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# Music

## In the Old Testament

— Jack P. Lewis —

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Allusions to worship of God in song are found throughout the Old Testament, most frequently in the Book of Psalms. Music is also found in a variety of other contexts. As we consider the music that was used by those who worshiped God under the Law and even before, and how God viewed their worship, we may gain some insight into what God wants from Christians today.

### THE PENTATEUCH

Mentions of singing or music are few in the Pentateuch. Jubal, of the line of Cain, was the father of all those who played the lyre and pipe (Genesis 4:21). Laban rebuked Jacob for having slipped away instead of being sent forth with joy and songs, with timbrel and lyre (Genesis 31:27).

After successfully crossing the Red Sea, Moses and Israel sang a song to the Lord (Exodus 15:1–18). The passage describes it as “sing[ing] to the LORD” (Exodus 15:1). Miriam then took a timbrel and led the women, who also had timbrels, in singing and dancing (Exodus 15:20, 21). In the desert Israel sang what is called “the Song of the Well” (Numbers 21:17, 18). Another song, attributed to ballad singers, is referred to in Deuteronomy 31:19–22. In 32:1–43, the composition is described as a song spoken by Moses. Instrumental accompaniment is not mentioned there.

When the Lord was giving instructions for worship in the tabernacle, He instructed Moses to make two trumpets of silver (Numbers 10:1, 2). These trumpets were to be used for signaling. When both were blown, all the congregation was

to assemble at the entrance of the tent of meeting. The sons of Aaron, the priests, were to blow the trumpets (Numbers 10:8), and the time when they were to be blown was specified (Leviticus 23:24; Numbers 10:10). The jubilee year began with a blast of a ram’s horn (שׁוֹפָר, *shophar*; Leviticus 25:9, 10). No other instrument is mentioned in connection with tabernacle worship. God regulated the music used.

In both the Mesopotamian and Nile valleys, music is older than in Israel. Though Israel was charged in certain matters not to become like their predecessors (Leviticus 18:3; Deuteronomy 12:30), celebration singing and dancing were part of Israel’s culture.

### THE HISTORICAL BOOKS

Allusions to singing in the historical books are abundant. After the victory over Sisera, Deborah and Barak composed the victory song in Judges 5. When Jephthah returned from battle, his daughter met him with timbrels and dances (Judges 11:34). King Saul, after his anointing by Samuel, met a band of prophets coming down from the high place with harp, tambourine, lute, and lyre before them (1 Samuel 10:5, 10). After David’s victory over Goliath, the women who came out to meet Saul were singing and dancing with tambourines. They sang to each other, “Saul has slain his thousands, and David his ten thousands” (1 Samuel 18:6, 7).

David himself was known as a musician. He was selected to play (נָגַן, *nagan*) on the harp before Saul to ease the king’s mind when an evil spirit came on him (1 Samuel 16:14–23; 18:10;

19:9). David made a lamentation over Saul and Jonathan and commanded Israel to teach the song of the bow (2 Samuel 1:17, 18). He also had a song praising the Lord for delivering him from his enemies (2 Samuel 22:1–51).

Later, David and all the house of Israel transported the ark out of the house of Abinidab. They were making merry before the Lord with all their might with songs and lyres, harps, tambourines, castanets, and cymbals (2 Samuel 6:5; 1 Chronicles 13:7, 8). David brought the ark from the house of Obed-edom with the sound of the trumpet and with his own leaping and dancing before the Lord (2 Samuel 6:14, 15). Before Solomon built the temple, David had men who ministered with song before the tabernacle (1 Chronicles 6:31, 32). Solomon's songs numbered 1,005. At the return from the Babylonian Exile, when the Israelites dedicated the rebuilt temple and walls, there were songs of praise and thanksgiving by the Levites (Ezra 3:10; Nehemiah 12:45, 46).

