

A SCRIPTURAL ANALYSIS OF MUSIC IN WORSHIP

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It was Leo Tolstoy that said "Music is the shorthand of emotion." This forum gives us a good testing grounds for his statement!

As I approached this subject, I sought for a non-technical approach, one that each listener here could share with others. I wanted an approach that would not be a battle among language experts. When I examined the assignment, *A Scriptural Analysis of Music in Worship*, I determined to have little to do with language experts and historians for today's presentation. These useful fields of expertise need to be subservient to the written Word, but our faith cannot rest in encyclopedias and lexicons.

We need a non-technical approach to facilitate our sharing of this viewpoint with non-technical people in our congregations.

This area of concern -- music in worship -- has been visited by many before us. We may cover some new ground today and, to that extent, add to the body of literature that already exists on the subject.

We will be using the *New International Version* translation. There is no special advantage or disadvantage from using it with reference to the subject at hand. It's use makes easier listening and we need that advantage after lunch!

Scriptural analysis should include the total range of Scripture. We will bear in mind that the New Testament calls the Old Testament Scriptures many times and that our use of the Old Testament is well within the assigned topic.

We are going to consider a line of inquiry on the subject of mechanical instruments of music in the church that deserves closer attention, then consider the momentum of Israel's worship and conclude with a discussion of the two covenants and their application to our subject.

I. THE DIVINE MANDATE FOR PROPHETS

One brother has suggested that we examine the noun prophet and the verb to prophesy as they apply to the issue at hand. God has dealt with man and revealed Himself to us through prophets. The word first occurs in **Genesis 20:7** where God, identifying Abraham, said to King Abimelech of Gerar in a dream,

Now return the man's wife, for he is a prophet, and he will pray for you and you will live. But if you do not return her, you may be sure that you and all your soil die. (Genesis 20:7 NIV)

Abraham is the first prophet so named. In the days of Moses, Aaron his brother, is to be in the role of prophet to Moses rather than God. **Exodus 6:29** ff.

Now when the LORD spoke to Moses in Egypt, he said to him, **"I am the LORD. Tell Pharaoh king of Egypt everything I tell you." But Moses said to the LORD "Since I speak with faltering lips, why would Pharaoh listen to me?" Then the LORD said to Moses, "See, I have made you like God to Pharaoh, and your brother Aaron will be your prophet." (Exodus 7 NIV)**

The definition here is apparently that of a spokesperson because Moses had just objected that he was unskilled in speech. The definition implied here is that of a forthteller.

Next we will examine another kind of prophet that will expand our Biblical definition. While Aaron has been called a prophet of Moses, Miriam is called a prophetess, a female prophet, in **Exodus 15:20**:

Then Miriam the prophetess, Aaron's sister, took a tambourine in her hand, and all the women followed her, with tambourines and dancing. Miriam sang to them: "Sing to the LORD, for he is highly exalted. The horse and its rider he has hurled into the sea." (Exodus 15:20 NIV)

Miriam's instruction to perhaps thousands of women that followed her was to sing and they all had tambourines. The word sing here must have meant to sing accompanied by the tambourines. She did not tell them to sing and play. Her definition of sing was not vocal only.

If Moses is taking up the flow of the narrative that was interrupted by the great inspired song of victory beginning in **Exodus 15:1**, then he is saying to us in **verses 19** and **20** that his sister Miriam was a prophetess and wrote the song.

We learn here that Miriam was a prophetess whether she wrote the song or not, that she led a very large group in singing using timbrels or a tambourine. Our job description of a prophet or prophetess needs to expand to include this case. God's spokesperson may be a forthteller like Aaron was for Moses or may be an inspired musical person, using their vocal and instrumental skills to praise God before others.

A similar case is Deborah in **Judges 4:4** where we learn that she had the dual roles of a prophetess and a judge in Israel. Her inspiration is clearly seen in the inspired song that she sang with Barak that occupies chapter five of Judges. Deborah, like Miriam before her, was inspired to write songs of praise to God. We will note that in **Judges 5:3**, she directs her song to the neighboring nations with these words:

Hear this, you kings! Listen, you rulers! I will sing to the LORD I will sing; I will make music to the LORD the God of Israel. (Judges 5:3 NIV)

The word translated music is the Hebrew word zamar. She is inspired to make music to Jehovah. This is the first occurrence of zamar in the Scriptures.

