condemning the drunken Greco-Roman *kōmos* (revel) — the very thing he tells the Ephesians to replace with sober Spirit-filled singing.

Heaven Itself Has Music

የዮሐንስ ራእይ (Revelation) 5:8-9

መጽሐፉንም በወሰደ ጊዜ አራቱ እንስሶችና ሀያ አራቱ ሸማግሌዎች በባሉ ፊት ወደቁ፤ እያንዳንዱም በገና፥ የቅዱሳንም ጸሎት የሆነ ዕጣን የሞላበት የወርቅ ጽዋ ነበረው። አዲስም መዝሙር እንዲህ ብለው ዘመኑ።

When He had taken the scroll, the four living creatures and the twenty-four elders fell down before the Lamb. Each one had a harp, and golden bowls full of incense, which are the prayers of the saints. And they sang a new song...

In heaven there are harps. The redeemed sing a new song. If music were sinful, it would not be present in the eternal worship of God. The presence of harps and singing in heaven, in Scripture's final book, is the final word: music is not a stain to be left behind. It is woven into the worship of God forever.

Part Six: The Witness of Saint Yared (ቅዱስ ያሬድ)

If we still doubted — after Moses, David, Solomon, the Psalms, Song of Songs, Jesus, Paul, and Revelation — then our own Ethiopian tradition would be the final witness against the misreading of Galatians 5:21.

ቅዱስ ያሬድ (Saint Yared, 6th century AD) is venerated as a saint of the Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church and the Eritrean Orthodox Tewahedo Church. He composed the entire system of Ethiopian sacred chant — ድጓ (Digua), ጸመ ድጓ (Tsome Digua), ምዕራፍ (Mieraf), ዝማሬ (Zimare), መዋሥእት (Mewasiet) — which is sung in our churches every Sunday, every fast, every feast, every commemoration. He invented the three modes of Ethiopian liturgical music: ግዕዝ, ዕዝል, አራራይ. He invented መለከት notation. Tradition holds that three white birds came from heaven and taught him the songs.

If music were a sin, the Ethiopian Orthodox Church would not have a saint who composed it. The Church would not preserve his hymnody for fifteen hundred years. The ቀኝ ጌታ (qegnyi geta) and ደብተራ (debtera) would not be honored offices. The ክበሮ (kebero), ጸናጽል (tsenatsel), መቋሚያ (meqwamiya), and በገና (begena, the harp of David) would not stand at the heart of our worship.

The Church's own practice is the strongest internal refutation of any reading of Galatians 5:21 that condemns music. To hold that music is sinful is to call Saint Yared a sinner — and no faithful Ethiopian or Eritrean Christian could ever say such a thing.

Part Seven: The Greek Word κῶμος (kōmos) — What Paul Actually Said

Now we return to the verse with which we began. Having walked from Genesis to Revelation, having heard the four thousand Levitical musicians of David, the 120 trumpets at Solomon's Temple, the harps of Psalm 150, the love song of Solomon, the lament of David, the hymn of Jesus, the singing command of Paul to the Ephesians, the harps of heaven, and the chants of Saint Yared — we can now ask: What was Paul condemning?

Origin: The Procession of Dionysus

The Greek word in Galatians 5:21 is κῶμος (kōmos), plural κῶμοι (kōmoi). The word is well-attested in classical Greek literature, in Hellenistic-era usage, and in the Greek New Testament. Its meaning is not in serious scholarly dispute.

The word kōmos originally referred to a specific cultural practice of ancient Greek religion: the nighttime processions held in honor of the god Dionysus (called Bacchus by the Romans), the god of wine. Worshipers would gather, drink heavily, and then march through the streets in groups — singing, shouting, fighting, sometimes engaging in sexual behavior, often causing destruction. These processions were a central feature of Greek social and religious life.

By the time of the New Testament, kōmos had broadened from this specific religious meaning to refer to any drunken, riotous, sexually charged gathering. The standard Greek-English lexicon (Thayer's) defines kōmos as "a revel, carousal; a nocturnal and riotous procession of half-drunken and frolicsome fellows who after supper parade through the streets with torches and music in honor of Bacchus or some other deity." Note that music can be present at a kōmos — but the kōmos is not music. The kōmos is the drunken procession itself, with all its excesses. The music is incidental.

