

ALL  
THE  
MUSIC  
OF THE  
BIBLE

*An Exploration of Musical Expression  
in Scripture and Church Hymnody*

Herbert Lockyer, Jr.

*All the Music of the Bible*

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of the Bible*



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***Dedicated to***  
*Dr. Herbert Lockyer Sr.*  
*My Dad*

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## *Foreword*

IN 1969, Herbert Lockyer Sr. wrote:

If, to the true musician, all nature carries the sound and melody of music—the singing of the birds, the bubbling of a brook, the rustling of leaves, the rolling waves of the sea, and peals of thunder—where could such an appreciation of rhythmic expression come from save from Him who made humans? Here we have an aspect of the divine being that we are apt to neglect. All melody, harmony, and joyful praises spring from Him who, as the happy God, created humans to be like Himself. In the New Testament, the Greek word *makarios* is translated “blessed” or “happy.” Paul used the word in Acts 26:2 to describe himself as he stood before Agrippa. In 1 Tim. 1:11 and 6:15, he refers to God as the blessed or happy one.

Is this not why the Bible is such a happy book and has so much to say about vocal and instrumental music? It abounds in praise and reverberates with the music of heaven. Glance over its sacred pages, and you will find that its psalms outweigh its sighs. Passages speaking of war, suffering, sorrow, strife, fears, and of all that destroys are few compared with the multitude of references to praise, joy, singing, happiness, gladness, and peace. No matter where you turn in the Bible, melody predominates over misery and songs over sobs. Happy were the people who had a happy God as their Lord and praised Him by lips, lute, and lyre. Melody is a natural mode of uttering the grateful emotions of the mind, a faculty conferred on humans by their creator for that very purpose. This is why we are called upon by prophets and psalmists to “sing and give praise,” both with and without instruments of music.<sup>1</sup>

As we will see, music, both vocal and instrumental, was well cultivated among the Hebrews, the New Testament Christians, and the Christian church through the centuries. A cursory glance at the Old Testament reveals how God's ancient people were devoted to the study and practice of music, which holds a unique place in the historical and prophetic books, as well as the Psalter. While it may be difficult to fully identify some items in the vocabulary of musical terms, the range of emotions expressed by Hebrew music was anything but limited. Such music was capable of expressing a great variety of moods and feelings or the broadly marked antitheses of joy and sorrow, hope and fear, faith and doubt. In fact, every shade and quality of sentiment are found in the wealth of songs and psalms and in the diverse melodies of a people who ranked their music highly in divine service.

An as introduction to the study before us, we have the magnificent concert held on the shores of the Red Sea after Israel had passed over in Exod. 15:1–20. “The words were adapted to the occasion,” says Dr. Herbert Lockyer Sr., “the music to the words; the performers to the music. There we behold Moses leading the bolder, rougher notes of manly voices. Here, Miriam, the prophetess, his sister, in sweet accord, blending the softer harmony of female strains of the timbrel, in praises of their great Deliverer.”<sup>2</sup> What a sight and sound that must have been, a fore-gleam of the host of redeemed choristers that John describes as singing and playing harps on the shores of the new Jerusalem. “They held harps given them by God and sang the song of Moses the servant of God and the song of the Lamb” (Rev. 15:2b–3 NIV).

I wish to see all arts, principally music, in the service of Him who gave and created them. Music is a fair and glorious gift of God. I would not for the world forego my humble share of music. Singers are never sorrowful, but are merry, and smile through their troubles in song. Music makes people kinder, gentler, more staid and reasonable. . . . I am strongly persuaded that after theology, there is no art that can be placed on a level with music; for besides theology, music is the only art capable of affording peace and joy of the heart. . . . the devil flees before the sound of music almost as much as before the Word of God.<sup>3</sup>

# *Preface*

## *The Origin of Music*

*Music is well said to be the speech of angels; in fact, nothing among the utterance allowed to [humans] is felt to be so divine. It brings us near to the infinite.*  
—Thomas Carlyle

MUSIC. What is this mystery that gives flight to the imagination, touches the deepest emotions, and speaks to the soul? From poets and mystics to saints and sinners, from antiquity to the immediacy of each breath we take, music communicates when words cannot. Since the dawn of creation, artists have been exploring the many ways in which music communicates beyond words. Indeed, music is a language unto itself, a language born in the heart of God countless ages before creation.