The writer of 1, 2 Chronicles showed much more interest in David's musical arrangements than did the writer of 1, 2 Kings. While the instructions for the service of the tabernacle given by Moses, apart from signaling with silver trumpets, have no statement about musical worship, the chronicler credited David and the chiefs of the service with setting apart the sons of Asaph and of Heman to prophesy with lyres, harps, and cymbals (1 Chronicles 25:1–8). The sons of Jeduthun also prophesied with lyres in thanksgiving and praise to the Lord (1 Chronicles 25:3). Both men and women engaged in music with cymbals, harps, and lyres in the service of the house of God (1 Chronicles 25:6). They were skillful and trained musicians. These temple musicians were divided by lot into twenty-four groups for their duties. With their singing being performed in a group, these singers formed a sort of choir. All of this is narrated as having happened before the temple was built. Nothing is said at this stage about David's having divine authority for the action. We learn that later, in 2 Chronicles 29:25, where we read that "the command was from the Lord through His prophets."

Adam Clarke, in his long-used commentary from the late eighteenth century, asserted regarding 2 Chronicles 29:25 that the Syriac and Arabic versions read differently from the Hebrew text. He wrote,

It was by the hand or commandment of the Lord and his prophets that the Levites should praise the Lord . . . it was by the order of David that so many instruments of music should be introduced into the Divine service.

Clarke then added a question. Even if the use of instruments was prescribed by the Law, he said, "could this be adduced [serve as an example] . . . that they ought to be used in Christian worship?"<sup>1</sup>

Clarke's case was restated by David Lipscomb and by Guy N. Woods,<sup>2</sup> without allusion to the versions; but nothing in the context of 1 or 2 Chronicles suggests that the prophets mentioned there were false prophets. In the New Testament, David is recognized as a prophet who spoke by the Spirit in writing his psalms (Acts 2:30). Paul cited David (Romans 4:6). The Hebrew, Greek, and Latin versions all claim *divine authority* for David.

When Solomon had completed the temple, the temple singers stood east of the altar as the ark was being brought into the temple. There were also 120 priests with trumpets. The singers had cymbals, harps, and lyres. The group made themselves heard in unison in praise and thanksgiving to the Lord. When the song was raised in praise to the Lord with trumpets and cymbals and other musical instruments, it was said, "He indeed is good for His lovingkindness is everlasting" (2 Chronicles 5:12, 13). One would not suppose that the Lord was displeased, for then "the glory of the Lord filled the house of God" (2 Chronicles 5:13, 14).

The writer did not devote additional space to music until he came to the account of King Hezekiah's reforms. Hezekiah stationed the Levites in the house of the Lord with cymbals, harps, and lyres (2 Chronicles 29:25). This activity would have been in the temple court; only the priests entered the building itself. The Levites stood with the instruments of David, and the priests with trumpets. Songs to the Lord began when the sacrifice was offered (2 Chronicles 29:27). The whole assembly worshiped, selected Levites sang

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<sup>1</sup>Adam Clarke, *The Holy Bible Containing the Old and New Testaments: A Commentary with Critical Notes* (Nashville: Abingdon, n.d.), 2:690.

<sup>2</sup>M. C. Kurfees, ed., *Questions Answered by Lipscomb and Sewell* (Nashville: McQuiddy Publishing Co., 1921), 340–41; Guy N. Woods, *Questions and Answers* (Henderson, Tenn.: Freed-Hardeman College, 1976), 26–30.

praises with gladness, and the people bowed down and worshiped.

The writer of 1 and 2 Chronicles devoted no space to music in his narration about the reforms of Josiah. However, when Josiah died, Jeremiah uttered a lamentation over him. We are told that all the singing men and singing women had spoken of Josiah in their laments “to this day” (2 Chronicles 35:25).

## THE PROPHETS

Isaiah has a total of twenty-three allusions to singing: fifteen of them to human singing<sup>3</sup> and seven to figurative singing of the earth, mountains, heaven, and the like.<sup>4</sup> A majority of the human instances involve singing for joy, with no accompaniment mentioned. Only two explicitly mention accompaniment. In one, Isaiah mentioned the “song of the harlot,” which portrays a harlot taking up her harp and singing; he was depicting Tyre’s unfaithfulness to God (Isaiah 23:15, 16). The second tells of a person setting out to the sound of the flute to go to the mountain of the Lord (Isaiah 30:29). Only one is explicit about being in the house of the Lord: King Hezekiah said, “The LORD will surely save me; so we will play my songs on stringed instruments all the days of our life at the house of the LORD” (Isaiah 38:20). “The house of the LORD” may be the temple, or it may refer to Palestine.

