

THRESHOLD
BIBLE STUDY

MUSIC,
HYMNS, *and*
CANTICLES

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“Be filled with the Spirit, as you sing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs among yourselves, singing and making melody to the Lord in your hearts.” EPHESIANS 5:18–19

Music, Hymns, and Canticles

Long before human beings began creating music and song, the natural world was doing what it was created to do—praising God with its own musical sounds and melody. Singing birds, chirping tree frogs, whistling wind, rolling thunder, the rhythm of waves—all creating a symphony of beauty and blessing.

From their earliest origins, humans have imitated the sounds around them and used their ingenuity to create new ones. Mimicking the cadence of nature, people began snapping their fingers, clicking their tongues, clapping their hands, and slapping their stomachs with the flat of their hands. Exhausting the noisemaking possibilities of their own bodies, they began hitting sticks together, drumming on a log, and tapping on a stretched animal skin. The movement of wind through trees and canyons gave rise to various sounds made with breath passing through the mouth and lips. This led to the sounds made by blowing through animal horns and the invention of pipes and reed instruments. Later a greater range of melody was made possible through the development of stringed instruments. Once animal gut was strung on a bow for hunting, the twang produced when the arrow took flight suggested the tonal possibilities that led to the lute and the lyre.

As humanity developed language, songs emerged as words were combined with the tenor provided by the human voice and the melody produced

by musical instruments. The variety of songs became as wide as the variety of human activities. Lullabies were sung to soothe a child or agitated flocks. Daily labor was accompanied by musical chants to absorb the monotony and maintain the rhythm of the work. The transitional events of life were marked with music and song: the merrymaking of weddings, the thanksgiving songs of new birth, and the dirges of funerals. Songs rallied troops for battles; then victories were celebrated and defeats were lamented. Festivals, feasts, processions, and observances of every kind were accompanied by music and dancing. The range of emotions expressed through music was anything but limited. Songs expressed a great variety of moods and feelings: joy and sorrow, faith and doubt, gratitude and vengeance, hope and fear.

Humanity realizes that its most important music should be directed in praise to the Lord who gave music to the world. There is something instinctual within human communities that seek to lift their voice in song to the divine, and sacred music has forever issued forth from the lips of people worshipping their gods. This study will focus on the music that developed within the community of ancient Israel and the early Christian church, the song and melody that has been preserved for us in the Old and New Testaments.

Reflection and discussion

- What is the music of the natural world that you hear during the day?
During the night?

- What are your earliest memories of music and song?

Music in Ancient Israel

In every stage of Israel's history and every facet of life for God's people, music has played a central role. Because Israel's prohibitions against images prevented them from developing a tradition of visual arts, the Israelites developed a robust oral and aural culture, emphasizing speech and sound. For this reason, music was an especially important aspect of life. From the least to the greatest, the people of the Bible sang and played musical instruments.

Among the most ancient words in the Hebrew Scriptures are sung texts in connection with victories in battle and the veneration of heroes. The Song of the Sea and Song of Miriam commemorate God's victory over Pharaoh of Egypt (Exod 15), the Song of Deborah celebrates the defeat of Israel's Canaanite adversaries (Judg 5), and singing and dancing honor the victories of David over the Philistines (1 Sam 18:6–7).

In the early chapters of Genesis, which serve as a prologue for Israel's history, Jubal is said to be “the ancestor of all those who play the lyre and pipe.” He is mentioned alongside the first to breed and raise livestock and the first smith, who made tools of bronze and iron (Gen 4:20–22). These legendary ancestors show the essential nature of music and its embeddedness in the daily life of God's people.

Since the Israelites engaged in a mixture of pastoral and agricultural activities, planting, harvesting, and sheepshearing were occasions for festive gatherings and religious celebrations. The young women of Shiloh danced each year beside their vineyards (Judg 21:19–21), and the sons of David celebrated a feast following the shearing of Absalom's sheep (2 Sam 13:23–28). The wedding ritual included a meeting between the bride and the groom's party, accompanied by musicians playing tambourines (1 Macc 9:37–39).

