



## Prayer and Praise in Ancient Israel

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**A**NCIENT LYRES, hand drums, cymbals and trumpets are no longer in use for worship, but the voices of prayer are never silent; and the music traditions of the Hebrew Bible continue to urge us to praise the Lord. How can we not sing—with the worshipers of three-thousand-years past and all the hosts of heaven—lifting up our voices in psalms and other sacred songs to serve the Lord with gladness? Now, as in ancient Israel, the psalmist invites us: “Make a joyful noise to the Lord, all you lands!” and, “Come into [God’s] presence with singing (Psalm 100).

Who were the musicians who led prayer and praise in ancient Israel? A common error is to assume that Israel’s musicians were also the priests of Israel. The bible tells us about priests: what they wore; the arrangements they made for the altar, tabernacle and temple; and the sacrifices they offered. They may also have played a minor role as musicians—sounding the trumpets or blowing the shofar—but the creators and performers of

Israel’s worship music were distinctly not the temple priests.

We can now identify four music traditions that were important in Israel’s worship. The first tradition is the solo psalmist who accompanied himself on the lyre. The second is the instrumental ensemble often used in processions. The third is the chorus of women playing hand drums and dancing. The fourth, finally, is the great temple tradition involving professional musicians, string orchestras, cymbals, trumpets and the psalm repertoire.

### The individual singer

The solo lyre player and psalmist par excellence was David, the shepherd boy and king of Israel:

And whenever the evil spirit from God was upon Saul, David took the lyre and played it with his hand; so Saul was refreshed, and all was well (1 Samuel 16:23).

And David spoke to the Lord the words of this song on the day when the Lord delivered him from the hand of

all his enemies. . . . "The Lord is my rock, and my fortress, and my deliverer" (2 Samuel 22:1-2).

The music tradition exemplified by David is the individual singer who accompanies him- or herself on the lyre and sings psalms that are often called "laments of the individual." David, the keeper of his father's sheep, Saul's armor bearer, Israel's greatest king, was also honored as the fountainhead of Israel's psalm tradition. It was David who organized the families of singers "as ministers before the ark of the Lord, to invoke, to thank, and to praise the Lord, the God of Israel" (1 Chronicles 16:4). But David finds his most revered place among the music traditions of the Hebrew Bible as a singer of psalms and player of the *kinnor* (lyre).

Many texts testify to David as individual singer and lyre player. Among the more noteworthy are the stories of David soothing Saul in his illness (1 Samuel 16); David's lament over Saul and Jonathan after they had been killed in battle (2 Samuel 2:17-27); the psalm of thanks for deliverance from his enemies (2 Samuel 22:1-51); his "last words" when he declared that God had made an everlasting covenant with him (2 Samuel 23:1-7); and the many "I" psalms attributed to him (e.g., Psalms 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 11, 12, 13).

The instrument David played, the *kinnor*, was assuredly a lyre, not a harp. Pictures of lyres and statuettes of individuals playing lyres have been found in ancient Canaan and Israel, but so far no pictures or statuettes of harps have been found. A harp is triangular in shape; a lyre is rectangular. Two arms rise from the lyre's soundbox, with a small rod connecting them at the top. The strings are stretched from the soundbox to the rod and knotted. Small sticks are sometimes inserted in the knots to be used in tuning the strings.

Two types of lyres are known from the ancient world. One had arms of unequal length. Often the arms curved outward or inward. The other type of lyre had equal-length arms. Sometimes the lyre was held upright; sometimes it was slanted forward at right angles to the body.

Lyres were known throughout the ancient Near East. The Sumerians played lyres shaped like bulls. Fourteenth-century (B.C.E.) texts found in the city of Ugarit north of present-day Beirut describe the god Baal playing a *kinnor*. The city of Megiddo in Palestine had a long history of lyre players. The earliest depiction of the asymmetrical lyre is

scratched in the pavement of a sanctuary in Megiddo (ca. 3100 B.C.E.). An individual playing an asymmetrical lyre is depicted on a twelfth-century carving on ivory and on an eleventh-century jug, both from Megiddo.

From the south of Judah come depictions of the equal-armed lyre. One appears on a nineteenth-century B.C.E. tomb in Egypt. The lyre is being played by a member of a small tribal group, probably a family of smiths from the Sinai. A much later drawing on a jar from Sinai shows a seated female figure playing the lyre.