In contrast with this abundance, Jeremiah made only three allusions to singing (Jeremiah 31:7, 12; 51:48). One was a “shout for joy” raised by “heaven and earth and all that is in them” (Jeremiah 51:48).

Ezekiel’s prophecy threatened that songs and the sound of harps would cease in Tyre (Ezekiel 26:13). A lamentation was raised over her (Ezekiel 27:2). Ezekiel was viewed by his contemporaries as one who sang love songs with a beautiful voice and played well on an instrument (Ezekiel 33:32). The temple in Ezekiel’s vision had singers (Ezekiel 40:44). Amos spoke of the Israelites’ singing songs for themselves to the sound of the harp (נְבֻלָּה, *nebel*; Amos 6:5). The instruments of the Old Testament are also called “instruments of music” (כְּלֵי-שִׁיר, *keli-shir*).

<sup>3</sup>Isaiah 5:1; 16:10; 23:15, 16; 24:14; 26:19; 27:2; 30:29; 35:6, 10; 38:20; 42:10; 48:20; 51:11; 52:8; 54:1; 65:14.

<sup>4</sup>Isaiah 14:7; 35:2; 42:11; 44:23; 49:13; 52:9; 55:12.

Hosea made only one mention of music: Israel, though taken back to the desert, would sing (“answer”; RSV) as in the days of her youth (Hosea 2:15 [17]). Amos pronounced woes upon those “at ease in Zion,” including those who improvised songs to the sound of the harp (Amos 6:1–5). He declared that in the day of the Lord songs of the temple (or palace) would become wailings (Amos 8:3). He threatened that songs would be turned into lamentation (Amos 8:10) and called for taking away the noise of songs from the Lord. He said that the Lord would not listen to the melody of harps made by unrighteous and unjust people (Amos 5:23).

Habakkuk portrayed the deep as giving forth its voice (Habakkuk 3:10). Zephaniah described wild creatures as singing (or hooting and croaking; RSV) in the ruins of Nineveh (Zephaniah 2:14). He called on the daughter of Zion to shout and rejoice and declared that the Lord would rejoice over Israel with loud singing, as on the day of a festival (Zephaniah 3:14, 17).

## MUSIC IN PSALMS

Scattered allusions to singing also appear in the Writings (the Old Testament Books of Poetry). Job claimed that he had made the widow’s heart sing for joy (Job 29:13). Proverbs speaks of the folly of singing to a heavy heart (Proverbs 25:20). The righteous man is said to sing and rejoice (Proverbs 29:6). The life of the writer of Ecclesiastes included acquiring singing men and women (Ecclesiastes 2:8).

The headings in Psalms tell how the psalms were used but are not thought to be by the writers of the psalms. They differ in the Hebrew, Greek, and Latin Bibles. That the term *selah* indicates a musical interlude while the instruments played on is only an hypothesis to explain a term whose meaning is not known.

Though it has been widely assumed that all of the psalms speak of group worship, many of the psalms do not indicate whether they are speaking of private or public worship. Even the use of the second person hortatory plural (an exhortation) would not necessarily indicate group worship. It would indicate that more than one person is being admonished. In temple worship, the priests and the Levites were the musicians and the singers. The assembled audience were not the singers.

Of the 150 psalms, sixty-nine, when referring to singing and joyful shouting, make no mention of an instrument.<sup>5</sup> The verbs *psallein* and *humnein* are used in these.

The mouth as the instrument of praise is mentioned in nine instances.<sup>6</sup> Lips and tongue are mentioned (Psalms 71:23, 24; 119:13, 171, 172). The “nations” are called on to sing (67:4), as are the “kingdoms of the earth” (68:32). All the earth is figuratively said to sing (66:4).

Sixteen psalms explicitly mention the use of an instrument.<sup>7</sup> No one seems to question that accompanied singing of the Levites was a part of worship under the Law. The Jews had processions which featured musicians (68:24, 25). Priests blew the trumpets, and the Levites sang. Trumpets (150:3), harps (33:2), and lyres (137:2; RSV) are the commonly mentioned instruments. Psalm 150 lists a whole orchestra.

