



Musical Instruments and Musicians in Worship in the Bible:

The Old Testament

Last time, we considered why singing and making music to the Lord in worship is so pivotal to Christian worship. I proposed that there are weighty biblical and church historical grounds for devoting considerable attention to which musical instruments are most suitable for inclusion in the church's song, especially since our churches are facing a changing reality when it comes to musical instruments and musicians.

The Bible, of course, is the best place to begin mapping a good course. In this article, we will begin a survey of the biblical data. Remarkably, the Old Testament has a lot more to say about this than the New. More than one article is needed to do justice to the Old Testament data. So, let's get started.

Among the patriarchs

Musical instruments were an integral part of the human cultural enterprise right from the beginning. Early in the Bible is found the story of Jubal, who is named *"the father of all who play the harp and flute"* (Gen 4:21). From the earliest references to musical instruments in the Bible, furthermore, there is every indication that musical instruments were mostly used to accompany singing. Laban told his fugitive son-in-law Jacob, who had fled with Laban's daughters and grandchildren, that he would have wanted to host a festive send-off *"with joy and singing to the music of tambourines and harps"* (Gen 31:27).

During the exodus

The prophetess Miriam, and the women who joined her in praising God after the exodus, sang and danced to the accompaniment of tambourines (Ex 15:20-21). The first recorded instance of God explicitly commanding his people to use musical instruments in worship appears already in the Pentateuch. In the wilderness, God commanded Moses to make two trumpets of hammered silver (Num 10:1-10). These trumpets, as it says there, were to be used to gather the assembly or the leaders, to signal the breaking of camp, to invoke Yahweh's help during war, and to commit the offerings to God as a memorial during the appointed feasts and times of rejoicing.

Musical instruments and singing

There are a number of instances in the Old Testament where singing is not specifically mentioned in connection with the use of musical instruments. In most of these instances, however, it is quite possible, even likely, that those who played the instruments also sang if they were able. The company of prophets, for example, whom Saul met after he was anointed Israel's first king by Samuel, prophesied to the accompaniment of lyres, tambourines, flutes, and harps (1 Sam 10:5). Also, Saul, when he was continually tormented by an evil spirit, hired David to play the harp as a means of soothing him (1 Sam 16:15-23). With respect to the latter, since David was not only a musician but also a poet and song-writer, as is clear from the many psalms which he composed, it is likely that the music he made for Saul was instrument-accompanied song. With respect to the former, 1 Chronicles 25:1 calls the musical ministry of the sons of Asaph, Heman, and Jeduthun *"the ministry of prophesying,"* suggesting the possibility that the prophesying of the company of

prophets which Saul joined was in the form of song. Even the trumpet blasts from the rams' horns during the fall of Jericho (Josh 6) were accompanied by a loud shout from the people.

Before and during David's kingship

Even before David organized the Levitical ministry of song, the Israelites made music before the LORD with instrument-accompanied song. When they were in the process of bringing the ark of God back to Jerusalem,

"David and the whole house of Israel were celebrating with all their might before the LORD, with songs and with harps, lyres, tambourines, sistrums, and cymbals."

(2 Sam 6:5)

Clearly music-making, while not yet highly organized, was an integral aspect of Israelite life, culture, and worship.

When the ark finally arrived in Jerusalem, one of the first things David did was appoint some of the Levites to the ministry of music and song. They were *"to minister before the ark of the LORD, to make petition, to give thanks, and to praise the LORD, the God of Israel: Asaph was the chief, Zechariah second, then Jeiel, Shemiramoth, Jehiel, Mattithiah, Eliab, Benaiah, Obed-Edom, and Jeiel. They were to play the lyres and harps, Asaph was to sound the cymbals, and Benaiah and Jahaziel the priests were to blow the trumpets regularly before the ark of the covenant of God"* (1 Chron 16:4-6). When David appointed these Levites, he also committed to them a psalm of thanks to the LORD (1 Chron 16:7-36), which was surely to set the tone for their ministry and music-making with instruments and song.