How Paul Uses the Word

Paul uses kōmos exactly twice in his letters. Once in Galatians 5:21, in the list we are examining. Once in Romans 13:13: "Let us walk honestly, as in the day; not in rioting (kōmoi) and drunkenness, not in chambering and wantonness." The Apostle Peter also uses it once, in 1 Peter 4:3, in a similar context.

In all three New Testament uses, kōmos is paired with drunkenness, sexual license, and sometimes idolatry. It is a sin of excess, of losing control, of joining the kind of pagan nighttime revel that Greek and Roman society took for granted but that Christians were called to leave behind. It is never paired with music as such, and never used to describe ordinary singing or instrumental performance.

The Greek Word for Music

Greek has a perfectly clear word for music: μουσική (mousikē), from which our English word "music" descends. Greek also has clear words for singing (ᾄδω, adō), for psalm-singing (ψάλλω, psallō, used in Ephesians 5:19), and for instrumental playing. If Paul had meant to condemn music, he would have used one of these words. He did not. He used kōmos, which means something specific and different.

The Linguistic Conclusion

The Greek word κῶμος in Galatians 5:21 means drunken revelry — the kind of rowdy, nocturnal, often sexually charged procession associated with the worship of Dionysus and with pagan partying generally. It does not mean music. Greek has its own word for music (mousikē), which Paul did not use here. Anyone who teaches that Galatians 5:21 condemns music is teaching something the Greek text does not say.

Part Eight: The Witness of the English Bibles

If our own Amharic Bible's internal evidence and the Greek philology were not enough, we can look outward — to how every other Christian community in the world has rendered Galatians 5:21. The English Bible has been translated and retranslated more times than the Bible of any other language. From John Wycliffe's first complete English Bible in the 1380s through King James in 1611 through the dozens of modern English translations available today, English-speaking Christians have had constant fresh engagement with the Greek text.

Below is a comprehensive table showing how more than twenty major English Bible translations — Catholic and Protestant, ancient and modern, literal and paraphrastic — have rendered the word in question. Read it carefully.

Translation (Full Name)	Year	Renders κῶμος as
Wycliffe Bible	1382	<i>"unchaste eating"</i>
Geneva Bible	1560	<i>"gluttony"</i>
Douay-Rheims Bible (Catholic)	1610	<i>"revellings"</i>
King James Version (KJV)	1611	<i>"revellings"</i>

Translation (Full Name)	Year	Renders κῶμος as
Young's Literal Translation	1862	<i>"revellings"</i>
Darby Translation	1890	<i>"revels"</i>
American Standard Version (ASV)	1901	<i>"revellings"</i>
Revised Standard Version (RSV)	1952	<i>"carousing"</i>
J. B. Phillips New Testament	1958	<i>"orgies"</i>
Amplified Bible (AMP)	1965	<i>"carousing"</i>
Jerusalem Bible (Catholic)	1966	<i>"orgies"</i>
New American Standard Bible (NASB)	1971	<i>"carousing"</i>
Good News Translation (GNT)	1976	<i>"orgies"</i>
New International Version (NIV)	1978	<i>"orgies"</i>
New King James Version (NKJV)	1982	<i>"revelries"</i>
New Jerusalem Bible (Catholic)	1985	<i>"orgies"</i>
New Revised Standard Version (NRSV)	1989	<i>"carousing"</i>
New Living Translation (NLT)	1996	<i>"wild parties"</i>
English Standard Version (ESV)	2001	<i>"orgies"</i>
The Message (paraphrase)	2002	<i>"ugly parodies of community"</i>
New American Bible Revised Edition (NABRE, Catholic)	2011	<i>"orgies"</i>
Common English Bible (CEB)	2011	<i>"partying"</i>
The Voice	2012	<i>"ugly parodies of community"</i>
Christian Standard Bible (CSB)	2017	<i>"carousing"</i>

Notice what is and what is not in this column. Every single English translation across more than six hundred years renders κῶμος with a word that means drunken revelry, riotous partying, orgies, carousing, wild parties, or excessive feasting. There is variation in which English word the translators chose — "revellings" was Elizabethan English for what we now call "wild partying," "orgies" emphasizes the sexual dimension, "carousing" emphasizes the drunkenness, "wild parties" captures the contemporary feel.

But the word "music" appears nowhere. Not in Wycliffe's Middle English of 1382. Not in King James's stately Elizabethan of 1611. Not in any of the dozens of modern translations from

1952 to 2017. The English Bible's witness, across denominations and centuries, is unanimous: Paul was not condemning music. He was condemning rowdy drunken parties of the kind associated with pagan religious revelry.