To keep us from concluding that prophetesses always made the music and the prophets always did the forthtelling, we include **1 Samuel 10:5** where the prophet Samuel told Saul:

After that you will go to Gibeah of God, where there is a Philistine outpost. As you approach the town, you will meet a procession of prophets coming down from the high place with lyres, tambourines, flutes and harps being played before them, and they will be prophesying. (1 Samuel 10:5 NIV)

Here we have prophets prophesying in procession. They were either preaching to each other as they walked along and trying to hear over the sound of the instruments or they were singing praises to God accompanied with instruments of music. The second choice is more reasonable. So now our description of prophesying has broadened to include both men and women using both voices and instruments to praise God. These prophets were probably vocational prophets - that was their full time employment.

By the time of David, prophesying with the use of instruments was definitely a vocational specialty. **1 Chronicles 25:1**:

David, together with the commanders of the army, set apart some of the sons of Asaph, Heman and Jeduthun for the ministry of prophesying, accompanied by harps, lyres and cymbals. (1 Chronicles 25:1 NIV)

A specialized definition of singing that always excludes musical instruments has made understanding between the two viewpoints represented here today difficult. We note here that Jeduthun did not prophesy and play -- two separate actions. He prophesied using the instrument.

As for Jeduthun, from his sons: Gedaliah, Zeri, Jeshaiah, Shimei, Hashabiah and Mattithiah, six in all, under the supervision of their father Jeduthun, who prophesied, using the harp in thanking and praising the LORD. (1 Chronicles 25:3 NIV)

Jeduthun was using the harp in thanking and praising the LORD. The instrument was a part of the process.

Now we move to the New Testament documents. There was an aged prophetess in the Temple at Jerusalem named Anna. What was her responsibility in the Temple if she were not a singer? She had inspired insight and spoke of the future of the baby Jesus. Albert Barnes says of her in his commentary on Luke,

Why Anna is called a prophetess is not known. It might be because she had been the wife of a prophet, or because she was employed in celebrating the praises of God (**1 Chronicles 25:1,2,4**; **1 Samuel 10:5**), or because she herself had foretold future events, being inspired.

Barnes raises the possibility that Anna was employed in praising God at the Temple. Whether with or without melody, she certainly prophesied with a great background of instrumentation as we will see in a few moments.

In Peter's watershed sermon on Pentecost, he quotes *Spiel* as saying,

In the last days, God says, I will pour out my Spirit on all people. Your sons and daughters will prophesy, your young men will see visions, your old men will dream dreams. (Acts 2:17 NIV)

Defining the word prophet with the limited definitions of forthteller and foreteller has caused many of us puzzlement over the daughters prophesying. It seems to be in conflict with the practices recorded in Acts and a later clear statement from Paul. The limited definition really doesn't fit King David too well either in **Acts 2:30** where he is called a prophet. However when we add the musical element to the description, David becomes a chief prophet in his own right, giving us many inspired Psalms. He is not a psalmist and a prophet, he is a songwriter and singing prophet. (**Psalms 101:1**)

Our expanded definition of a prophet helps with another problem passage in **Acts 21:9**. Listen to Luke as he narrates:

Leaving the next day, we reached Caesarea and stayed at the house of Philip the evangelist, one of the Seven. He had four unmarried daughters who prophesied. After we had been there a number of days, a prophet named Agabus came down from Judea. Coming over to us, he took Paul's belt, tied his own hands and feet with it and said, "The Holy Spirit says, 'In this way the Jews of Jerusalem will bind the owner of this belt and will hand him over to the Gentiles.'" (Acts 21:9 NIV)

The limited definition of a prophet as one who forthtells or foretells leaves an unanswered question in this event. If the evangelist Philip had four daughters prophesying the future, why did God send a man from Jerusalem to Caesarea to foretell the binding of Paul? A reasonable answer is that the ladies were singers and inspired songwriters, not preachers and proclaimers. Historically, prophetesses were connected with inspired musical praise to God.