Of the 38,000 Levites, David set aside 4,000 for the ministry of music (1 Chron 23:3-5). More than one-tenth of the Levites, therefore, a generous tithe, spent their time of holy service making music. Clearly, David allocated a considerable portion of the human resources at the temple to the ministry of music.

Place and role under David's reign

The ministry of song to which the Levites were called was a service (1 Chron 6:31, 32). As such, these Levites were *"put in charge of the service of song"* (1 Chron 6:31).¹ They were to lead the praises of God's people (2 Chron 23:13).² In other words, the musicians were to *serve by leading*, and to *lead by serving*.

By definition, musical instruments had a specific function. They were called instruments *for* song or instruments *of* song (1 Chron 15:16; 16:42; 2 Chron 5:13; 7:6; 23:13; 29:27; 34:12; Neh 12:36; Amos 6:5). The root meaning of the Hebrew word *keli* is *"useful object."*³ Occurrences of this word refer to objects, then, that have a particular utilitarian function – carrying, storing, containing, furnishing; or serving as a tool or weapon of war.⁴ The particular function of musical instruments, then, was to carry, lift up, and enhance holy song.

The appointed musicians were by no means expected to be subdued in their music-making, as suggested already by their sheer number. When the ark was brought to Jerusalem, the musicians were commissioned to *"play loudly on musical instruments, on harps and lyres and cymbals, to raise sounds of joy"* (1 Chron 15:16, ESV; cf. 15:28). They were to play *"to be heard;"* thus, *"the joy of Jerusalem was heard far away"* during the rebuilding of the wall (Neh 12:43). The musical instruments, likewise, were described as instruments of power (2 Chron 30:21; 1 Chron 13:8).

While the Levites were to play their instruments loudly, the music they made was to blend well with the words being sung. The musical instruments of the Levites were actually called *"instruments for sacred song"* (1 Chron 16:42). The voices and instruments were to blend together into one sound, rather than competing to be heard. They were to join *"in unison, as with one voice, to give praise and thanks to the LORD"* (2 Chron. 5:13).

The LORD'S musical instruments

The musical instruments were also called *"the LORD'S musical instruments, which King David made for praising the LORD"* (2 Chron 7:6). In other words, although David was the one who had manufactured them and they were always closely identified with him (1 Chron 23:5; 2 Chron 29:26-27; Neh 12:36), the musical instruments belonged to none other than the LORD himself. Indeed, they were manufactured *"for praising the LORD"* (2 Chron 7:6). The Chronicler makes clear, furthermore, that the Levitical ministry of music – instruments and musicians included – had been *"commanded by the LORD through his prophets"* (2 Chron 29:25) and therefore was not merely dreamed up by David.

At the height of his kingdom's splendour, Solomon imported unprecedented amounts of almugwood. This high quality wood was used not only to make supports for the temple and royal palace, but also to make harps and lyres for the musicians (1 Kings 10:11-12). These musical instruments, then, displayed the splendour and glory of Israel's king and kingdom – and especially the glory of Israel's God, Yahweh!

As we continue to survey the impressive Old Testament data about musical instruments and musicians, we turn our attention to the manner in which their use reflected the spiritual vitality of God's people, how the Book of Psalms speaks of them, some thoughts about *Selah*, and some preliminary conclusions.

The spiritual vitality of Israel

The health and vitality of music and song in Israel was an indication of the nation's spiritual condition. On the one hand, the silence of musical instruments, the unemployment of musicians, and the fading away of joyful song were sure symptoms that God had removed his favour and brought judgment on account of the rebellion and subsequent deformation of his beloved nation (Nehemiah 13:10; Psalm 137; Jeremiah 7:34; Ezekiel 26:13; Amos 5:23). On the other hand, a sure sign of spiritual revival and reformation was the restoration of Davidic worship, when musical instruments would once again come to life, voices of joy and gladness would again be heard, and the Levitical musicians would have their jobs back (2 Chronicles 23:18; 35:15; Nehemiah 13:10-12; Jeremiah 33:10-11; Amos 9:11-12).

