

Lecture #7 – History of Sacred Music – Part I

I. Introduction

While we readily admit that a foundation for a philosophy of church music that is built fully upon Scripture is more than sufficient, we may also find a study of the history of church music to be beneficial. In doing so we may see that our philosophy of church music has been tested over centuries of debate and controversy. Many of the debates that are being fought today have already been addressed by our spiritual forefathers.

“Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it.” – philosopher George Santayana

II. Musical Instruments of the Ancient Israel

The focus of our study will be on the instruments that were used by the Jews during the Old Testament period. We will not examine the instruments used by other nations, as in Daniel 3.

String Instruments

The *kinnor* (Strong’s H4658, translated as “harp” 42x) was a type of harp or lyre. It would have a small, angled body with two arms stretching from it, a bridge between the arms, and strings stretched from bridge to body.

The *nebel* (Strong’s H5035, translated as “psaltery” 21x and “viol” 4x) is another type of harp/lyre. The distinction between it and the *kinnor* is unclear.

The word *men* (Strong’s H4482, translated as “stringed instruments” 1x) is a generic term for stringed instruments.

Wind Instruments

The *chalil* (Strong’s H2485, translated as “pipe” 6x) was simple flute made from a hollowed reed, bone, or stick. It had holes bored into it to produce different tones. Sometimes two of these could be combined into an inverted “V” shape so that two tone could be produced at once.

The *uggab* (Strong’s H5748, translated as “organ” 4x) was perhaps a primitive bagpipe, but the design is not certain.

Percussion Instruments

The ***toph*** (Strong's H8596, translated as “tabret” 8x and “timbrel” 9x) was a small hand drum. These were often constructed by stretching skin over a hoop of wood

The ***tslatsal*** (Strong's H6767, translated as “cymbals” 3x) was a type of cymbal that made a rattling or buzzing sound. This word has non-musical meanings so it more descriptive than definitive. The plural word ***metsiltayim*** (Strong's H4700, translated “cymbals” 13x) describes a pair of these cymbals.

Non-Instruments

There are a few devices that can easily be confused for musical instruments, but their use was not musical.

The ***shofar*** (Strong's H7782, translated as “trumpet” 68x or “cornet” 4x) is a hollowed-out animal horn that is blown primarily for as a signaling instrument. It can be mentioned along with musical instruments (I Chronicles 15:28) but it could not be used for melody or harmony. It would at times be sounded at the end of lines of songs, but its usage would be musically speaking would be similar to the cannons that are fired during the “1812 Overture”.

The ***yobel*** (Strong's H3104, translated as “jubilee” 21x, “ram’s horn” 4x, and “trumpet” 1x) is another term for the *shofar*.

The ***chatsotrah*** (Strong's H2689, translated as “trumpet” 27x) was a metal trumpet. These had no valves and could produce limited tones, so their musical use was limited. These were signaling devices.

The ***paamon*** (Strong's H6472, translated as “bells” 7x) is the bell that was on the bottom of the High Priest's robe in Exodus 28 and 39. This was not used for musical purposes.

The ***metsillah*** (Strong's 4698, translated as “bells” 1x) is used for the bells placed upon horses. These were not used for musical purposes.

The ***menaanea*** (Strong's H4517, translated as “cornet” 1x) only appears once in I Samuel 6:5. The parallel passage in I Chronicles 13:8 lists *trumpets* (*chatsotrah*) instead of these. Some say these are rattle-like percussion instruments called *sistrums*.

III. Music in the Tabernacle and Temple

The earliest associations between the Jews and music are not regarding worship. We read of trumpets (*shofar*) as signals for war, as in Judges 7:18-20. We also find reference to music in times of merriment, as in Genesis 31:27 and Judges 11:34. The first time we find music and worship together is when Israel danced before the Golden Calf in Exodus 32:18-19. Because of music's association with pagan rites and secular settings, it appears the early Jews may have been careful to incorporate it into their worship. Quoting from the *Illustrated Manners and Customs of the Bible*:

“Hebrew leaders who ministered in the temple took great care to avoid using music that was associated with sensuous pagan worship. In cultures where fertility rites were common, women singers and musicians incited sexual orgies in honor of their gods. Even instruments not associated with pagan practices were sometimes restricted. For example, priests feared that a happy, melodious flute tune in the temple could distract someone’s mind from worship.”¹

During the use of the Tabernacle (1490-1004 B.C.²) it is unclear how much of a role music played in worship there. There are few references to music in connection to Tabernacle worship in Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, or Deuteronomy. We find numerous uses of trumpets for signaling (examples: Leviticus 25:9 and Numbers 10:2). There are also bells on the high priest’s robe, but these were used to show the priest was alive and moving (Exodus 28:33-35).

When we come to the time of David, we find the most references to music in organized Jewish worship. Whether he originated this use or expanded upon it is not clear. David appears to have organized the first musicians and singers among the Levites in I Chronicles 15:16-24 after the Ark was returned from the Philistines.

During the times of the First Temple (1004-586 B.C.) and Second Temple (516 B.C.-70 A.D.)³ we find that music was an important part Temple services. Alfred Edersheim, writing in his book *The Temple: Its Ministry and Services* says:

“To the wealth and splendour of the Temple corresponded the character of its services. The most important of these, next to the sacrificial rites, was the hymnody of the sanctuary. We can conceive what it must have been in the days of David and of Solomon. But even in New Testament times it was such that St. John could find no more adequate imagery to portray heavenly realities and the final triumph of the Church than that taken from the service of praise in the Temple....”⁴

On the use of instruments in the Temple, Edersheim writes:

“Properly speaking, the real service of praise in the Temple was only with the voice. This is often laid down as a principle by the Rabbis. What instrumental music there was, served only to accompany and sustain the song. Accordingly, none other than Levites might act as choristers, while other distinguished Israelites were allowed to take part in the instrumental music. The blasts of the trumpets, blown by priests only, formed—at least in the second Temple—no part of the instrumental music of the service, but were intended for quite different purposes....