David brought the ark of the covenant up to Jerusalem amidst great rejoicing. A procession led into the city, while David and the people sang and danced to the sound of musical instruments (2 Sam 6:5). The coronation of kings was announced with the sounding of trumpets and a procession led into Jerusalem to the tune of pipes (1 Kgs 1:39–40). A group of “royal psalms,” commemorating the dynasty of David, were sung at royal festivals (Pss 2, 20, 72, 89, 101, 110, 144). An annual feast acclaiming the enthronement of God was marked by a grand procession to the temple, “the singers in front, the musicians last, between them girls playing tambourines” (Ps 68:25).

The people of Israel always remembered David as the God-anointed singer and composer of Israel's psalms. Yet David himself claims that it is God who inspired his compositions: "He put a new song in my mouth" (Ps 40:3), and "The spirit of the Lord speaks through me" (2 Sam 23:2). David is present in the psalms in a number of ways. Some of them sing about his reign, God's covenant with him, and the divine promises given to him. Other psalms are marked "of David," a phrase that many understand to mean that David wrote them. Still others contain notations that associate them with events in David's life. Some of the royal psalms may have even been composed for his coronation, and others relate either directly or indirectly to his reign. Undoubtedly David wrote some of the psalms, while in a more general sense his legacy inspired those who wrote the rest. He is the guiding voice of the entire Book of Psalms, and his spirit sings in every one of them.

Other occasions for music making in ancient Israel were pilgrimages to sacred shrines like Shiloh and Bethel. After the construction of the temple in Jerusalem, pilgrimages were centered on the capital city for the annual feasts of Passover, Weeks, and Booths, bringing thousands of people streaming to the city. Pilgrim songs were an important part of the journey, especially the "psalms of ascent," providing opportunities for cheerfulness and melodious prayer along the way (Pss 120—134).

The music of worship gained a formal, liturgical setting at Jerusalem's temple as professional guilds of musicians were employed to form choirs and orchestras. These singers from among the Levites were tasked with performing the music for the calendar of religious events at the temple. Called to "prophesy with lyres, harps, and cymbals," they were obligated to give God constant praise, perform the epic songs of God's past victories, and execute the rituals for the annual cycles of religious feasts (1 Chron 25). Each guild was responsible for a particular repertoire of songs, which aided in preserving this music during periods of war and exile.

Although professional groups of musicians provided the dominant song and musical accompaniment for temple worship, the congregation was never excluded from the ritual sounds of the temple. The *Shema* (Deut 6:4–9) and other familiar words could have been chanted in unison by the whole assembly. Many other texts throughout the Bible suggest how people would have sung familiar refrains throughout the music. For example, in Psalm 136, the

continual refrain, “for his steadfast love endures forever,” would have been rhythmically chanted by the assembly. Other psalms suggest that the people’s response, “Praise the Lord” and “Hallelujah” was added to the song of the guilds (Pss 148—150).

Given the rich beauty and joy of Israel’s music, it is no wonder that the refusal to play instruments and sing became the most poignant way of expressing the people’s desolation as they were marched away into exile: “By the rivers of Babylon—there we sat down and there we wept when we remembered Zion. On the willows there we hung up our harps. For there our captors asked us for songs, and our tormentors asked for mirth, saying, ‘Sing us one of the songs of Zion!’ How could we sing the Lord’s song in a foreign land?” (Ps 137:1–4). This refusal to sing at the taunt of their tormentors shows that music expressed a spontaneous and irrepressible outpouring of emotion, not something that can be beckoned with external manipulation.

After the exile in Babylon, those returning to Jerusalem included “two hundred male and female singers” (Ezra 2:65). As the new foundation of the Lord’s temple was laid, the ceremony was marked by the priests in their vestments praising God with trumpets and the levitical guilds playing cymbals, while all sang responsively, “praising and giving thanks to the Lord, for he is good, for his steadfast love endures forever toward Israel” (Ezra 3:10–11).

Reflection and discussion

- Why did the Israelites refuse to sing the “songs of Zion” while exiled in Babylon?

- How could my reading of Old Testament texts be enhanced by imagining the sounds of music that pervade the scenes?

Music in the Early Church

Since the first followers of Jesus worshiped in the temple and the synagogues of Judaism, the emerging music of Christianity was most influenced by these contexts from which it arose. After the glorification of Jesus, his followers continued to chant the psalms and other lyrical texts of the Scriptures of Israel. Christianity inherited its appreciation for the biblical word from its roots in ancient Israel and Judaism. So Christian music at its core is vocal music that serves the Scriptures.

