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The Ritual Use of Music in Ancient Israelite Worship

Mindy J. Anderson

This extract is taken from my honors thesis where I focus on the role the Levites played in association with the Ark of the Covenant and the Temple of Solomon to determine Israel’s use of music as a form of worship.

Music served as a conduit of communication between the LORD and his children. Extant text traces the first occurrence of ritual music to Moses. The use of music was commanded by the LORD at this time and in later Israelite history. The LORD revealed through his prophets that music should accompany prescribed ritual acts.

The Levites ministered before the LORD, offering up thanks and praise with instrument and voice. The Levites accompanied and aided worshippers in keeping divine commands to remember and offer thanksgiving to the LORD. Using their lyric text, the Psalms, the Israelites gathered in holy places and invoked the name of the LORD, literally requesting his presence. The psalms accompanied ritual acts. A Levitical temple orchestra, composed of lyres, harps, cymbals, and trumpets accompanied the daily sacrifices.

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Israelite worshippers sang songs of ascent as they would journey up to the house of the LORD. Music was a medium through which the Israelites were able to worship, expressing thanks and praise, as well as publicly announced the LORD’s presence.

Levites were charged with caring for the day-to-day requirements of temple service. This included the upkeep and preparation of vessels, instruments and furniture of the tabernacle and temple. The musical instruments were considered vessels of service and therefore under the charge of the Levites. According to Sigmund Mowinckel, the Levites held a more important role than most biblical scholars admit. He believes that the Levites received a portion of prophetic inspiration. To better understand the use of music it is imperative to study the verbs associated with it.

‘To Prophesy’ with Music

In the post-exilic period, Levites functioned as cultic prophets. The verbal root שְׁפַע in the niphal (שְׁפַע) and hitpael (שְׁפַע) describe divine inspiration. The verb is translated as “prophesy” in the King James English version. According to A.A. Wolf, the terms “prophet” and “seer” anciently had the same meaning as “musician” and “singer.” The root שְׁפַע is found four times in the Hebrew Bible in a musical context.

When Saul was anointed by Samuel, Samuel told him that he would meet a company of prophets prophesying with musical instruments. 1 Samuel 10:5–6 gives both verbs in the hitpael. With them, Saul was told, he would prophesy.

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David appointed Levitical families to play the cultic instruments of harp, lyre and cymbal, in order to give thanks and to praise the Lord. In addition to other cultic duties, the Levites were set apart to prophesy in their musical calling, specifically with harps. 1 Chronicles 25:1 states that the Levite musicians prophesied (תָּנַבְת) with these instruments. בתְּנַבְת is a ketib and should be read as the niphal participle תְּנַבְת. Verse three of the same chapter verifies the use of the niphal participle (תְּנַבְת). The Levites not only played the instruments but also prophesied with them.

John Kleinig, writing about the use of liturgical song in Chronicles, sees reason for the use of this root in connection with the musical role of the Levites. Kleinig observed that the Levites communicated words of the LORD, conveyed the congregation’s answer to the LORD, and prophetically proclaimed the LORD’s name and his acceptance, urging the Israelites to remember their God (1 Chronicles 23:13).

‘To Minister’ with Music

The root תָּנַבְת occurs ninety-three times in the Hebrew Bible. Sixty-seven of these verses relate to temple settings. תָּנַבְת is translated as “minister” in the King James version, connoting priestly service in the temple. The action of ministering is directly associated with temple ritual, the burning of incense (1 Chronicles 23:13), burnt and peace offerings (2 Chronicles 31:2), and offering up of thanks and praise (2 Chronicles 31:2). The verses that contain this root describe priestly functions as well as the dress and sacred vessels of the temple. 1 Chronicles 16:4 affirms that Levites “ministered (תָּנַבְת) before the ark of the LORD, to record, thank and praise the LORD God of Israel.” 1 Chronicles 6:32 states that the Levites “ministered (תָּנַבְת) with singing” before the tabernacle. In both instances the piel participle is used. Fulfilling their Levitical role to play or “minister” with musical instruments, the Levites acted as cultic prophets. They prophesied to
give thanks and praise to the LORD (1 Chronicles 25:3). The contributors to the Hebrew Bible chose to use the verbs “prophesy” and “minister” in these musical contexts outlined above, indicating the interconnection of music and ritual.

Levites served a prophetic role as they accompanied and aided worshippers in keeping divine commands to remember and offer thanksgiving to the LORD. A bearer of prayer and praise, the Levites used music to invoke the Divine Presence. Though the sacrificial rite could have existed without musical accompaniment it did not. Music completed the ritual.