The Psalms

The Book of Psalms is full of exhortations to praise God with the sound of instruments and song. Some of the most prominent examples, from Psalms 33, 92, 98, 144, and 150, follow here:

*Sing joyfully to the LORD, you righteous;
it is fitting for the upright to praise him.
Praise the LORD with the harp;
make music to him on the ten-stringed lyre.
Sing to him a new song;
play skillfully, and shout for joy.*

(Psalm 33:1-3)

*It is good to praise the LORD
and make music to your name, O Most High,
to proclaim your love in the morning
and your faithfulness at night,
to the music of the ten-stringed lyre
and the melody of the harp.*

(Psalm 92:1-3)

*Shout for joy to the LORD, all the earth,
burst into jubilant song with music;
make music to the LORD with the harp,*

*with the harp and the sound of singing,
with trumpets and the blast of the ram's horn –
shout for joy before the LORD, the King.*

(Psalm 98:4-6)

Of David.

*Praise be to the LORD my Rock,
who trains my hands for war,
my fingers for battle...
I will sing a new song to you, O God;
on the ten-stringed lyre I will make music to you,
to the One who gives victory to kings,
who delivers his servant David from the deadly sword.*

(Psalm 144:1, 9-10)

*Praise the LORD.
Praise God in his sanctuary;
praise him in his mighty heavens.
Praise him for his acts of power;
praise him for his surpassing greatness.
Praise him with the sounding of the trumpet,
praise him with the harp and lyre, praise him with tambourine and dancing,
praise him with the strings and flute, praise him with the clash of cymbals,
praise him with resounding cymbals.
Let everything that has breath praise the LORD.
Praise the LORD.*

(Psalm 150)

Also in the Psalms, then, instruments and singing re of a piece. They are typically mentioned together. When the one is mentioned, the other is implied.

Instruments as weapons

Psalm 144, which is from the hand of David, implies a close relationship between war and song. The war-king is also the song-king. There is also a word-relationship between "musical instruments" and "weapons of war" in the Old Testament, which is anything but incidental. Musical instruments – instruments of power – are arguably the most effective weapons of war that King David wields.⁵

Selah

A term that occurs often – more than seventy times in the Book of Psalms, and is particularly relevant to the matter of musical instruments in worship, is the Hebrew word *Selah*. It must be acknowledged at the outset that there has been uncertainty about the meaning of this term among lexicographers and commentators. Koehler and Baumgartner call it "*obscure*"⁶ and Holladay calls it "*unexplained*."⁷ A common thread in the suggestions and explanations offered, however, is that *Selah* is a "*musical or liturgical marker*," in the words of Dr. James A. Swanson.⁸ Some have suggested that it means "*pause*," as translated by the New Jerusalem Bible⁹ or "*Silence!*" according to the eminent Hebrew scholar, William Gesenius.¹⁰ Old Testament commentator Franz Delitzsch believes that "*in a psalm where **Selah** is appended ... the stringed instruments ... and the instruments generally, are to join in in such a way as to give intensity to that which is being sung.*"¹¹

A closer look at the semantic root of this word supports Delitzsch's assertion about *Selah*. Brown, Driver, and Briggs suggest that the word is, in fact, a verb in the imperative mood, meaning "lift up" or "exalt," from the Hebrew verb *salal*.¹² Gesenius connects it to the verb *salah*, "to be quiet, to be silent," and to the noun *seleh*, "rest, silence," and designates its form as *Milel*.¹³ In this same entry, however, where he comments that this word has "*been so much discussed and tortured by the*

*conjectures and blunders of interpreters," Gesenius argues that "it seems to have been used to mark a short pause in singing the words of the psalm, so that the singer would be **silent**, while the instrumental music continued."*¹⁴ In support of this interpretation, Gesenius mentions firstly, that the Septuagint always renders this Hebrew word *diapsalma*, which means "interlude"; secondly, that its usual position in the middle of the psalms where a section is finished implies that it was used to divide the respective psalms into strophes; and thirdly, that in Psalm 9:17 *Higgayon Selah* is used, "*which should apparently be rendered 'Instrumental music – pause,' i.e. the instrumental music was to continue while the singer paused.*"¹⁵ This explanation seems the most plausible, especially considering the fact that almost all the occurrences of this word are in the Psalms, many of which call for the use of musical instruments.