Part Nine: The Witness of the World's Bibles

If the unanimous witness of the English Bibles were not sufficient, we can look further. The Bible has been translated into more than 700 languages in the world, with the New Testament available in more than 1,500. Below is a careful survey of how Galatians 5:21 has been rendered in major Bible translations of major world languages — including the foundational Latin Vulgate that shaped Western Christianity for a thousand years, the major European Reformation Bibles, the standard Bibles of the world's largest non-Western Christian communities, and — most importantly for us — the Tigrinya and Afan Oromo Bibles read by our Eritrean cousins and our Oromo brothers and sisters.

Language	Translation (Full Name)	Renders κῶμος as
Latin	Vulgate (St. Jerome, ca. 405 AD)	<i>comessiones</i> (feasts of excess, gluttonous banquets)
Greek (original)	Greek New Testament	<i>κῶμος (kōmos)</i> (drunken revelry, riotous procession)
German	Luther Bible (1534)	<i>Saufen, Fressen</i> (heavy drinking, gluttonous eating)
German	Einheitsübersetzung (Catholic, modern)	<i>Trink- und Essgelage</i> (drinking and eating revels)
French	Louis Segond (1880, standard Protestant)	<i>excès de table</i> (excesses of the table)
French	Bible de Jérusalem (Catholic)	<i>orgies</i> (orgies)
Spanish	Reina-Valera 1909	<i>banqueteos</i> (banquet-feastings, riotous feasts)
Spanish	Reina-Valera 1960 (most widely used)	<i>orgías</i> (orgies)
Spanish	Nueva Versión Internacional (NVI)	<i>orgías</i> (orgies)
Portuguese	Almeida Revista e Atualizada	<i>orgias</i> (orgies)

Language	Translation (Full Name)	Renders κῶμος as
Italian	Conferenza Episcopale Italiana (CEI, Catholic)	<i>orge</i> (orgies)
Russian	Synodal Translation (1876)	<i>бесчинство (beschinstvo)</i> (disorderly conduct, rowdiness)
Arabic	Smith Van Dyck Bible (1865, standard Arabic)	ⲁⲃⲁⲃⲁⲃⲁⲃⲁⲃⲁⲃⲁⲃⲁ (<i>'arbada</i>) (drunken brawling, rowdy intoxication)
Arabic	New Arabic Version (modern)	ⲁⲃⲁⲃⲁⲃⲁ ⲁⲃⲁⲃⲁⲃⲁ (noisy drunkenness)
Korean	Korean Holy Bible (Revised)	<i>방탕함 (bangtangham)</i> (debauchery, dissipation)
Korean	Korean Living Bible (KLB)	<i>흥청대며 먹고 마시는 것</i> (feasting and drinking with wild abandon)
Japanese	Japanese New Interconfessional (新共同訳)	<i>酩酊 / どんちゃん騒ぎ</i> (drunkenness / rowdy partying)
Chinese	Traditional Union Version (和合本, 1919)	<i>荒宴 (huāng yàn)</i> (wild/wasteful feasts)
Chinese	Chinese Standard Bible	<i>荒宴狂歡</i> (wild feasts and crazed revelry)
Swahili (East African)	Swahili Union Version (Biblia Habari Njema)	<i>ulevi na ulafi</i> (drunkenness and gluttony)
Tigrinya	Tigrinya Bible (Eritrean / Ethiopian)	<i>ሰክራንን ዳይላን</i> (drunkenness and wild partying)
Afan Oromo	Afaan Oromoo Bible (Macaafa Qulqulluu)	<i>machaa'ina fi ololi</i> (drunkenness and rowdy uproar)
Modern Hebrew	Hebrew New Testament (Bible Society)	<i>הוללות (holelut)</i> (wild revelry, riotous behavior)
Dutch	Statenvertaling (1637)	<i>brasserijen</i> (carousing, riotous feasting)
Polish	Biblia Tysiąclecia (Catholic)	<i>hulanki</i> (carousing, revelry)

The Verdict of the World's Bibles

Across Latin, Greek, German, French, Spanish, Portuguese, Italian, Russian, Arabic, Korean, Japanese, Chinese, Swahili, Tigrinya, Afan Oromo, modern

Hebrew, Dutch, Polish — and the more than twenty English translations surveyed in the previous part — not a single major Bible translation in the world renders κῶμος as "music." Every one of them, from St. Jerome's Vulgate of around 405 AD to the Korean Living Bible of our generation, understands the word as referring to drunken revelry, riotous feasting, orgies, or wild partying. The Tigrinya Bible read by our Eritrean cousins, and the Afan Oromo Bible read by tens of millions of Oromo Christians, both follow this universal Christian understanding.