But why study all the music of the Bible? Why do we create music? How does listening to music affect the soul? How do we, mere humans, collaborate with the Holy Spirit to combine notes and tones into melodies and songs that reflect what cannot be said by words alone? How can we put the utterances of our soul on paper and into a form?

These are the questions that a study of all the music of the Bible will consider. This book explores how people throughout time and across cultures have done just that. We will look at how ordinary people responded to God's call to extraordinary work, and in so doing, transcended the limitations of their own humanity to express themselves with the language of angels.

Part 1 will explore ancient songs of the Old Testament. In Part 2, we will consider the Hebrew poetry of David, Isaiah, and Solomon. New

Testament songs and modern hymnody are the concern of Part 3. Finally, we will spend a few moments with my father's notes on music in Part 4.

As Herbert Lockyer's son, I listened to my father preach and teach well beyond the four score years of an average lifetime. My father lived to the age of 98 and actively continued to study and teach the Word of God well into his eighties. I treasure the length of his years on earth and the wealth of wisdom I learned from this faithful man of God. His three essays are included in this book in honor of his remarkable ability to see beyond the text to the spiritual meaning deep within—and communicate that meaning to others. The first is a mediation, "Instrument of Ten Strings," I heard my father use many times in his teaching and preaching. The second is a brief study of "Nebuchadnezzar's Orchestra," a study which demonstrates how magnificent music must have been in Biblical times. And the third is a story I heard my father tell many times.

In the opening passage of his lilting motet "*Der Geist hilft unser Schwachheit auf*," J.S. Bach immortalized the idea of transcendent expression by setting the German translation of Rom. 8:26 to music.

Der Geist hilft unser Schwachheit auf,  
*The Spirit helps us in our weakness,*

denn wir wissen nicht,  
*since, when we do not know*

was wir beten sollen, wie sichs gebühret;  
*what we should pray for,*

sondern der Geist selbst vertritt uns aufs  
*then the Spirit personally makes our petition for us*

beste mit unaussprechlichem Seufzen  
*in sighs that cannot be put into words.*

From Moses and Miriam to Paul and Silas to Jan Hus and John Calvin, music is as integrated into the lives and faith of the people of God as prayer, praise, and worship. This study of *All the Music of the Bible* invites you to walk through the pages of Scripture and hymnody and draw near to the Infinite as you journey into the heart of the divine.

# PART 1



## Music of the Ancients

# 1

## *Ancient Music*

*The one who sings, prays twice.* —Saint Augustine

HUMAN HISTORY is rich with music, though music predates any *human* musical expression. From the beginning of time, music has filled the world. The moment God separated the land from the seas and filled the skies with birds, music was born. A walk in the woods is a symphony of sound. A visit to the ocean's shore is an opportunity to hear again the percussion of a world alive with sound.

With the music of nature often silenced in our modern culture, we are, nonetheless, both serenaded and bombarded with music, constantly. In our homes and cars, at the grocery store, in elevators and offices, even on the streets, we hear a diversity of sound and rhythm that would have mystified primitive human beings. Music today may bring tears or energize our bodies. Music may tell a tale or become a prayer. But this diversity of musical expression and the many venues in which we enjoy it is a recent development in the history of music.

In ancient times, music and ritual were inseparable. Through the pounding of drums before a hunt or celebrations of a plentiful harvest, music was integral to the life of primitive tribes. Across time and space, cultures and geography, music and life are inseparable—and have been since music was born in the heart of God. Music *affects* us, deeply, powerfully, and prophetically.