Another vexing verse is **1 Corinthians 11:5** where Paul says,

And every woman who prays or prophesies with her head uncovered dishonors her head -- it is just as though her head were shaved. (1 Corinthians 11:5 NIV)

What is the lady doing prophesying? Was she preaching? The broader description of prophetess has her as a singer of inspired songs.

Prophets abounded in the early church. The church is built on the foundation of the Apostles and Prophets. The Old Testament prophet may have been a music man or a combination man like Habakkuk who is called a prophet and yet he writes his prophecy in chapter three to music and the musical instructions are in the text.

If we take the view that instruments are forbidden, we must demonstrate a narrower description of the prophet than that used by the inspired writers of the Old Testament. Where is our authority for a new and narrower definition? None appears to exist. Jesus said, "The Scriptures cannot be broken."

We have expanded our definition of prophesying to include words and instrumentation. We have not appealed to the Old Testament for authority to use the instrument. We have used it to define the task of the prophet and we find prophets to be very active in the infant church.

To limit our understanding of the prophet to simply the root meaning of the word is like trying to describe the job of the preacher by saying that he only preaches, nothing else. None of us would agree.

D.R. Dungan in his famous text on *Hermeneutics* says,

Language under one covenant may explain duties under another, in those features in which the two are alike. (*Hermeneutics, page 109*)

Remember, the only Scriptures Jewish Christians had for 20 years after Pentecost was Genesis to Malachi. When they read about prophets, what did they learn from the Scriptures?

Our next inquiry concerns the difficulty every preacher has experienced in trying to change something that is -- especially with those past 30 years of age. We will discuss momentum.

II. LANGUAGE THAT REINFORCES THE MOMENTUM VIEWPOINT.

As we enter this next phase of our investigation, it is important that we consider the time dimension of our hermeneutics. The New Testament is not a document hammered out over a period of several months by men who understood all of God's truth the day after Pentecost in AD 30. Jesus promised that they would be led into all of the truth, there would be an unfolding of truth.

The validity of this can be seen in the case of Peter. On Pentecost he preached that the Gospel was for all "that the Lord should call." Yet it took the direct intervention of God to get Peter into the house of Cornelius. Even then, he did not become the great champion of the Gentile Christians.

New truth unfolded slowly. The core of the new message was the death and resurrection of Christ. That is the dominant theme of all eighteen sermons recorded in part or in whole in Acts. Those who accepted Jesus as the Messiah and identified with Him by reenacting his death, burial and resurrection became a part of the church.

Our question is, "Did the church of the first century sing while using, or accompanied by, a mechanical instrument." My answer to this is that they would not have known about any other kind of singing. Much of their singing historically was accompanied and they did not even possess a word to describe singing that was unaccompanied.

Imagine with me, if you will, that you are a Jewish person who lived in Capernaum in AD 30. You did not have your own copy of the Hebrew Scriptures because you could not have read it without special training. You spoke Aramaic. You attended the synagogue weekly and you heard there the Hebrew Scriptures read by one who could Targum into the Aramaic language.

You also regularly attended the feasts in Jerusalem. Those feasts were Passover, Pentecost and Tabernacles, words defined for us in the Law, just as prophet has been defined in the Law. Your wife may have attended with you. If you had sons over the age of twelve or thirteen they also were required to attend because at thirteen a man became of age as far as his responsibility to the Law, the Torah, was concerned. So this spring you are going to go up to Pentecost as the Law required and your heart desired.

On the way up you traveled from Galilee with one of the pilgrim bands that made their way to Jerusalem. You did this for fellowship and to protect yourself and your family from bands of robbers that plied their trade along the Jordan River. You sang as you walked. You sang the songs that are labeled in today's Bible the "Songs of Degrees," or the "Songs of the Ascents," because they were probably sung by the Jewish pilgrims since the times of David. These are **Psalms 120** through **134**.

You may have carried with you a flute or some other instrument. You can take a bamboo shaft, drill some holes in it and you will have a four note instrument that will do quite well for playing a simple tune. It seems like Isaiah is pointing this direction when he records in **Isaiah 30:29**:

And you will sing as on the night you celebrate a holy festival; your hearts will rejoice as when people go up with flutes to the mountain of the LORD, to the Rock of Israel. (Isaiah 30:29 NIV)

Just a little flute, but they used it as Isaiah indicated. The instruments were common in Old Testament times and as we get to the time of Christ we learn that the children used them in playing.

