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Ancient Music

The one who sings, prays twice. —Saint Augustine

HUMAN HISTORY is rich with music, though music predates any *human* musical expression. From the beginning of time, music has filled the world. The moment God separated the land from the seas and filled the skies with birds, music was born. A walk in the woods is a symphony of sound. A visit to the ocean's shore is an opportunity to hear again the percussion of a world alive with sound.

With the music of nature often silenced in our modern culture, we are, nonetheless, both serenaded and bombarded with music, constantly. In our homes and cars, at the grocery store, in elevators and offices, even on the streets, we hear a diversity of sound and rhythm that would have mystified primitive human beings. Music today may bring tears or energize our bodies. Music may tell a tale or become a prayer. But this diversity of musical expression and the many venues in which we enjoy it is a recent development in the history of music.

In ancient times, music and ritual were inseparable. Through the pounding of drums before a hunt or celebrations of a plentiful harvest, music was integral to the life of primitive tribes. Across time and space, cultures and geography, music and life are inseparable—and have been since music was born in the heart of God. Music *affects* us, deeply, powerfully, and prophetically.

“There is something about human beings that needs to make music, something that insists on song,” writes Don E. Saliers. “The act of singing together is deeply and indelibly human. When we sing, words are given greater range and power than when we speak.”¹

To study the music of the ancient people who eventually became the Israelites is to acknowledge the vital, essential role music has played in the drama of the human race. Though scholarly research and archeological finds confirm the significance of music in ancient times and we know with certainty the need and desire of the people of God to express love and praise to their Creator, we know almost nothing of how the ancient music actually *sounded*. Much of the history of Hebrew music eludes musical scholars to this day. We have no knowledge of the ancient Hebrew scales, their methods of tuning instruments, or the integration of the human voice with instrumentation.

Ancient Music

The term “ancient music” has been used by historians to represent music up to 450 A.D. and includes the cultures of ancient Greece and the first few centuries of the Christian church. Our knowledge of music from this time is so limited, quite simply, because history was passed from generation to generation orally, by rote repetition of verse, poetry, and song. Few attempts were made by ancient cultures to preserve music or history by writing it down.

However, there are rare exceptions. In the 1950’s, an archeological dig in Syria uncovered a set of clay tablets with characters written in the ancient Hurrian language, a language used by citizens of the city of Ugarit in Mesopotamia as early as the third millennium or earlier. The tablets, measuring seven and a half inches long by three inches high, date back to approximately 1400 B.C. Remarkably, the tablets include detailed performance instructions for a singer accompanied by a harpist and contain a hymn to the goddess Nikal.² A limited understanding of the Hurrian language has resulted in only one translated phrase of the hymn: “Thou [the goddess] lovest them in [thy] heart.” Love was expressed in song at least five thousand years ago.

The music of ancient Greece was inseparable from poetry, dancing, and theatre, with the principal instrument being the human voice. Yet the music of this ancient civilization was almost entirely monophonic, consisting of a single melody without a contrasting line or harmony. In the case of the “Hurrian Hymn to Nikal,” the harpist

most likely played the same line the singer sang, perhaps with slight improvisations.

We also know from the work of scholars that in the sixth century B.C., choral music was utilized in drama with instruments such as the aulos, a type of oboe. After the fall of Athens in 404 B.C., an anti-intellectual reaction took place and gave birth to the professional musician who employed more elaborate melody and rhythms in music composition and performance.

Early Christians undoubtedly took their cue from the ancient Greeks by composing monophonic music. As the Christian faith spread throughout the world, it incorporated the styles, instrumentation, and rhythms of many indigenous cultures as the early disciples of Christ carried the message of the one true and holy God into foreign lands. But jumping ahead to the time of Christ and the early Christian church is moving ahead much too quickly. To look at *All the Music of the Bible* is first to look at Abram, the patriarch of the Hebrew people.

The Beginnings of a Nation

The history of the Israelites as recorded in the Old Testament reveals a landscape of physical, mental, and emotional difficulties, a series of challenges that became the story of humans at our best and our worst. Abram, eventually renamed Abraham (Gen. 17:5), was the patriarch of the Hebrew people. Abram was an old man of seventy-five years when he heard the call of God, instructing Abram to move his entire family and all of his possessions to Canaan, the chosen land.