“There is something about human beings that needs to make music, something that insists on song,” writes Don E. Saliers. “The act of singing together is deeply and indelibly human. When we sing, words are given greater range and power than when we speak.”<sup>1</sup>

To study the music of the ancient people who eventually became the Israelites is to acknowledge the vital, essential role music has played in the drama of the human race. Though scholarly research and archeological finds confirm the significance of music in ancient times and we know with certainty the need and desire of the people of God to express love and praise to their Creator, we know almost nothing of how the ancient music actually *sounded*. Much of the history of Hebrew music eludes musical scholars to this day. We have no knowledge of the ancient Hebrew scales, their methods of tuning instruments, or the integration of the human voice with instrumentation.

### *Ancient Music*

The term “ancient music” has been used by historians to represent music up to 450 A.D. and includes the cultures of ancient Greece and the first few centuries of the Christian church. Our knowledge of music from this time is so limited, quite simply, because history was passed from generation to generation orally, by rote repetition of verse, poetry, and song. Few attempts were made by ancient cultures to preserve music or history by writing it down.

However, there are rare exceptions. In the 1950’s, an archeological dig in Syria uncovered a set of clay tablets with characters written in the ancient Hurrian language, a language used by citizens of the city of Ugarit in Mesopotamia as early as the third millennium or earlier. The tablets, measuring seven and a half inches long by three inches high, date back to approximately 1400 B.C. Remarkably, the tablets include detailed performance instructions for a singer accompanied by a harpist and contain a hymn to the goddess Nikal.<sup>2</sup> A limited understanding of the Hurrian language has resulted in only one translated phrase of the hymn: “Thou [the goddess] lovest them in [thy] heart.” Love was expressed in song at least five thousand years ago.

The music of ancient Greece was inseparable from poetry, dancing, and theatre, with the principal instrument being the human voice. Yet the music of this ancient civilization was almost entirely monophonic, consisting of a single melody without a contrasting line or harmony. In the case of the “Hurrian Hymn to Nikal,” the harpist

most likely played the same line the singer sang, perhaps with slight improvisations.

We also know from the work of scholars that in the sixth century B.C., choral music was utilized in drama with instruments such as the aulos, a type of oboe. After the fall of Athens in 404 B.C., an anti-intellectual reaction took place and gave birth to the professional musician who employed more elaborate melody and rhythms in music composition and performance.

Early Christians undoubtedly took their cue from the ancient Greeks by composing monophonic music. As the Christian faith spread throughout the world, it incorporated the styles, instrumentation, and rhythms of many indigenous cultures as the early disciples of Christ carried the message of the one true and holy God into foreign lands. But jumping ahead to the time of Christ and the early Christian church is moving ahead much too quickly. To look at *All the Music of the Bible* is first to look at Abram, the patriarch of the Hebrew people.

### *The Beginnings of a Nation*

The history of the Israelites as recorded in the Old Testament reveals a landscape of physical, mental, and emotional difficulties, a series of challenges that became the story of humans at our best and our worst. Abram, eventually renamed Abraham (Gen. 17:5), was the patriarch of the Hebrew people. Abram was an old man of seventy-five years when he heard the call of God, instructing Abram to move his entire family and all of his possessions to Canaan, the chosen land.

In a magnificent showing of faith, Abraham left all that was familiar to lead his clan to Canaan (ca. 2090 B.C.), beginning the saga of God's chosen people chronicled in the Old Testament. Few pieces of literature rival these adventures for the drama and intrigue, romance and betrayals, hope and despair that characterized this journey into the unknown. Faith in God eroded with the fickleness of human emotions as the wandering clan confronted difficulties for which they were unprepared. Hunger, thirst, boredom, fear, jealousy, and even a longing for the "good old days" of enslavement were all part of the human

experience God used to prepare them for the promised land, a land which mirrored the inconsistencies of the Abrahamic clan.

This land of plenty and want flowed “with milk and honey” (Num. 13:27), as well as including vast wilderness areas void of vegetation. The diversity of the land itself symbolized both the faithful presence and seeming absence of this powerful God, known to the wandering tribe only as “Yahweh.”