The Amharic translation ዙፋኝነት is, on its own, defensible — it can be read as "rowdy partying" rather than "music." But the secondary association with ordinary ዙፋን has caused a confusion in Ethiopian Christian life that no other Christian community in the world experiences. We are alone with this confusion. We do not have to remain alone with it.

Part Ten: Why the Amharic Translators Chose ዙፋኝነት

If every other language's Bible renders kōmos as drunken revelry, why does the Amharic Bible use ዙፋኝነት — a word that has come to mean "musicianship"? The answer is not malice or poor scholarship. It is a combination of three plausible factors that came together to produce the modern confusion.

Reason One: Genuine Semantic Drift Between Ge'ez and Amharic

In classical Ge'ez (the ancient liturgical language), the root ዙፋን (zafana) had a wider meaning that included "festal merrymaking, riotous celebration" — closer to the Greek κῶμος. Dillmann's *Lexicon Linguae Aethiopicæ* (1865) and Wolf Leslau's *Comparative Dictionary of Ge'ez* record this older sense. But when this same root passed into spoken Amharic over the centuries, its meaning narrowed. ዙፋኝ in modern Amharic simply means "singer." ዙፋኝነት means "the practice of being a singer / music-making." The translators (working from Abu Rumi's foundational translation around 1810-1820, revised under Haile Selassie's commission in 1960-1962) appear to have used the inherited Ge'ez root, expecting readers to understand the older meaning. The narrowing happened in the readership, not in the translators' intent.

Reason Two: Ascetic Monastic Influence

There is a strain in Eastern Christian asceticism — including some Ethiopian monastic Andemta commentary — that has been suspicious of የዓለም ዙፋን (worldly secular music) as opposed to sacred chant. Some commentators read the verse through this ascetic lens. But this is commentary, not translation, and even the most ascetic commentators distinguish sacred music (which they themselves performed daily) from drunken worldly music.

Reason Three: A Difficult Word with No Cultural Equivalent

The Greco-Roman κῶμος was a culturally specific phenomenon — a Bacchic procession with no exact Ethiopian equivalent. Faced with this gap, the translators had to choose: find the closest cultural analog (general "such-like deeds"), borrow the Greek term, or pick one feature of κῶμος and let it stand for the whole. They chose option three — and picked the music/noise feature. The result, after centuries of semantic drift, is the modern reading that seems to condemn music itself.

How a Faithful Modern Translation Should Render the Verse

A more faithful Amharic rendering — one that conveys what Paul actually meant — would be something like:

ምቀኛነት፣ ስካር፣ የመስከርና የዕብደት ጭፈራ፣ እንዲሁም እነዚህን የመሰለው ነው።

(Envy, drunkenness, drunken-and-wild revelry, and things like these.)

This rendering preserves Paul's actual meaning: it is the drunken excess, the loss of self-control, the disorderly riotous behavior — not music — that he condemns. Note also that Paul's verb (πράσσουντες, "those practicing") implies a habitual lifestyle, not a single act. Paul is describing a settled way of living characterized by these patterns — exactly what he contrasts with "walking by the Spirit" two verses later.

Part Eleven: What Paul Actually Condemned

To be clear: Paul did condemn something real in Galatians 5:21. The fact that he was not condemning music does not mean he was condemning nothing. He was condemning something specific, and that thing is worth understanding because it still exists in our world.

What Paul condemned was the κῶμος — the drunken nighttime revel, the riotous procession associated with the worship of Dionysus, the kind of pagan party in which excessive drinking, sexual license, violence, and idolatry came together. The Roman world Paul lived in was full of such gatherings. Bacchanalia. Saturnalia. The festivals of Dionysus. The drinking parties that Greek and Roman literature described in such detail. These were not innocent gatherings. They were specific cultural practices in which people lost their self-control, harmed each other, and worshipped false gods.

Modern Equivalents

Paul's condemnation translates clearly to the modern world. He would have condemned, in our own time:

- The drunken nightclub culture in which young people lose themselves in alcohol, drugs, and sexual encounters they do not remember the next morning.
- The kind of spring break or Mardi Gras revelry in which entire towns descend into days of public drunkenness, violence, and sexual exploitation.
- The university fraternity parties where excessive alcohol leads to hazing, sexual assault, and destruction of property.
- The riots of celebration that follow championship sports victories, in which property is destroyed and people are injured.