We played the flute for you, and you did not dance; we sang a dirge, and you did not mourn. (Matthew 11:17 NIV)

This was said about the generation that did not like John the Baptist because he was not a party attender and they did not like Jesus because he was a man who was involved with society. So you can see from that incidental statement that instruments of music were common. Singing with instrumental accompaniment was a way of national life. It had been going on as a part of the religious life for centuries.

Even in Jesus' time the instruments were common. One of the outstanding authorities on life in the New Testament times is the man who converted from Judaism at twenty-one and became a priest in the church of England, Alfred Edersheim, PH.D. He wrote *The Temple, Its Ministry and Its Services*. He described the Temple of Herod with these words:

The music of the Temple owed its origin to David, who was not only a poet and a music composer, but who also invented musical instruments especially the ten string Nevel or lute. From the **Book of Chronicles** we know how fully this part of the service was cultivated, although the statement of Josephus, that Solomon had provided forty thousand harps and lutes, and two hundred thousand silver trumpets, is evidently a gross exaggeration. The Rabbinic enumerate thirty-six different instruments, of which only fifteen are mentioned in the Bible, and of these five in the Pentateuch. (**Page 78**)

Later, Edersheim says,

Quite in accordance with the social character of these feasts, the flute was also used by the festive pilgrim bands on their journey to Jerusalem, to accompany the "Psalms of Degrees," or rather of "Ascent," sung on such occasions. It was also customary to play it at marriage feasts and at funerals for according to Rabbinical law every Jew was bound to provide at least two flutes and one mourning woman at the funeral of his wife. In the Temple, not less than two nor more than twelve flutes were allowed, and the melody was on such occasions to close with a note of one flute alone. (**Page 80**)

Now I have read that passage to underscore the fact that instruments of music were used in Herod's Temple and were part of Jewish national life. Each and every Jew connected instrumental accompaniment with his singing to God and about God. Their Scriptures taught them that singing was often accompanied.

Their read such statements as **1 Chronicles 23:5**:

Four thousand are to be gatekeepers and four thousand are to praise the LORD with the musical instruments I have provided for that purpose." (1 Chronicles 23:5 NIV)

What would make a man who was living at Capernaum in 30 A.D. anti-instrumental or even non-instrumental. Who or what would give him that impression?

It would take a very specific authorization from the inspired leaders to stop using instruments for a first century Christian at Jerusalem to quit doing what he had always done and his fathers had done for centuries. It required just such a prohibition for Christians to stop their reliance on the feasts. There was no similar comment about the use of instruments.

Now you came to Pentecost in AD 30 and heard the apostles proclaim Jesus as the Messiah. You said, "That's right, he is the Messiah. We saw him perform miracles. We saw him heal the sick." He is the Christ and so you accepted Jesus of Nazareth as the Messiah, the One that the whole nation had been looking for. You were happy about this and you sang with the brethren. How did you sing? Did you sing vocal only? Or, did you sing as the brethren had been singing, as the Jews had been singing -- for centuries? Did you sing accompanied with mechanical instrument?

The letter of James was probably the first canonical New Testament book written. I date it at AD 47 or 17 years after Pentecost. How would the Jewish brethren have understood **James 5:13**?

Is any one of you in trouble? He should pray. Is anyone happy? Let him sing songs of praise. (James 5:13 NIV)

In his own word praise, James selected the same Greek word psallo that the translators of the Greek Old Testament selected to translate zamar, the profoundly instrumental word for singing in the Old Testament. It appears 36 times. How would the Jewish readers of James purge the word of its inherent instrumentality?

There is not one word that the apostles or prophets ever spoke against instrumental music. Rather, we find the church met in the Temple where the instruments were used in profusion.

We can find the Christians in and about the Temple in a number of Scriptures, here the angel commands in **Acts 2** where the church originated. In **Acts 5:20**, we see again that the Christians were in the Temple. In fact, here the angels bring,

"Go, stand in the temple courts," he said, "and tell the people the full message of this new life." (Acts 5:20 NIV)

Remember, these courts resounded with the sounds of voices and instruments raised in the praise of God. They preached with a background of instrumental music.