A harsh climate, lack of many natural resources, and rugged terrain might seem an unlikely place for Yahweh to send His chosen people. An area of land measuring roughly 10,330 square miles, approximately the size of the state of Maryland, the territory to which Yahweh was leading His chosen people, was an area strategic for sea trade and commerce, a region forming the only intercontinental land bridge linking Asia and Europe with Africa, linking the Atlantic with the Indian Ocean by way of the Red Sea and the Mediterranean.

Not only was this land a strategic region geographically, but the difficulties the land presented forced the Israelites to rely on Yahweh for survival, demanding the trust and obedience Yahweh desired from the children of Israel. The journey that began the story of Abraham and Sarah and a fledgling nation is both spiritual and geographic, and the significance of music is integral to both.

### *Ancient Form and Function*

The emphasis on music in the Old Testament offers assurance that music played an important part in the Hebrews’ worship of Yahweh. References to music, praise, and singing in the Bible outnumber references to prayer and praying almost 2 to 1; in other words, twice as many biblical passages mention music as do prayer! Obviously, the Word of God has something to say about the importance of music in the life of those who seek to know God. Writing in the fourth century, Saint Augustine observed, “Apart from those moments when the scriptures are being read or a sermon is preached, when . . . praying aloud or . . . speaking prayer, is there any time when the faithful are not singing?”

The most important form of music in ancient Hebrew life was the song; the essential purpose of instrumental music was to underlie a

song's thought, to make the sung word more easily understood. It is striking to discover that the use of musical instruments is especially mentioned in the early texts of the Old Testament, relatively little in the more recent, and not at all in the New Testament until the Revelation of John. This pattern is likely a corollary to the development of musical instruments themselves. As their potential grew and numbers increased, instrumental sounds became fuller and more pleasant. Instruments acquired a language of their own, independent of the spoken word, and instrumental music became self-sufficient, an expression alongside the spoken word.

Hebrews sang in unison without need of harmony or counterpoint. The effectiveness of the music depended on the number of singers and the size of the participating orchestra. The orchestra sometimes played instrumental interludes as indicated by the word *selah* (louder playing or “forte”), which appears more than seventy times in Psalms.

This emphasis is illustrated wonderfully in 1 Chr. 25 where the temple chorus and orchestra, numbering several thousand, were divided into twenty-four sections and trained and conducted by the sons of Asaph, Heman, and Jeduthun. No doubt the music inspired the worshippers as they remembered Yahweh's blessings during very difficult times.

In Israel, as elsewhere, no popular or family feast passed without music. Singing and dancing is present when sending loved ones off on a journey to another land. When Jacob sneaks away from his father-in-law, Laban follows him asking, “Why did you flee away secretly, and steal away from me, and not tell me; for I might have sent you away with joy and songs, with timbrel and harp?” (Gen. 31:27 NKJV).

The court and nobility engaged or “owned” singers, both men and women, while commoners feasted with singing to the harp and tambourine as well. When these feasts drew the Israelites into drunkenness and debauchery, the prophets used music as an example of luxury and dissoluteness in their prophecies.

Music also played a role in the act of prophesying itself. Elisha asked for music one day, and while a harpist played “the hand of the LORD came upon him [Elisha]” (2 Kgs. 3:15 NKJV). At times of mourning, at funerals and burials, music was played, perhaps intended to

drive away evil spirits. For example, we know when David played his harp for Saul, a tormented Saul was refreshed and made well:

David would take a harp and play it with his hand. Then Saul would become refreshed and well, and the distressing spirit would depart from him. (1 Sam. 16:23 NKJV)

### *Songs of the Targum*

The historical and cultural significance of music in the life of the ancient people of God is underscored by a pivotal development. During the sixth and fifth centuries B.C., the Hebrew people were taken into captivity by the Babylonians and forbidden from speaking, singing or worshipping in Hebrew. The dominant language spoken by the Babylonian captors was Aramaic, and Aramaic became the official language of the Persian Empire. Their grief is captured in Ps. 137:

By the rivers of Babylon,  
There we sat down, yea, we wept  
When we remembered Zion.

We hung our harps  
Upon the willows in the midst of it.