While there is no indication that musical instruments were banned from early Christian assemblies, simple chant predominated. Attending a performance of music, listening to it for its own sake, was relatively unknown in early Christianity. As in other cultures of the ancient Near East, music was woven into the fabric of community living and public worship.

In Christian homes, simple blessings were chanted over meals, and psalms were sung throughout the day, making these homes mostly indistinguishable from Jewish households. Assemblies of worship also took place typically in larger homes. Paul urged his communities to make music an integral aspect of their new life in Christ, to be filled with the Spirit, and to sing “psalms and hymns and spiritual songs” to the Lord with joy and gratitude (Col 3:16; Eph 5:19). Lyrical fragments from Judaism, such as “Hosanna,” “Amen,” “Alleluia,” and “Maranatha,” naturally also became Christian expressions and took on a Christ-centered usage. As time passed, the Jewish texts and melodies of the early believers began to be reshaped with Jesus Christ at their heart, offering a more enlarged and distinctive repertoire of prayers, songs, and melodies.

Although the New Testament does not contain as many musical texts as the Scriptures of Israel, it offers sufficient indications to let us know that music was indispensable for both daily life and worship. Short, lyrical for-

mulas of praise are found throughout the New Testament, like the doxology sung by the angels at the birth of Jesus: “Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace among those whom he favors” (Luke 2:14). In time, these Jewish texts led to the development of doxologies centered on Christ: “To the only wise God, through Jesus Christ, to whom be the glory forever!” (Rom 16:27).

As Christians chanted their prayers of praise, they directed them to God and “in the name of” or “through” Jesus. In other texts, singing is directed “to the Lord,” most likely to the exalted Jesus Christ. In the letters of Paul, Christ is both the one to whom worship is offered, as he is included in the identity of God, and also the one through whom worship is offered. A similar development is seen in Hebrews. Its opening verses are a lyrical text exalting Christ as the “heir of all things” and as worthy of the worship due to God: “He is the reflection of God’s glory and the exact imprint of God’s very being, and he sustains all things by his powerful word” (Heb 1:3). Yet, at the same time, his is the leader of the congregation’s song addressed to God: “I will proclaim your name to my brothers and sisters, in the midst of the congregation I will praise you” (Heb 2:12).

Developing Christian texts expressed an increasingly trinitarian dynamic of worship. The personal presence of God the Spirit initiates and sustains the church’s prayerful singing. Through Christ we have “access in one Spirit to the Father” and become “members of the household of God” (Eph 2:18–19). This trinitarian dynamic of worship becomes the dynamic of redemption. The Spirit unites us to Christ and him to us, so that with him, as well as through him, we have access to the Father.

Larger musical texts of the New Testament include the canticles of Luke’s infancy accounts, which have been set to music from the first century until today. These texts also contain hymns to Christ sung within the early Christian communities and included within the letters of Paul and Peter. Christian hymns and canticles were incorporated within New Testament writings destined for the urban Gentile world of the empire, indicating that Christians carried their embrace of the musical heritage of Judaism into the larger world of Greco-Roman culture.

God’s redeemed people “sing to the Lord a new song” (Isa 42:10). In the New Testament, this motif is incorporated into the Book of Revelation,

expressing what music means to the biblical imagination. All in the heavenly assembly “sing a new song” before the divine throne and before the sacrificed and glorified Lamb (Rev 5:9; 14:3). The visionary hears “the sound of harpists playing on their harps” (Rev 14:2) and trumpets announcing the time of judgment and redemption. Most pervasive of all is the sound of singing as the saints in heaven praise God for their salvation.

Reflection and discussion

- What is the role of the Holy Spirit in the music of the New Testament?
- How is the liturgical music of today similar to and dissimilar from the music of the early church?

The Sound of Music in the Bible

Biblical studies, archeology, and musicology tell us a great deal about the significance of music in the biblical period and its importance for the secular and sacred life of ancient people. Yet the texts give us no musical notes and few directions, so we don’t know exactly how the music of the Bible sounded.

In the ancient world there was no clear distinction between speaking and singing. The lyrical character of speech, especially when offering praise or prayer, encompassed melodic features that drifted toward song. Especially when poetic texts were recited with the accompaniment of musical instruments, the text could certainly be labeled a hymn or canticle. Because the Bible presents a God who communicates primarily through the word, the auditory environment of worship held many sound shadings between speech and music.