Again in **Acts 5:42**,

Day after day, in the temple courts and from house to house, they never stopped teaching and proclaiming the good news that Jesus is the Christ. (Acts 5:42 NIV)

In **Acts 22:17**, Paul describes a time of worship:

"When I returned to Jerusalem and was praying at the temple, I fell into a trance (Acts 22:17 NIV)

So we find that early Christians, including inspired leaders, were in the Temple where the instruments were clearly used. Now if we make the claim that the New Testament is silent about the instrument, then we are saying that it was approved by the apostles, because they did not warn against this common, everyday Jewish practice of worship.

III. THE THEOLOGY OF THE NEW COVENANT.

The New Covenant began on the Jewish feast day of Pentecost in AD 30. We all understand that. Alexander Campbell set the Redstone Baptist Association on its tear with this profound truth. The reality of it is not up for review here. It is well established by the Lord himself.

As the moments ticked away before the crucifixion of Jesus, He was setting up a permanent memorial with his men in the upper room,

"In the same way, after the supper he took the cup, saying, "This cup is the new covenant in my blood, which is poured out for you." (Luke 22:20 NIV)

This is the first reference to the New Covenant in the New Covenant documents we call the New Testament. Jesus' death put the New Covenant into effect.

The second reference to this doctrine is in the **Book of Galatians** written after the Jerusalem Conference in AD 49. Nineteen years elapsed before this important bit of Reformation was mentioned again. Here Paul introduces it as something these readers were not familiar with.

24 These things may be taken figuratively, for the women represent two covenants. One covenant is from Mount Sinai and bears children who are to be slaves: This is Hagar. 25 Now Hagar stands for Mount Sinai in Arabia and corresponds to the present city of Jerusalem, because she is in slavery with her children. 26 But the Jerusalem that is above is free, and she is our mother. (Galatians 4:24-26 NIV)

We should inquire into this silence of 19 years. One obvious answer could be that no books were written during that time. No book was composed except **James**. How does James handle the subject? He is absolutely silent. It certainly seems to us important enough to discuss.

Also Papias claims that Matthew wrote the **Gospel of Matthew** in Aramaic about this same time. No one since his days has seen one. But the curious thing is that when Matthew reports the events of the upper room in his Greek version, he omits an important word. Listen carefully.

27 Then he took the cup, gave thanks and offered it to them, saying, "Drink from it, all of you. 28 This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins. (Matthew 26:27-28 NIV)

He doesn't say new covenant, although Luke does when he writes. It's so important to us that we read it in, assuming that it is there. The doctrine of the New Covenant is much better understood by those of us who have **Galatians**, the **Corinthian letters** and **Hebrews** than those who lived in the first few years of the church. The great doctrinal truths have galatians had bit by bit by the Holy Spirit. They were not introduced abruptly.

While no other books were composed during this period, one book was written about what happened during the period and it tells us what was taught in the years from Pentecost to about AD 60. That book is the **Book of Acts**.

In **Acts**, there was a perfect place to use the doctrine of the New Covenant -- if it were widely understood. When the problem of circumcision arose among the Gentiles and the Jerusalem Conference was called, the inspired men could have said that circumcision belonged to the Old Covenant and we are in the New Testament age. I think that I would have said it. Instead, Peter called attention to the fact that the Gentiles had received the Holy Spirit when he preached to them. He did not appeal to the emerging New Covenant, but to the grace of God.

Paul and Barnabas got up. Instead of reasoning that the New Covenant did away with the Old, they demonstrated that God had been working signs and wonders among the uncircumcised. James got up and recited the Old Testament. Instead of using **Jeremiah 31** that foretold the coming of the New Covenant, he cited **Amos** and Amos does not mention the New Covenant.

If the doctrine of the New Covenant was one that was understood and would carry weight, why was it not used in **Acts 15**? And why was it not referred to in any of the nine sermons of Peter or the nine sermons of Paul that are presented in **Acts**, either in part or in whole?

What conclusion do we draw from all of this? The Christians of the first two decades of the church did not perceive themselves as living in another covenant. As a matter of fact, they were living in a new covenant. As a matter of perception, they did not understand it. Therefore they would not be using this mature rule of theology to test their every religious action. For us to use the rule of New Covenant verses Old Covenant is out of sync with the unfolding truth of Scriptures.