For there those who carried us away captive asked of us a  
song,  
And those who plundered us requested mirth,  
Saying, "Sing us one of the songs of Zion!"

How shall we sing the LORD's song  
In a foreign land?

If I forget you, O Jerusalem,  
Let my right hand forget its skill!

If I do not remember you,  
Let my tongue cling to the roof of my mouth—  
If I do not exalt Jerusalem above my chief joy.  
(Ps. 137:1–6 NKJV)



Assyrian Captives (perhaps Northern Israelites) Playing Harps<sup>3</sup>  
 Figure 1.1 from a bas-relief in the British Museum

Afraid of losing their songs along with their language, Ezra and the Hebrew scribes translated and paraphrased Hebrew songs and Scriptures into Aramaic, and the translated documents became known as the Targum, meaning “the translation.” Some of the songs in the Targum are the same texts we find in the Hebrew Old Testament today. That these sacred texts are recorded in both languages and survived throughout centuries demonstrates the significance these songs played in the memory and worship of Israel. By the time of Christ, Aramaic had become the common language of Palestine, and was, in fact, the

language Jesus himself spoke. During synagogue services of His time, one verse of the Hebrew text would be read, followed by a translation and explanation in Aramaic; by the second or third century A.D., only the Aramaic translation was read.

Unlike the Scriptures themselves, the Targum became a depository of commentary *in addition to* the translated sacred texts. The scribes who translated the texts would include observations, explanations, and historical notes, providing modern scholars with valuable insights and information about the religious life and daily practices of the Israelites.

In the earliest Targum, several songs are highlighted as particularly meaningful. Tradition attributes the first song to Adam, who rejoiced when his sins were forgiven. According to the story, when the Sabbath came, he put a covering on his lips and sang a psalm for the Sabbath day, though the actual song is lost and goes unrecorded in the translation.

Three songs of the Exodus follow. Moses led the children of Israel in singing when the Lord divided the Red Sea for them to pass (Exod. 15:1–21), and Israel sang again when Yahweh revealed the well of water at Beer (Num. 21:16–18). At the end of his life, Moses sang an exhortation to the house of Israel (Deut. 32:1–43). Again, though we don't know what the songs themselves actually *sounded* like, the texts of the songs follow a consistent theme and one which ultimately becomes one of the major themes of the Bible itself: that of deliverance.

The Targum goes on to note the song of Joshua, a song of conquest following the fight at Gibeon; the Scriptures record that the sun and moon stood still for thirty-six hours (Josh. 10:12–13). The Targum includes the subsequent songs and stories told through music of Israelite judges, prophets, and kings. Barak and Deborah sang the day the LORD delivered Sisera and his army into the hands of the children of Israel (Jdg. 5:1–31). Hannah sang when LORD gave her a son, Samuel (1 Sam. 2:1–10). David, the king of Israel, sang of the wonders the LORD had done for him and by the spirit of prophecy (2 Sam. 22:1–51). Solomon, his son and heir, also sang before Jehovah (see Song of Songs). Finally, the Targum celebrates Isaiah's restoration song in which he promises the captive Jews in Babylon that they shall sing again as though they were home in Israel on a festival night (Isa. 30:29–33).

What becomes clear when reading through these familiar stories of the Old Testament, looking specifically at what events brought forth songs of response, is that music was a primary tool of preserving the history of the chosen people of God. Long before the Holy Scriptures were committed to paper by scribes, the stories themselves were preserved by what scholars and historians call “oral tradition,” one generation telling the stories over and over to the next generation. What easier way to remember than putting those stories to music? The songs of the Old Testament tell us again and again that Yahweh, the one true and Holy Lord, delivers the faithful. Whatever the anguish of His people, whether from oppression, sorrow, injustice, want or need, God is with His people in a timeless covenant of love and redemption. Although we will examine many of these ancient texts more thoroughly in the coming chapters, what is worthy to note is the common melody that flows throughout all the music born in ancient times and places. That melody is one of divine love, calling, pursuing, delivering, and redeeming a chosen people. (For a list of well-known songs of the Bible, see Appendix B.)