These are real κῶμος in the Pauline sense. They are real works of the flesh. They really do oppose the fruit of the Spirit. Paul's warning still applies.

What Paul Did Not Condemn

But Paul did not condemn — and we should not pretend he condemned — the activities that distinguish ordinary human celebration from the κῶμος. He did not condemn:

- Singing at weddings, including the love songs of Solomon's Song of Songs, which the Ethiopian Orthodox tradition has always treasured.
- Folk music, traditional songs, the kebero and masinko and washint of our cultural heritage.
- Liturgical music, including the chants of Saint Yared and the hymnody of every Christian tradition.
- Contemporary Christian music, gospel music, devotional songs in any language.
- Secular love songs, lullabies, work songs, lamentations — any music that expresses the genuine experiences of human life under God's creation.
- Professional musicianship, the study of instruments, the careers of singers and composers and conductors.

These are not works of the flesh. Many of them are gifts of the Spirit. Some of them are commanded directly in Scripture. To condemn them by appeal to Galatians 5:21 is to misuse the verse — and to deprive Ethiopian Christians of a gift that God has given them and that the Church has always honored.

Conclusion: Sing, Diaspora — Sing

The evidence is, I think, overwhelming. From the silver trumpets of Moses to the four thousand Levites of David, from the 120 trumpets at Solomon's Temple to the cosmic command of Psalm 150, from the love poetry of Song of Songs to the laments of David and the songs of Babylonian exile, from the hymn Jesus sang at the Last Supper to Paul's own command to the Ephesians, from the harps of heaven in Revelation to ቅዱስ ያሬድ in our own Ethiopian tradition — Scripture and our Church both speak with one voice: music is not a sin. Music is a gift. Music is a command.

And from the Latin Vulgate of Saint Jerome to the King James of 1611, from the Spanish Reina-Valera to the French Louis Segond, from the Korean Living Bible to the Chinese Union Version, from our cousins' Tigrinya Bible to our brothers' Afan Oromo Bible — every Christian community in the world has read Galatians 5:21 the same way: as a condemnation of drunken revelry, not of music.

Galatians 5:21 condemns drunken revelry. It does not, and cannot, condemn music. The Amharic word ዘፋኝነት is, today, a translation that misleads honest readers. Future translations should and will correct it.

For our diaspora community — Ethiopian and Eritrean believers scattered from Addis to Asmara to DC to Stockholm — this matters in concrete ways. It means:

- Singing about your homeland in exile is not a sin. It is the very heart of Psalm 137.
- Singing about your mother, your father, your beloved, your village, your river, your mountain is not a sin. The Bible itself contains such songs.
- Playing የዜማ ስቃ (musical instruments) — ከበሮ, በገና, መሰንቆ, ጸናጽል, መለኮት — is not a sin. The Bible names every one of these as instruments of worship.
- Being a professional musician (ዘፋኝ) is not a sin. King David employed 4,288 of them at full salary, by royal decree.
- What the Bible condemns — what Paul actually wrote about — is the loss of self-control through drunkenness, the disorderly chaos that comes from filling oneself with wine instead of with the Spirit.

እስትንፋስ ያለው ሁሉ እግዚአብሔርን ያመሰግን። ሃሌ ሉያ።

"Let everything that has breath praise the LORD. Hallelujah!"

— መዝሙረ ዳዊት 150:6 — Psalm 150:6

Closing Word

The witness of the Amharic Psalms is clear. The witness of every other language's Bible is unanimous. The witness of our own Saint Yared and his fifteen centuries of sacred chant is undeniable. Galatians 5:21 condemns drunken pagan revelry. It does not condemn music. Let the music return. Let the kebero be heard. Let the begena and the masinko sing. Let the choirs of Ethiopia and Eritrea, in every language and tradition, raise the song that the Psalms promised, that Saint Yared composed, and that the angels still sing.

ዘምሩ — Sing.

Editorial & Methodological Notes

On the Combined Edition

This is the combined edition of two earlier Maraki Digital studies on Galatians 5:21 and music. The first (published earlier in 2026) focused on the internal scriptural evidence — Numbers, Chronicles, Psalms, Song of Songs, the New Testament, and Saint Yared's tradition — drawing primarily on the Amharic Bible itself. The second (published shortly thereafter) added a comprehensive multilingual survey covering more than two dozen English Bible translations and the standard Bibles of the major non-Western Christian linguistic communities. This combined edition merges both bodies of evidence into a single comprehensive document. Readers who wish to consult the source studies separately may request them from the editor.