In a magnificent showing of faith, Abraham left all that was familiar to lead his clan to Canaan (ca. 2090 B.C.), beginning the saga of God's chosen people chronicled in the Old Testament. Few pieces of literature rival these adventures for the drama and intrigue, romance and betrayals, hope and despair that characterized this journey into the unknown. Faith in God eroded with the fickleness of human emotions as the wandering clan confronted difficulties for which they were unprepared. Hunger, thirst, boredom, fear, jealousy, and even a longing for the "good old days" of enslavement were all part of the human

experience God used to prepare them for the promised land, a land which mirrored the inconsistencies of the Abrahamic clan.

This land of plenty and want flowed “with milk and honey” (Num. 13:27), as well as including vast wilderness areas void of vegetation. The diversity of the land itself symbolized both the faithful presence and seeming absence of this powerful God, known to the wandering tribe only as “Yahweh.”

A harsh climate, lack of many natural resources, and rugged terrain might seem an unlikely place for Yahweh to send His chosen people. An area of land measuring roughly 10,330 square miles, approximately the size of the state of Maryland, the territory to which Yahweh was leading His chosen people, was an area strategic for sea trade and commerce, a region forming the only intercontinental land bridge linking Asia and Europe with Africa, linking the Atlantic with the Indian Ocean by way of the Red Sea and the Mediterranean.

Not only was this land a strategic region geographically, but the difficulties the land presented forced the Israelites to rely on Yahweh for survival, demanding the trust and obedience Yahweh desired from the children of Israel. The journey that began the story of Abraham and Sarah and a fledgling nation is both spiritual and geographic, and the significance of music is integral to both.

Ancient Form and Function

The emphasis on music in the Old Testament offers assurance that music played an important part in the Hebrews’ worship of Yahweh. References to music, praise, and singing in the Bible outnumber references to prayer and praying almost 2 to 1; in other words, twice as many biblical passages mention music as do prayer! Obviously, the Word of God has something to say about the importance of music in the life of those who seek to know God. Writing in the fourth century, Saint Augustine observed, “Apart from those moments when the scriptures are being read or a sermon is preached, when . . . praying aloud or . . . speaking prayer, is there any time when the faithful are not singing?”

The most important form of music in ancient Hebrew life was the song; the essential purpose of instrumental music was to underlie a

song's thought, to make the sung word more easily understood. It is striking to discover that the use of musical instruments is especially mentioned in the early texts of the Old Testament, relatively little in the more recent, and not at all in the New Testament until the Revelation of John. This pattern is likely a corollary to the development of musical instruments themselves. As their potential grew and numbers increased, instrumental sounds became fuller and more pleasant. Instruments acquired a language of their own, independent of the spoken word, and instrumental music became self-sufficient, an expression alongside the spoken word.

Hebrews sang in unison without need of harmony or counterpoint. The effectiveness of the music depended on the number of singers and the size of the participating orchestra. The orchestra sometimes played instrumental interludes as indicated by the word *selah* (louder playing or "forte"), which appears more than seventy times in Psalms.

This emphasis is illustrated wonderfully in 1 Chr. 25 where the temple chorus and orchestra, numbering several thousand, were divided into twenty-four sections and trained and conducted by the sons of Asaph, Heman, and Jeduthun. No doubt the music inspired the worshippers as they remembered Yahweh's blessings during very difficult times.

In Israel, as elsewhere, no popular or family feast passed without music. Singing and dancing is present when sending loved ones off on a journey to another land. When Jacob sneaks away from his father-in-law, Laban follows him asking, "Why did you flee away secretly, and steal away from me, and not tell me; for I might have sent you away with joy and songs, with timbrel and harp?" (Gen. 31:27 NKJV).

The court and nobility engaged or "owned" singers, both men and women, while commoners feasted with singing to the harp and tambourine as well. When these feasts drew the Israelites into drunkenness and debauchery, the prophets used music as an example of luxury and dissoluteness in their prophecies.

Music also played a role in the act of prophesying itself. Elisha asked for music one day, and while a harpist played "the hand of the LORD came upon him [Elisha]" (2 Kgs. 3:15 NKJV). At times of mourning, at funerals and burials, music was played, perhaps intended to

drive away evil spirits. For example, we know when David played his harp for Saul, a tormented Saul was refreshed and made well:

David would take a harp and play it with his hand. Then Saul would become refreshed and well, and the distressing spirit would depart from him. (1 Sam. 16:23 NKJV)

Songs of the Targum

The historical and cultural significance of music in the life of the ancient people of God is underscored by a pivotal development. During the sixth and fifth centuries B.C., the Hebrew people were taken into captivity by the Babylonians and forbidden from speaking, singing or worshipping in Hebrew. The dominant language spoken by the Babylonian captors was Aramaic, and Aramaic became the official language of the Persian Empire. Their grief is captured in Ps. 137:

By the rivers of Babylon,
There we sat down, yea, 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,
And those who plundered us requested mirth,
Saying, "Sing us one of the songs of Zion!"