Of great significance is a seal found near Jerusalem showing a lyre with arms of unequal length curving gently outward at the top. The seal, which has been dated to the seventh century B.C.E., is inscribed in Hebrew, "belonging to Maadanah, the king's daughter." Though it comes from a period about three hundred years after David, this seal is the best picture we have of a lyre used in Judah.

Many psalms refer to the lyre, but not all of those references are examples of the individual lyre-player and psalmist tradition. The clearest references to that tradition are Psalm 43:4 and Psalm 49:5. Other examples are Psalms 57:7-9 and 71:22-23, but those verses also include references to another instrument called the *nebel*.

While there is consensus that the *kinnor* was a lyre, there is less agreement on the meaning of *nebel*. The Revised Standard Version translates it as "harp." Since no contemporaneous pictures of harps have been found in the region, however, it seems more likely that the *nebel* was a lyre. Perhaps one of the two, *kinnor* or *nebel*, was the equal-armed lyre and the other the asymmetrical lyre. This is only a conjecture, however, and at the present time we have no basis for further clarifying the issue.

As so many psalms are "I" psalms—the prayers or songs of an individual worshiper—it is fair to imagine that many were originally part of the repertoire of the individual lyre playing psalmist. Many of those psalms begin with cries for deliverance from the psalmist's enemies. They detail the singer's sufferings but count on God to deliver the singer—or the singer's community or both—as God has done before, and they often end with a vow to praise God in the sanctuary. They are appealing because they so majestically express the passion of pain and the joy of deliverance. The singer of Psalm 43 (3-4) exclaims:

Oh send out thy light and thy truth;  
let them lead me,  
let them bring me to thy holy hill  
and to thy dwelling!  
Then I will go to the altar of God,  
to God my exceeding joy;  
and I will praise thee with the lyre,  
O God, my God.

The individual psalmist was most prominent in the worship of Israel before the growth of the large levitical choirs described in Chronicles. Though the psalms of this tradition include references to worshiping God in the sanctuary, their setting is not necessarily that of the first temple in Jerusalem. Until late in the history of Judah, there were many sanctuaries in both the northern and southern kingdoms of Israel and Judah.

Many psalms of the individual psalmists ultimately became part of the temple choirs' official repertory, which has been preserved for us in the book of Psalms. A few psalms—such as the lament and the songs attributed to David in 2 Samuel and the psalm in Jonah 2:2-9—were preserved outside the psalter. Were all the psalms attributed to David actually written and sung by him? Probably not. The attribution does testify, however, to the enduring importance of the musical tradition of the individual psalmist accompanying him- or herself on the lyre.

#### Prophet bands and their instruments

The small instrumental ensemble described in 1 Samuel 10:5-6 was a popular musical tradition in Israel:

As you come down to the city, you will meet a band of prophets coming down from the high place with lyre [*nebel*], hand drum, pipes, and lyre [*kinnor*] before them, prophesying. Then the spirit of the Lord will come upon you, and you shall prophesy with them and be turned into another man.

Such ensembles played not only for religious celebrations but for military expeditions and various other feasts and festivities. In this text, Samuel describes a band of prophets who will be coming down from a "high place" (*bama*), a sanctuary either within or just outside the city, and often consisting of an open-air altar near a grove of trees. Samuel, who was both a priest and a prophet, was sure that the band of prophets would be playing

a certain set of instruments as they came down the hill. He also expected that the effect of this meeting would be so powerful that the spirit of the Lord would overcome Saul and turn him into "another man."

Abundant evidence of this small instrumental ensemble has been found wherever peoples of semitic background have had influence. The ensemble consisted of from three to five instruments, including one or two stringed instruments (the *kinnor* and *nebel*), a wind instrument (the *halil*, a double pipe), the hand drum (*tof*) and often, cymbals or another percussion instrument, the *sistrum*. Some of the earliest pictures of such ensembles are found in Egypt. About 1500 B.C.E., the traditional Egyptian men's harp and long flute ensemble was replaced by an "orchestra" of semitic instruments played by women. Texts from the Syrian city of Ugarit describe such an ensemble played by the gods at a feast.

A terra-cotta stand depicting a typical ensemble has been found in Ashdod and dated to the tenth century B.C.E., making it contemporary with David and Solomon. The instrumentalists form the legs of the stand. One plays the hand drum, another the pipe, and a third the lyre. The hands of another figure, a woman, are broken, leaving it unclear whether she is singing or playing a different instrument. A larger male figure is either shouting or blowing another pipe.