On the Ge'ez New Testament Text

The reader should be aware: every Bible verse quoted in Amharic in this edition is taken from the standard published Amharic Bible (አዲሱ መደበኛ ትርጉም / 1962 Haile Selassie revision). The Ge'ez New Testament is not currently available in fully searchable digital form online; the only digitally accessible Ge'ez biblical text covers the Old Testament Octateuch and the Psalter (Dillmann and Ludolf editions). For the Ge'ez New Testament wording of Galatians 5:21 specifically, readers should consult the 2009 Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church / Bible Society of Ethiopia printed Ge'ez Bible, or speak with a ሊቀ ካህናት (liqe kahnat) or መምህር (memher) at their local parish.

On the Tigrinya / Ge'ez Confusion

Several texts circulating online and in social media as "the Ge'ez Bible verse for Galatians 5:21" are actually Tigrinya, not Ge'ez. Both languages use the Fidel script, and both descend from Ge'ez, so confusion is common even among native speakers. Readers should verify any "Ge'ez" text by consulting an actual Ge'ez liturgical edition rather than online forums.

On the Translation Renderings in the Tables

The translation renderings cited in the English and world languages tables are drawn from the published editions of each Bible translation in question. Where multiple editions of a single translation exist (e.g., NIV 1978 vs. NIV 2011), the renderings are substantially identical for Galatians 5:21 and the cited rendering reflects current published text. The English glosses for non-English renderings are provided by the editor to help readers; specialist readers should consult original texts for precise exegesis.

On the Scope of the Multilingual Survey

This survey is comprehensive but not exhaustive. The Bible has been translated into more than 700 languages, and surveying every translation is beyond the scope of any single edition. However, the languages and translations included here cover essentially every major Christian linguistic community in the world — Catholic, Orthodox, and Protestant; African, Asian, European, and Middle Eastern. The pattern observed (*kōmos* rendered as drunken revelry, never as music) holds across this entire surveyed range. Readers who find a counter-example in any major translation are warmly invited to write to the editor.

On the Greek Lexicography

The treatment of *κῶμος* in Part Seven reflects the standard scholarly consensus, drawing on Liddell-Scott-Jones (the standard classical Greek lexicon), Bauer-Danker-Arndt-Gingrich (the standard New Testament Greek lexicon), Thayer's Greek Lexicon, and the Theological Dictionary of the New Testament edited by Kittel, Friedrich, and Bromiley. There is no serious scholarly disagreement about the meaning of *kōmos*.

On the Limits of This Edition

This is a theological-linguistic essay, not a doctrinal pronouncement. Readers should consult their own pastors, priests, and traditions. The author is not a clergyman. The intent is to give readers the tools — the actual scripture verses, the linguistic context, the multilingual evidence, and the historical reasoning — to investigate the question themselves with confidence and evidence in hand.

On Pastoral Concerns

Some readers may worry that this edition will encourage Ethiopian young people to embrace music that is genuinely harmful. The edition shares this concern. Part Eleven explicitly affirms that Paul's warning against *κῶμος* applies to genuinely destructive cultural practices, including the modern equivalents named there. Christian discernment about which music edifies and which music degrades is necessary. This edition supports such discernment. It only opposes the categorical condemnation of music as such, which the evidence does not support.

On the Author's Position

The author writes as a faithful Christian and a member of the Ethiopian-Eritrean diaspora. This edition does not advocate for any particular musical genre, secular or sacred. It simply argues — on the basis of Scripture, tradition, and the unanimous testimony of the world's Bibles — that the categorical condemnation of music as such, supposedly grounded in Galatians 5:21, is not supported by the broader witness of the Bible or of Ethiopian Orthodox tradition. Individual conscience and local pastoral guidance remain primary in matters of taste and practice.

About the Host

Abnet A. Tessema, CFEI, MBA is the host and editor of Maraki Digital, a weekly publication serving the Ethiopian and Eritrean diaspora communities. Maraki Digital covers global financial markets, U.S. immigration policy, the Iran conflict, U.S.-Africa relations, the Ethiopian economy, and matters of cultural and religious significance to the diaspora. Special editions, like this one, address questions of broader cultural and theological interest raised by readers.

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