How shall we sing the LORD's song
In a foreign land?

If I forget you, O Jerusalem,
Let my right hand forget its skill!

If I do not remember you,
Let my tongue cling to the roof of my mouth—
If I do not exalt Jerusalem above my chief joy.
(Ps. 137:1–6 NKJV)



Assyrian Captives (perhaps Northern Israelites) Playing Harps³
Figure 1.1 from a bas-relief in the British Museum

Afraid of losing their songs along with their language, Ezra and the Hebrew scribes translated and paraphrased Hebrew songs and Scriptures into Aramaic, and the translated documents became known as the Targum, meaning “the translation.” Some of the songs in the Targum are the same texts we find in the Hebrew Old Testament today. That these sacred texts are recorded in both languages and survived throughout centuries demonstrates the significance these songs played in the memory and worship of Israel. By the time of Christ, Aramaic had become the common language of Palestine, and was, in fact, the

language Jesus himself spoke. During synagogue services of His time, one verse of the Hebrew text would be read, followed by a translation and explanation in Aramaic; by the second or third century A.D., only the Aramaic translation was read.

Unlike the Scriptures themselves, the Targum became a depository of commentary *in addition to* the translated sacred texts. The scribes who translated the texts would include observations, explanations, and historical notes, providing modern scholars with valuable insights and information about the religious life and daily practices of the Israelites.

In the earliest Targum, several songs are highlighted as particularly meaningful. Tradition attributes the first song to Adam, who rejoiced when his sins were forgiven. According to the story, when the Sabbath came, he put a covering on his lips and sang a psalm for the Sabbath day, though the actual song is lost and goes unrecorded in the translation.

Three songs of the Exodus follow. Moses led the children of Israel in singing when the Lord divided the Red Sea for them to pass (Exod. 15:1–21), and Israel sang again when Yahweh revealed the well of water at Beer (Num. 21:16–18). At the end of his life, Moses sang an exhortation to the house of Israel (Deut. 32:1–43). Again, though we don't know what the songs themselves actually *sounded* like, the texts of the songs follow a consistent theme and one which ultimately becomes one of the major themes of the Bible itself: that of deliverance.

The Targum goes on to note the song of Joshua, a song of conquest following the fight at Gibeon; the Scriptures record that the sun and moon stood still for thirty-six hours (Josh. 10:12–13). The Targum includes the subsequent songs and stories told through music of Israelite judges, prophets, and kings. Barak and Deborah sang the day the LORD delivered Sisera and his army into the hands of the children of Israel (Jdg. 5:1–31). Hannah sang when LORD gave her a son, Samuel (1 Sam. 2:1–10). David, the king of Israel, sang of the wonders the LORD had done for him and by the spirit of prophecy (2 Sam. 22:1–51). Solomon, his son and heir, also sang before Jehovah (see Song of Songs). Finally, the Targum celebrates Isaiah's restoration song in which he promises the captive Jews in Babylon that they shall sing again as though they were home in Israel on a festival night (Isa. 30:29–33).

What becomes clear when reading through these familiar stories of the Old Testament, looking specifically at what events brought forth songs of response, is that music was a primary tool of preserving the history of the chosen people of God. Long before the Holy Scriptures were committed to paper by scribes, the stories themselves were preserved by what scholars and historians call “oral tradition,” one generation telling the stories over and over to the next generation. What easier way to remember than putting those stories to music? The songs of the Old Testament tell us again and again that Yahweh, the one true and Holy Lord, delivers the faithful. Whatever the anguish of His people, whether from oppression, sorrow, injustice, want or need, God is with His people in a timeless covenant of love and redemption. Although we will examine many of these ancient texts more thoroughly in the coming chapters, what is worthy to note is the common melody that flows throughout all the music born in ancient times and places. That melody is one of divine love, calling, pursuing, delivering, and redeeming a chosen people. (For a list of well-known songs of the Bible, see Appendix B.)