Various bowls, plates, boxes and bas-reliefs found throughout the area and dated from the ninth to the seventh centuries B.C.E. picture similar ensembles. Some include groups of singers or dancers. Some are military bands, while others form a procession, bringing offerings to a male or female deity. In the book of Isaiah, 5:12 and 24:8 describe a social context for such ensembles, while 30:32 refers to a military context. Job 21:12 associates the ensemble with prosperity, material well-being and the rejection of God and God's demands.

Our quotation from 1 Samuel suggests that the bands of prophets which existed from Samuel's time to Elisha's (eleventh to the ninth century B.C.E.) played the instruments as part of their prophesying. The music helped to stir up the state of consciousness conducive to oracles. See, for example, 2 Kings 3:13-16, in which Elisha needs a "minstrel" to induce the spirit of the Lord.

The ensemble was also used for processions. When David the king brought the ark out of the house of Abinadab up to Jerusalem, he did so with great celebration and merrymaking. In 2 Samuel 6:5, we read of songs, stringed instruments (*kinnor* and *nebel*), hand drums, cymbals and an unidentified rattling instrument (cf. the description in 1 Chron 13:8). Psalm 68:24-25 describes a more formal procession in the sanctuary:

Thy solemn processions are seen, O God,  
the processions of my God, my King,  
into the sanctuary—  
the singers in front, the players of instruments  
last,  
between them the maidens playing hand  
drums.

The psalms rarely refer to the use of such an ensemble in worship; perhaps Psalm 81:2-3 is the exception. Perhaps the tradition became so associated with ribald feasts and noisy rituals that it finally lacked spiritual meaning. The prophet Amos (5:23-24) resoundingly rejected such worship:

Take away from me the noise of your songs;  
to the melody of your stringed instruments  
I will not listen.  
But let justice roll down like waters,  
and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream.

The instrumental ensemble, with one or two stringed instruments, hand drum, cymbals and double-pipe, was a noisy assemblage suitable to merrymaking, processions and inducing prophetic states. The ensemble was also strongly associated with the worship of other gods, as attested by depictions on offering bowls and stands throughout that part of the world. As the prophets sought to bring the people's attention back to the Lord and the covenant's ethical dimensions, the instrumental ensemble was rejected in worship. The words of worship became increasingly important, and more subtle instrumentation was needed.

Only later could all the musical instruments and traditions of Israel be affirmed in offering praise to God. Psalms 149 and 150, which bring the book of Psalms to a doxological close, look beyond worship in the sanctuary to the outpouring of praise from "everything that breathes." All the instruments are invited to "praise the Lord." Once again, as in the early days of Israel, the noisier

instruments of the ensemble add their exuberance to worship.

### The women's chorus

The first of Israel's music traditions to be described, and the oldest, is attested in Exodus 15 (vv. 20-21):

Then Miriam, the prophetess, the sister of Aaron, took a hand drum in her hand; and all the women went out after her with hand drums and dancing. And Miriam sang to them: "Sing to the Lord, for [the Lord] has triumphed gloriously; the horse and his rider [the Lord] has thrown into the sea."

In the books of Exodus, Judges and 1 and 2 Samuel, we find reference to the music traditions of the women of Israel. When Israel was brought safely to the other side of the Reed Sea while the pursuing Egyptian army drowned in the waters, Israel's most ancient memory is that Miriam recorded the saving event in a song of praise to the Lord. She sang, played the hand drum, and led the women in dances called *mecholot*.

Women also play the role of praising the Lord in song and dance for salvation from Israel's enemies in Judges 11:34, in which Jephthah's daughter welcomes Jephthah on his return from defeating the Ammonites, and in 1 Samuel 18:6, in which the women greet Saul and David. This tradition, like that of the ensembles, is not unique to Israel; David hopes the daughters of the Philistines will not tell the news of Saul and Jonathan's deaths in the streets of Gath and Ashelon (2 Samuel 1:20). Psalm 68:11 refers to the great female host who bear the tidings of the Lord's coming. In the song of Deborah in Judges 5, Deborah promises, "To the Lord I will sing, I will make melody to the Lord, the God of Israel" and the chorus implores her to "Utter a song!"

The characteristic musical features of that tradition were the hand drum and the *mecholot*. The term *mecholot* seems to be related to a term in the akkadian dialect meaning "games" or "dances." In Hebrew, however, *mecholot* is not used as a synonym for dancing but reserved for the form of movement peculiar to the women's chorus tradition. A group of women, or an individual woman like Miriam or Deborah who was prominent in the community, would lead the *mecholot*. Occasionally,

the whole community was said to *mecholot*, as in Exodus 32:6; but never does a man *mecholot* alone.