IV. MUSIC AND THE FIRST COVENANT.

Now that we had discussed the progressive perception of the Theology of the New Covenant, let's inquire about our assumption that instrumental music was a part of the first covenant. What if the entire church understood the doctrine of the New Covenant on the day after Pentecost in AD 30? What if they understood that the covenant of Moses had been replaced yesterday? Is instrumental music a part of that covenant? Not at all. Instrumental music being used in the praise of God was a commandment before the first covenant.

Returning to the case where Miriam used instruments to praise God after the escape from Egypt, was that before or after Pentecost? It was before. Was she doing this spontaneously or was there an underlying commandment from God? Consider **Psalms 81**:

1 Sing for joy to God our strength; shout aloud to the God of Jacob!

2 Begin the music, strike the tambourine, play the melodious harp and lyre.

3 Sound the ram's horn at the New Moon, and when the moon is full, on the day of our Feast;

4 This is a decree for Israel, an ordinance of the God of Jacob.

Notice carefully what this originated:

5 He established it as a statute for Joseph when he went out against Egypt, where we heard a language we did not understand.

6 He says, "I removed the burden from their shoulders; their hands were set free from the basket."

7 In your distress you called and I rescued you, I answered you out of a thundercloud; I tested you at the waters of Meribah. <Selah>

Miriam was not acting on her own. God had commanded this grand national event of singing praises to his name with every bit of instrumentation that they could use. He even sent the song that they were to sing after leaving Egypt.

Where is instrumental music in the Covenant of Moses? The ram's horn was used as a call, but not in general singing. Where is any mention of praise using instruments? There was none. The use of instruments is not mentioned after Sinai for several centuries.

While instruments were used later by the prophets themselves in the time of King Saul, God expanded their use in the Temple to include the Levites as we read in **2 Chronicles 29:25**:

He stationed the Levites in the temple of the LORD with cymbals, harps and lyres in the way prescribed by David and Gad the king's seer and Nathan the prophet; this was commanded by the LORD through his prophets. (2 Chronicles 29:25 NIV)

Our God wants to be praised and he loved the combination of words and music that exploded into use during David's time. These were the golden years of Israel. As the nation began its descent into idolatry, the use of both voices and instruments is harder to find in the Scriptural record. When Judah was taken into captivity, they composed one more **Psalms, number 137**:

1. By the rivers of Babylon we sat and wept when we remembered Zion.

2. There on the poplars we hung our harps,

3. for there our captors asked us for songs, our tormentors demanded songs of joy; they said, "Sing us one of the songs of Zion!"

4. How can we sing the songs of the LORD while in a foreign land?

Using singing and music in the praise of God was not a part of the Law of Moses. It is first seen before the Law given on Sinai. Then it came into use during the time of Saul through the prophets and was developed to it maximum in the reigns of David and Solomon. It declined as Israel lost the heart for true worship and was lost entirely while Israel was captive. They restored it to a shadow of it former greatness in the second temple and in the Temple of Herod in the days of Jesus.

SUMMARY FOR THE PRESENTATION:

1. The Scriptural presentation of prophets and their tasks includes the use of instrumental music. Not all prophets foretold the future; not all prophets were music people. The New Testament church had both prophets and prophetesses. By definition, some of these were music people since there is no authorization for changing their job description.

2. The national heritage of the Jews was saturated with instrumental music for both secular and sacred purposes. If a change in direction had been intended by God, why were the inspired writers silent on that change of direction? If we claim that the New Testament is silent on the use of instruments, then we are acknowledging that there is not a new rule for the worship of God.

3. The New Covenant began on Pentecost. But that perception was not present in the talk immediately following Pentecost. The church of AD 30 knew that Jesus of Nazareth was their Messiah. None of them could have talked with our theologians about the New Covenant, for it was not a part of their understanding of Christ.

4. Instrumental music was used to worship prior to the first Covenant and was not fully developed until hundreds of years after the Covenant was given. Ending the Covenant would not end the use of instrumental music in the Jews' religious life because it is not even mentioned in the documents that define the Covenant.