

THE ROLE OF MUSIC IN THE NATION OF ISRAEL

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DR. DONALD SCOVILL
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BY
SHAWN TRUEMAN
BOX 230

AMBASSADOR BAPTIST COLLEGE

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It is obvious from a cursory examination of the Bible that the music of the nation of Israel had as its primary focus, Jehovah. Jehovah was the theme, the audience, and often the source of their music. The rare instances where music is mentioned outside of the scope of Jehovah, it is correlated with some sort of idolatry (Daniel 3,) or personal derision (Job 30:9). Because the behavior of the nation of Israel is to be an example for the Christian, it is important to know the role which music had for Israel. The music of Israel was God-centered, and served two basic functions: **The Worship of God**, and **The Witness of God**.

The Worship of God

Music was for Israel, an integral part of their worship of God. Worship for the Jewish people generally happened in three areas. There was first the Levitical worship which included the temple ceremonies, offerings and feast days; second, there were opportunities for personal worship; and third, times of public, or corporate worship. In all of these we find music, singing, or instrumentation.

The books of 1 and 2 Chronicles reveal the role of music as a part of the Levitical system of worship. King David set many things in place to insure that the music of temple worship would be done by the best qualified musicians available (1 Chronicles 15:22-27) and that it would be done orderly.

31 And these are they whom David set over the service of song in the house of the LORD, after that the ark had rest.

32 And they ministered before the dwelling place of the tabernacle of the congregation with singing, until Solomon had built the house of the LORD in Jerusalem: and then they waited on their office according to their order.

(1 Chronicles 6:31-32, KJV).

6 And the priests waited on their offices: the Levites also with instruments of musick of the LORD, which David the king had made to praise the LORD, because his mercy endureth for ever, when David praised by their ministry; and the priests sounded trumpets before them, and all Israel stood.

(2 Chronicles 7:6, KJV).

16 And David spake to the chief of the Levites to appoint their brethren to be the singers with instruments of musick, psalteries and harps and cymbals, sounding, by lifting up the voice with joy.

(1 Chronicles 15:16, KJV).

Another instance where we see the priests involving music in their worship is at the feast days. Although these times (as with all the Levitical services) were public, they are of

a different emphasis than that which will be discussed later. The time of the feasts was a time of pilgrimage to Jerusalem and it is believed that the *Psalms of Degrees* were sung by those making their journey to the Holy City. The celebration of the feasts would also include praising the LORD with music.

21 And the children of Israel that were present at Jerusalem kept the feast of unleavened bread seven days with great gladness: and the Levites and the priests praised the LORD day by day, singing with loud instruments unto the LORD.
(2 Chronicles 30:21, KJV).

The Levites were also commanded to use music as a part of the service of offering the sacrifices to the LORD.

18 Also Jehoiada appointed the offices of the house of the LORD by the hand of the priests the Levites, whom David had distributed in the house of the LORD, to offer the burnt offerings of the LORD, as it is written in the law of Moses, with rejoicing and with singing, as it was ordained by David.
(2 Chronicles 23:18, KJV).

27 And Hezekiah commanded to offer the burnt offering upon the altar. And when the burnt offering began, the song of the LORD began also with the trumpets, and with the instruments ordained by David king of Israel.

28 And all the congregation worshipped, and the singers sang, and the trumpeters sounded: and all this continued until the burnt offering was finished.
(2 Chronicles 29:27-28, KJV).

With the records of scripture showing hundreds of singers and instrumentalists involved in the temple worship services, it is clear that God intended this to be an important aspect of the relationship He had with Israel. But there is also a wonderful emphasis placed upon music and singing as a part of the individual's relationship with God.

Many of the Psalms, which are referred to as "Israel's Hymnal," were written as statements of an individual's personal worship and relationship with God. We find Godly music in 1 Samuel 16:16 as the source of spiritual comfort for King Saul as he strayed away from God. Psalm 83 is an individual's personal entreaty for the LORD's help in time of trouble. An example of an individual's praise to God is seen in Psalm 28:7:

7 The LORD is my strength and my shield; my heart trusted in him, and I am helped: therefore my heart greatly rejoiceth; and with my song will I praise him.
(Psalms 28:7, KJV).

As mentioned above, this examination of the role of music in public worship is not that of the Levitical services, but of that worship which was offered in conjunction with some public ceremony or event. Due to their realization of God's hand at work in their lives, the

Jews would often offer praise and gratitude to God at the coronation of a king, (2 Chronicles 23:13) or celebration of military victory. (1 Samuel 18:6) Music was also a part of the dedication of the walls in Nehemiah 12:27.

27 And at the dedication of the wall of Jerusalem they sought the Levites out of all their places, to bring them to Jerusalem, to keep the dedication with gladness, both with thanksgivings, and with singing, with cymbals, psalteries, and with harps.
(Nehemiah 12:27, KJV).

These and other similar public events afforded a great opportunity for the Israelites to worship corporately in song and music.

The Witness of God

Music was not only used to worship, praise, and thank the LORD for his wonderful works to the children of men, but it was also used express the character of God; educating the people of Israel about who God was and the things that He had done.

1 <<A Psalm or Song for the sabbath day.>> It is a good thing to give thanks unto the LORD, and to sing praises unto thy name, O most High:
2 To shew forth thy lovingkindness in the morning, and thy faithfulness every night,
3 Upon an instrument of ten strings, and upon the psaltery; upon the harp with a solemn sound.
(Psalms 92:1-3, KJV).

The Psalms are the primary scriptures dealing with a musical expression of God's character. We see His loving kindness, and faithfulness in the above passage and His greatness and power in Psalm 66. Psalm 46:1 reveals the refuge and strength found in the LORD. As the Israelites sang these songs and taught them to their children, the attributes of God were engraved upon their hearts.

Music was also a tool of instruction for the nation of Israel. Moses is instructed in Deuteronomy 31:19-22 to teach a song to the children of Israel so that it would witness for the LORD of what he had done through the Egyptian captivity, the Exodus, and wilderness wanderings. A *maschil* is a psalm of instruction and it would be used to rehearse history for the nation, to bring some deed back to remembrance or to act as a light for some future event.

Psalm 18 and the Song of Moses in Deuteronomy are two of several songs which detail a portion of Israel's history. Psalm 77 reveals the psalmist remembering in song some comforting aspects of God's character during his time of trial. Psalms 19 and 119

teach of the power and truth of God's word.

Inasmuch as several Psalms are Messianic in nature, music also served as an educator of things yet to come. 1 Chronicles 25:1-6 describes the musicians of David prophesying, setting forth God's word in music; and we see some of their works revealing future events. (Psalm 75 and 76) The scriptures also reveal the hope of a "new song" for the nation of Israel. A song that God would place in their heart. In some instances, we see this fulfilled in the history of Israel, but it is also clearly revealed in Revelation 14:3 as something yet to come.

The music of Israel, with God as its focal point, served as an indispensable tool of the LORD by which He glorified Himself in worship and taught the nation about Himself.