The hand drum was a circular frame covered with a membrane on one or both sides. According to the Talmud (Quinnim III.6), the hides were taken from horned animals, either the ram or the wild goat. The hand drum did not have the jingling metal platelets associated with the tambourine. About twenty to twenty-five inches in diameter, the hand drum was designed to be held in the left hand at right angles to the body. Complex rhythmic patterns and differences in sound could be obtained by various finger movements on different parts of the drum.

The best evidence for women's drum choruses comes from Egyptian paintings in which such choruses are seen offering greetings to a god being carried in procession by the priests. Some choruses have a woman leader, and some are shown dancing. Those paintings date to the period contemporary with the Exodus, about the thirteenth century B.C.E. They provide a fascinating backdrop to the description of Miriam and the women's celebration.

After the rise of the monarchy and the development of the temple, the women's music tradition disappeared. Its provenance most likely had been the country sanctuaries where the older traditions were preserved, and the tradition never became part of the worship in the Jerusalem sanctuary. The role of women in celebrating the Lord's victories was not forgotten, however.

When the prophet Jeremiah describes the new exodus, he pictures Israel as a young woman adorned with hand drums and "going forth in the dance [*machol*] of the merrymakers" (Jeremiah 31:4). When the new exodus is complete and all have returned to the heights of Zion, he continues, "then shall the maidens rejoice in the dance [*machol*]." The composer of Psalm 150 also links hand drum and *machol* when he lists all who are called to praise the Lord.

The women's songs of salvation apparently were not included in the repertory of the temple. They may have been recorded in the song collections referred to in 2 Samuel 1:18, Joshua 10:13 ("The Book of Jashar") and Numbers 21:14 ("The Book of the Wars of the Lord"). Careful linguistic study of the songs attributed to women, including Miriam's song (Exodus 15:1-18, 21), Deborah's

song (Judges 5) and Hannah's song (1 Samuel 2:1-10), indicates that they were written earlier than most of the psalms. Along with other songs now included in the narrative sections of the bible, the songs of the women's choruses form the earliest of Israel's musical traditions.

### The temple choirs

The psalms that enrich our worship today were the hymns of the temple choirs. Although some of them were originally composed and sung in sanctuaries far from Jerusalem, they became part of the temple repertory as small collections of psalms were brought together to form the present-day psalter.

These psalms are a gift from the choirs and music leaders of long ago. Most of them were sung in Solomon's first temple (ca. 950-582 B.C.E.). A few were the product of the exile (582-late sixth century B.C.E.), and others were composed in the period of the second temple (beginning in 515 B.C.E.).

Our major source of information about the temple choirs is Chronicles 1 and 2, which are among the latest books of the Hebrew Bible. The levitical choirs described in Chronicles may be more like the temple choirs of the chronicler's day than the ancient choirs he purports to describe. It seems quite unlikely that David had such an elaborate musical establishment in his day, even though the tradition of the temple music system having its origins in the united monarchy of David and Solomon may well be accurate.

The chronicler's assumption that all members of the choirs were Levites, while contrary to the evidence on the role of Levites in other books of the Hebrew Bible, no doubt reflects the situation when Chronicles was written (fourth century B.C.E.). Chronicles asserts that the temple musicians were descended from the three sons of Levi, Kohath, Gershom and Merari.

According to this tradition, the men whom David appointed over the "service of song in the house of the Lord, after the ark rested there" were Heman of the line of Kohath, Asaph of the line of Gershom and Ethan of the line of Merari (cf. 1 Chronicles 15:16-17). These three sang and sounded the bronze cymbals while another group played stringed instruments (*nebel*) "according to

I. INDIVIDUAL SINGER PLAYING LYRE



From Beni-Hasan tomb, 1800 BC

EQUAL ARMED LYRE PLAYED BY MEMBER OF TRIBAL GROUP IN EGYPT

Alamoth." Yet another group was to "lead with lyres according to the Sheminith." Finally, a group of priests, with Chenaniah as their leader, blew the trumpets.

The major instruments in the temple orchestra were the stringed instruments, the *nebel* and the *kinnor*. Temple worship centered on the expression of praise, and words were central to the experience. Stringed instruments are suitable for accompanying singers, since the words of the song can be heard over the soft sound of the strings. Cymbals and trumpets were used for announcement or accent.