While the two most likely meanings of *Selah*, "Silence!" on the one hand and "Strike it up!" on the other, initially seem to contradict each other, the meaning of the related Hebrew words along with the locations and uses of this word in the Psalms strongly suggest that *Selah* designated an instrumental interlude (in the middle of a psalm) or crescendo (at the end of a psalm)¹⁶ during which the voices went momentarily silent and the musical instruments swelled to punctuate and intensify the words being sung.

This interpretation, admittedly, joins the long list of other attempts to explain this obscure term. Just like other obscure musical terms, mentioned in the headings of many psalms, should be included in the public reading of Holy Scripture, so should *Selah*.

Preliminary summary of Old Testament data

Right from the beginning, musical instruments and musicians made an integral contribution to human life and culture by means of the music and song they produced. Long before David organized the Levitical ministry of music, God's people were using musical instruments to praise and worship him. God specifically commanded them to do so even as early as their sojourn in the desert. The evidence suggests that the playing of musical instruments and singing were typically combined.

King David organized and supervised the ministry of music and song by appointing a generous tithe – more than ten percent – of Levites to this ministry, giving them specific instructions and providing them with the resources they needed to fulfill their task. These Levite musicians were to serve by leading and to lead by serving. Musical instruments, furthermore, were the tools the temple implements – which David gave the Levites to carry, lift up, and enhance the holy song of God's people for the worship and praise of God. They were fittingly called, therefore, *the LORD'S instruments and instruments of sacred song*.

The musicians were expected to make music that was loud, moving, and impressive – even fearful, for they were wielding instruments of power. Fearful, for King David, the music-king was also the war-king, and the musical instruments he entrusted to the Levites were his most powerful weapons of war. There is something dangerous about the ministry of song inaugurated by King David!

When the kingdom of Solomon was at its pinnacle, the splendour and quality of the musical instruments displayed the splendour of Israel's great King, Yahweh. When musical instruments came to life and voices of joy and gladness sang; when the Levitical musicians had work and their mighty *Selahs* punctuated the people's praise; that was a sure sign of the health, vigour, and strength of God's beloved nation!

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Endnotes:

¹ The Hebrew verb that is used for "ministry" means "to serve, minister, be in service of God," William L. Holladay, *A Concise Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988).

² Ibid. The Hebrew verb that is used for "leading" means "to make known, to teach" here in the form of an active participle. In meaning, the Hiphil form can be causative, permissive, declaratory, or "expressive of the development of a state or quality," A. B. Davidson, *An Introductory Hebrew Grammar* (Edinburgh: T. T. Clark, 1966), § 24.1.1.b; cf. E. Kautzsch, *Gesenius' Hebrew Grammar* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1990), § 53.2. In the Hiphil form, then, this word suggests that there was a teaching aspect to the musical ministry of the Levites, an aspect to which we will return in a later article.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Cf. 2 Chronicles 20:21 where Jehoshaphat, after consulting with the LORD, appoints musicians to lead the army into battle with song. David, similarly, had used his music-making with an instrument to drive evil spirits from Saul (1 Samuel 16:14-23).

⁶ Ludwig Koehler and Walter Baumgartner, *Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament* (Leiden: Brill, 2000).

⁷ Holladay, *A Concise Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament*.

⁸ James A. Swanson, *Dictionary of Biblical Languages with Semantic Domains: Hebrew* (Bellingham, WA: Logos, 1997).

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ William Gesenius, *Gesenius' Hebrew-Chaldee Lexicon to the Old Testament Scriptures*, Samuel P. Triggles, transl. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980).

¹¹ Franz Delitzsch, *Biblical Commentary on the Psalms* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1959), 1:31.

¹² Francis Brown, Samuel R. Driver and Charles A. Briggs, *Hebrew and English Lexicon* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1906); cf. Robert L. Thomas, *New American Standard Hebrew-Aramaic Dictionary* (La Habra, CA: The Lockman Foundation, 1998).

¹³ Gesenius, *Gesenius' Hebrew-Chaldee Lexicon to the Old Testament Scriptures*.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ In Psalms 3, 9, 24, and 46 there are *Selahs* at the end.