“The music of the Temple owed its origin to David, who was not only a poet and a musical composer, but who also invented musical instruments (Amos 6:5; 1 Chron 23:5), especially the ten-stringed Nevel or lute (Psa 33:2; 144:9). From the Book of Chronicles we know how fully this part of the service was cultivated, although the statement of Josephus (Anti. viii. 3, 8.), that Solomon had provided forty thousand harps and lutes, and two hundred thousand silver trumpets, is evidently a gross exaggeration. The Rabbis enumerate thirty-six different instruments, of which only fifteen are mentioned in the Bible, and of these five in the Pentateuch. As in early Jewish poetry there was neither definite and continued metre (in the modern sense), nor regular and premeditated rhyme, so there was neither musical notation, nor yet any artificial harmony. The melody was simple, sweet, and sung in unison to the accompaniment of instrumental music. Only one pair of brass cymbals were allowed to be used. But this ‘sounding brass’ and ‘tinkling cymbal’ formed no part

¹ *Illustrated Manners and Customs of the Bible*, p. 493-494

² Dates found in *Reese’s Chronological Bible*

³ Dates found in *Reese’s Chronological Bible*

⁴ <https://ccel.org/ccel/edersheim/temple/temple.v.html> - Accessed 12-28-21. This quote stops mid-paragraph for the sake of brevity but is worth reading for the ties he shows between Temple music and the imagery of Revelation.

of the Temple music itself, and served only as the signal to begin that part of the service. To this the apostle seems to refer when, in 1 Corinthians 13:1, he compares the gift of ‘tongues’ to the sign or signal by which the real music of the Temple was introduced.”⁵

Edersheim, describing the singing in the Temple:

“As already stated, the service of praise was mainly sustained by the human voice. A good voice was the one qualification needful for a Levite. In the second Temple female singers seem at one time to have been employed (Ezra 2:65; Neh 7:67). In the Temple of Herod their place was supplied by Levite boys. Nor did the worshippers any more take part in the praise, except by a responsive Amen. It was otherwise in the first Temple, as we gather from 1 Chronicles 16:36, from the allusion in Jeremiah 33:11, and also from such Psalms as 26:12; 68:26. At the laying of the foundation of the second Temple, and at the dedication of the wall of Jerusalem, the singing seems to have been antiphonal, or in responses (Ezra 3:10, 11; Neh 12:27, 40), the two choirs afterwards apparently combining, and singing in unison in the Temple itself. Something of the same kind was probably also the practice in the first Temple. What the melodies were to which the Psalms had been sung, it is, unfortunately, now impossible to ascertain. Some of the music still used in the synagogue must date from those times, and there is no reason to doubt that in the so-called Gregorian tones we have also preserved to us a close approximation to the ancient hymnody of the Temple, though certainly not without considerable alterations.”⁶

IV. Music in the Synagogue

Synagogues have their root in the Babylonian exile and the *Diaspora*. Jews gathered locally to worship when they could not go the Temple to do so. By the time of Christ, they were deeply ingrained into Jewish society and worship. In a synagogue service during the first century A.D., you would expect singing, prayers, Scripture reading, and lectures. No instruments were allowed to be played in the synagogue. The songs sung would have been Psalms. A **cantor**⁷ (Hebrew: *hazzan*) would sing a line and the congregation would sing a response in unison.

The style of chanting Scripture, called **cantillation**, has been preserved by use of **trope** symbols. The website MyJewishLearning.com explains cantillation:

“Cantillation consists of the musical system for chanting texts from the Bible. The Pentateuch is generally read in short sections each Sabbath over the course of a year; various readings from the Prophets accompany the reading from the Pentateuch every week, and sections of the Writings are often read on special holidays. These sections of the Bible are read by one member of the congregation while the rest of the congregation listens.

“The written notation for cantillation was developed by a group known as the Masoretes (from the Hebrew word *Mesorah*, meaning ‘tradition’), active as early as the sixth century, but who may have been recording much more ancient practices. The Masoretes inscribed each word in the Bible with a cantillation mark, indicating how it was to be sung. Those markings do not indicate specific notes or melodies, but only guidelines for enunciation. During the ensuing 1,500 years, each community’s cantillation melodies diverged and took on the character and sound of music of

⁵ <https://ccl.org/ccl/edersheim/temple/temple.v.html> - Accessed 12-28-21.

⁶ <https://ccl.org/ccl/edersheim/temple/temple.v.html> - Accessed 12-28-21.

⁷ A term still found today in liturgical denominations.

surrounding peoples, but the Masoretic markings and guidelines for cantillation have remained the same.”⁸

The arrows below point to the cantillation marks⁹:



For an example of singing in a synagogue, I recommend watching this YouTube video titled “Mizrahi Jews Singing in Synagogue”, found at <https://youtu.be/ulEoW5eCNOU>

⁸ <https://www.myjewishlearning.com/article/synagogue-music/> - accessed 9-4-22

⁹ https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Example_of_biblical_Hebrew_trope.svg – accessed 9-4-22