

Biblical Theology and the Arts: Music and the Bible

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Music is, or should be, a vital part of the Christian life.

I suspect most Christians have never considered how big a role music plays in Scripture. Our ideas of “Christian music” tend to focus in on the particular genres of music that we like, whether classical (for example, Handel’s *Messiah*), hymns (“And Can It Be” is a particular favorite of mine), or contemporary (“We believe” would be an example here). These preferences have led to the “worship wars” of the past decades in American Evangelicalism, as advocates of one style of music are pitted against others over what is the “proper” or “best” way to worship.

That in itself betrays several misunderstandings: music is not the same as worship; it isn’t about us and our preferences; we are to treat others with respect and due humility; etc. While there is much to be said about biblical worship and liturgics, I am not going to discuss that here. Instead, this article will focus on surveying music’s place in the biblical story to help us appreciate just how important it should be in our lives.

Let’s start with music in worship.

Music in Old Testament Worship

1 Chronicles contains several passages that discuss the role of musicians in worship. The first of these discusses the provisions for bringing the Ark of the Covenant into Jerusalem:

David also commanded the chiefs of the Levites to appoint their brothers as the singers who should play loudly on musical instruments, on harps and lyres and cymbals, to raise sounds of joy. So the Levites appointed Heman the son of Joel; and of his brothers Asaph the son of Berechiah; and of the sons of Merari, their brothers, Ethan the son of Kushaiah; and with them their brothers of the second order, Zechariah, Jaaziel, Shemiramoth, Jehiel, Unni, Eliab, Benaiah, Maaseiah, Mattithiah, Eliphelehu, and Mikneiah, and the gatekeepers Obed-edom and Jeiel. The singers, Heman, Asaph, and Ethan, were to sound bronze cymbals; Zechariah, Aziel, Shemiramoth, Jehiel, Unni, Eliab, Maaseiah, and Benaiah were to play harps according to Alamoth; but Mattithiah, Eliphelehu, Mikneiah, Obed-edom, Jeiel, and Azariah were to lead with lyres according to the Sheminith. Chenaniah, leader of the Levites in music, should direct the music, for he understood it. Berechiah and Elkanah were to be gatekeepers for the ark. Shebaniah, Joshaphat, Nethanel, Amasai, Zechariah, Benaiah, and Eliezer, the priests, should blow the trumpets before the ark of God. Obed-edom and Jehiah were to be gatekeepers for the ark. (1 Chron. 15:16-24)

Here we see singers under a director singing and accompanied by cymbals, harps, lyres, and trumpets.

Later, David appointed some of these same men to perform music at the sanctuary prior to the building of the Temple (1 Chron. 25). The text tells us that individual singers, large choirs and an orchestra were

all part of the worship at the king's sanctuary. Solomon continued these arrangements when he built the Temple.

David did not only organize the musicians for worship, he also wrote songs, as did several of the men he appointed to lead worship.

The book of Psalms—a Greek word that means “Songs”—is the largest book in the Bible. The Psalms include not only “worship songs,” but laments, reflections on life, complaints, expressions of repentance, even curses on enemies. The full range of human emotions is expressed in the Psalms.

The Psalms have been sung from time out of mind in Jewish worship, and many were clearly written to be performed responsively as part of the worship in the Temple (e.g. Ps. 136). The Psalter also became both the hymnbook and prayer book of Christians; as St. Augustine said, “He who sings prays twice.” Singing the Psalms was part of the regular liturgy of the monasteries and was the heart of the devotional life of many great saints over the centuries.

And, of course, Ps. 150 tells us that we are to worship God with the full range of musical instruments and with dance.

Worship in Heaven

Since the Temple itself was a copy of the heavenly sanctuary (Heb.8:5), it is not surprising that we find music an integral part of the life of Heaven. In Isaiah's vision of the throne room of Heaven, he saw the four living creatures doing antiphonal praise to God. In the book of Revelation, we see similar spoken or chanted liturgical responses as well as songs, sometimes sung to the accompaniment of harps (e.g. Rev. 5:9, 14:3, 19:1). It is hard to escape the conclusion that God loves music, and that it should be integral to worshipping him.

Music and the Spirit

But just as worship is more than music, so music goes beyond corporate worship.

Music was used in the Old Testament in connection with prophecy—in fact, it seems that prophets typically gave their prophecies accompanied by instrumental music. For example, in 1 Sam. 10:5, Samuel tells Saul that he will meet prophets coming down from the high place at Gibeath-elohim prophesying to the music of harp, tambourine, flute, and lyre. (Perhaps that's why some translations refer to this as a band of prophets.) And in the example of David's arrangements for worship in 1 Chron. 25, the text tells us that

David and the chiefs of the service also set apart for the service the sons of Asaph, and of Heman, and of Jeduthun, who prophesied with lyres, with harps, and with cymbals. The list of those who did the work and of their duties was: Of the sons of Asaph: Zaccur, Joseph, Nethaniah, and Asharelah, sons of Asaph, under the direction of Asaph, who prophesied under the direction of the king. Of Jeduthun, the sons of Jeduthun: Gedaliah, Zeri, Jeshaiiah, Shimei, Hashabiah, and Mattithiah, six, under the direction of their father Jeduthun, who prophesied with the lyre in thanksgiving and praise to the LORD. (1 Chron 25:1-3)

There are other examples as well. Prophetic inspiration was thus often given in the context of music.

This use of music is likely related to the New Testament teaching that being filled with Spirit is evidenced by “addressing one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody to the

Lord with your heart” (Eph. 5:19) Since the fullness of the Spirit leads to music, it is no surprise that prophecy—itself an expression of the Spirit speaking through us—should also be stimulated by music.

Music also seems to have real power in the spiritual realms. We see an example early in David’s career:

Now the Spirit of the LORD departed from Saul, and a harmful spirit from the LORD tormented him. And Saul’s servants said to him, “Behold now, a harmful spirit from God is tormenting you. Let our lord now command your servants who are before you to seek out a man who is skillful in playing the lyre, and when the harmful spirit from God is upon you, he will play it, and you will be well.” So Saul said to his servants, “Provide for me a man who can play well and bring him to me.” One of the young men answered, “Behold, I have seen a son of Jesse the Bethlehemite, who is skillful in playing, a man of valor, a man of war, prudent in speech, and a man of good presence, and the LORD is with him.” Therefore Saul sent messengers to Jesse and said, “Send me David your son, who is with the sheep.” And Jesse took a donkey laden with bread and a skin of wine and a young goat and sent them by David his son to Saul. And David came to Saul and entered his service. And Saul loved him greatly, and he became his armor-bearer. And Saul sent to Jesse, saying, “Let David remain in my service, for he has found favor in my sight.” And whenever the harmful spirit from God was upon Saul, David took the lyre and played it with his hand. So Saul was refreshed and was well, and the harmful spirit departed from him. (1 Sam. 16:14-26)

David was functionally able to exorcise a harmful spirit simply through playing his harp. This by itself should demonstrate the spiritual power that music can convey.

Music should thus be an integral part of our worship and of our Christian life. T. M. Moore, Chuck Colson’s theological advisor, argues that singing is a spiritual discipline that we should all practice, and looking at this brief survey of ways in which music functions in Scripture bears out this view. Scripture shows that all kinds of music—singing solo or choral, instrumental, congregational, and professional performance—can and should have its place in worship. We need to move beyond our disagreements about our stylistic preferences and look for good quality music and words that properly recognize God’s glory and greatness and incorporate these regularly into our spiritual lives.