In 1 Chronicles 16:5, Asaph is called "the chief." He and Zadok the priest are in charge of the tabernacle in the high place at Gibeon. In 16:41, Asaph's musical companions are Heman and Jeduthun (another version of the name Ethan or the name of another companion replacing him). The only indication that at one time women were part of the temple choirs occurs in 25:5:

All these were the sons of Heman the king's seer, according to the promise of God to exalt him, for God had given Heman fourteen sons and three daughters. They were all under the direction of their father for the music in the house of the Lord.

We also have other evidence that Asaph, Heman and Ethan or Jeduthun were revered as leaders of the temple choirs. In 1 Kings 4:31, Solomon is called wiser than Ethan the Ezrahite and Heman, Calcol and Darda the "sons of Machol." Psalm 88 is called "a maskil of Heman the Ezrahite," and Psalm 89 is "a maskil of Ethan the Ezrahite." Jeduthun is named in the heading of Psalm 77. Psalms 73–83 are all psalms of Asaph. While tradition has preserved the names of these musicians, a number of psalms are attributed to the "sons of Korah"—a name not mentioned in Chronicles.

Only the "sons of Asaph" returned from exile in Babylon. The lists in Ezra 2:41 and Nehemiah 7:44 agree that from 128 to 148 "sons of Asaph" returned, along with an additional 200 singers who were not of the levitical Asaphites (cf. Ezra 2:65 and Nehemiah 7:67). A hundred years or so after the return from exile, Mattaniah is named as a "son of Asaph" and "the leader to begin the thanksgiving in prayer" (Nehemiah 11:17). His great-grandson, Zechariah, leads at the dedication of the

II. INSTRUMENTAL ENSEMBLE



FOUR MEN IN ENSEMBLE PLAYING THE HAND DRUM, UNEQUAL-ARMED LYRE, EQUAL ARMED LYRE AND PIPE, FROM KARATEPE BAS-RELIEF (10TH CENTURY B.C.).

III. WOMEN'S CHORUS WITH HAND DRUMS AND DANCING



EGYPTIAN WOMEN'S CHORUS WITH HAND DRUM, DANCING, LIMESTONE RELIEF FROM SAKKARAH (13TH CENTURY B.C.).

rebuilt wall of Jerusalem (Nehemiah 12:35). There were never enough tithes to support all the Levites, so they took turns in the choirs and, as Nehemiah notes, supported themselves by farming in villages built outside Jerusalem (see Nehemiah 12:28–29).

A description of the liturgy in the book of Sirach (50:11–12, 16–18) gives us a rare insight into the service of the temple at the time of the high priest Simon (219–196 B.C.E.):

When he put on his glorious robe  
and clothed himself with superb perfection  
and went up to the holy altar,  
he made the court of the sanctuary glorious.  
And when he received the portions from the  
hands of the priests,  
as he stood by the hearth of the altar  
with a garland of brethren around him,  
he was like a young cedar on Lebanon. . . .

Then the sons of Aaron shouted,  
they sounded the trumpets of hammered  
work,  
they made a great noise to be heard  
for remembrance before the Most High.  
Then all the people together made haste  
and fell to the ground upon their faces  
to worship their Lord,  
the Almighty, God Most High.  
And the singers praised him with their voices  
in sweet and full-toned melody.

The service, which may have occurred on the Day of Atonement (the only day on which the Lord's name could be spoken) ended with prayer and Simon's blessing.

Final reflections

Each of the four musical traditions described in this essay was very important in the worship of ancient Israel. Yet the traditions represented by Miriam and the women and by the prophets' instrumental ensembles faded from view as greater emphasis was placed on temple worship. Those traditions and that of the soloist and lyre player were not unique to Israel; they were also practiced in the larger culture of which Israel was part. Consequently, the most distinctive and enduring of Israel's music traditions was that of the temple. Not only did the temple psalmists create poetry of unparalleled beauty, but their orchestras, made up of two types of stringed instruments and using trumpets and cymbals for accent, must have provided the loveliest of musical background for the singers.

Nevertheless, all four music traditions of the Hebrew Bible must continue to contribute inspiration and encouragement to women and men in contemporary worship situations, as they strive to create new forms and styles of praise and petition. Though the sounds of ancient lyres, hand drums, cymbals and trumpets have died away, our congregations of all kinds will continue to resound with "thanks to the Lord of lords, . . . forever" (Psalm 136:3).

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