Qumran,<sup>8</sup> and perhaps other such communities, preserved and read the psalms as well as composing psalms of their own. One of Qumran’s treatises is known as *The Thanksgiving Psalms*.

The Hebrew word שִׁיר (*shir*, “sing”) occurs seventy-seven times in fifty-eight psalms, but only four of these also specify an instrument (33:3; 71:22; 144:9; 147:7).<sup>9</sup> Three or four are parallel with the verb זָמַר (*zamar*, “sing”; 27:6; 57:7; 108:1; and possibly 87:7).

Some psalms are personal declarations. The psalmist was praising God in a private, personal setting. That is not what the discussion has been about for the past hundred years. The age-old question concerns what is practiced in the assembly of the church, rather than what is done in private devotions.

Those who are attempting to justify what

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<sup>5</sup>See Psalms 5:11; 7:17; 9:2, 11; 13:6; 18:49; 21:13; 27:6; 30:4; 40:3; 42:8; 47:6, 7; 59:16, 17; 61:8; 63:7; 68:4; 69:30; 75:9; 95:2; 96:1, 2; 100:1, 2; 101:1; 104:33; 105:2, 43. Statistics are from Richard E. Wolfe, *Songs, Cymbals, and Tambourines* (Nashville: 21st Century Christian, 1998), 74.

<sup>6</sup>See, for example, Psalms 40:3; 63:5; 71:8; 89:1; 109:30; 145:21. (Ibid.)

<sup>7</sup>Wolfe cited, for example, Psalms 33:2; 45:8; 57:7, 8; 68:25; 71:22; 81:2, 3; 92:2, 3; 98:5; 108:[2]; 144:9; 147:7; 149:3; 150:1–6. (Ibid., 75–80.)

<sup>8</sup>Qumran is believed by scholars to have been a settlement of a Jewish sect, perhaps the Essenes. The settlement was near the caves where the first of the Dead Sea Scrolls was discovered in 1947.

<sup>9</sup>Wolfe, 73.

they want to do by appealing to Psalms (whether they are pleading for freedom or for justification) should look at the other side of the question. How many things are included in the admonitions of the psalms that are not presented as examples for the worship of the Lord’s church?

- The dance: “Let them praise His name with dancing” (149:3a; see 30:11; 150:4).
- The use of incense (141:2).
- Imprecations on enemies (109:7; 137:9). Jesus taught that we should pray for those who despitely treat us.
- Shouting (47:1; 81:1).
- Clapping (47:1).
- Blowing trumpets (81:3).
- Processions (42:4; 68:24, 25).
- Animal sacrifices (51:19).
- Uplifted hands (28:2).
- The washing of hands (26:6).
- Worship toward the temple (5:7; RSV).

While some people participate in some of these activities, neither instrumental worshipers nor a cappella worshipers customarily practice them. Why not? These elements are excluded from worship because they are unauthorized by the New Testament. All recognize, then, that the mention of something in Psalms does not constitute New Testament authorization—even if the psalms are quoted in the New Testament, and even if we often cite the psalms for edification. Does Christian freedom mean that we are free to pick and choose what we want to obey and ignore the rest? No, that only creates division.

One can only be impressed with the amount of emphasis given to the concept that the singing spoken of is addressed to the Lord.<sup>10</sup> Praise may be to the name of the Lord (9:2; 18:49; 61:8; 66:4; 69:30), for the Lord’s lovingkindness (89:1), for the Lord’s power (21:13), or to the rock of our salvation (95:1). A “psalm” may be described as a song of praise to our God (40:3). This emphasis on praising the Lord is likewise seen in those psalms where singing and an instrument are also mentioned.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>10</sup>See Psalms 9:11; 13:6; 27:6; 30:4; 40:3; 47:6, 7; 57:9, 16; 68:4, 32; 75:9; 95:1; 96:1, 2; 100:1.

<sup>11</sup>See Psalms 33:2, 3; 47:5, 6; 57:8, 9; 71:22; 81:1–4; 87:7; 92:1–3; 98:1–5; 108:1–3; 137:2, 3; 144:9; 147:7; 149:3; 150:1–5.