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The Role of Music in Worship

by K. M. Campbell

Eight years ago Dr. Campbell contributed a paper to our pages on Heb. 9: 16 f. entitled "Covenant or Testament?" The subject of this paper may seem quite remote from that, but everything that Dr. Campbell touches tends to be related by him to what is of central importance for Christian faith and life. The role of music in worship, he suggests, is a theme seldom dealt with in journals, and he hopes that his essay may encourage some thought on the question.

A certain amount of dissatisfaction with the present character and value of congregational praise is being expressed in many evangelical circles. Unfortunately sides are often taken along age lines, with young people agitating for folk or "pop" styles of musical worship, and older christians holding onto familiar and "dignified" music. Frequently lacking from much of the discussion is an appreciation of the surprisingly rich biblical background to this problem. Surely the Bible should be accepted as normative on this as on other topics; here I simply want to survey some of the biblical evidence in order to guide our thinking as we try to honour God in corporate praise.

A rather obvious point at the outset is the fact that nowhere does the Bible present the concept or practice of music as the concern of "arty" types or eccentric individuals; on the contrary music plays a meaningful and important role in the life of God's people throughout biblical history. In the O.T. God's people as a whole sing (Ex. 15), as do kings (David), prophets (Moses), prophetesses (Miriam, Deborah), priests (Levites), lovers (Song of Solomon), and so on. Moreover God himself is represented as singing (Zeph. 3: 17), and so is Christ (Heb. 2: 12), and also the angels (Isa. 6: 3).

The fact that music pervaded every aspect of life in the O.T. is indicated by the various kinds of music that find mention in the pages of Scripture. We read, for example, of *military* music (Josh. 6: 4, 8, 15, 20), of *popular* music (Job 30: 9; Amos 6: 5), and of *work*-songs (Isa. 16: 10); there is the song of the grape-pickers (Isa. 16: 10; Jer. 48: 33; cf. Jer. 25: 30), the song of the well-diggers (Num 21: 17), the song of the harvest-gatherers (Isa. 9: 3; Ps. 126:6). We find also *court* music (e.g. 1 Kings 1: 34); the royal psalms celebrated various notable events, such as marriage, victory in battle, etc. (cf. e.g., Pss. 31, 72, 18, 20, 45, 101, 110). There are *love* songs (Isa. 5: 1; Song of Solomon) and songs of *victory* (Judg. 5); songs to *soothe* (1 Sam. 16: 16-23) and songs to *inspire* (2 Kings 3: 15). Music in fact played a significant part in Hebrew culture throughout biblical history; this is illustrated by the fact that when the Israelites went into foreign captivity, kings were careful to preserve the Hebrew musicians, who enjoyed an international fame in the ancient Near East. Psalm 137 laments this sort of experience during the Babylonian captivity.

With this general background in view, it will be appreciated that music was a very important feature of public worship in Israel. One of the marks of God's people is that they are called to 'praise his name' (cf. 2 Sam. 22: 50; Ps. 18: 49; 66: 1; Isa. 43: 21; cf. 1 Pet. 2: 9). Praising God is the immediate response of the forgiven man and the renewed church (cf. Ps. 51: 15; Is. 35: 6; 61: 11). In the Temple worship 4,000 full-time musicians were appointed by David to play and sing (cf. 1 Chron. 23: 5; also 2: 16-32; 15: 16-24; 16: 41-42). A chief musician was appointed over them all, and various groups were formed (e.g. of Asaph, Korah, etc.) with

different functions. About this time small collections of songs began to be collated together into five main groups, to form the basic outline of the Psalter as we know it today. Some songs which are recorded elsewhere in Scripture were included in the collection (e.g. 2 Sam. 22; cf. Ps. 18), but others were not (e.g. Dt. 32; Ex. 15, etc.). Several songs found in different collections simultaneously were included, and this led to some duplication, e.g. cf. Ps. 14 with 53; 40: 14-18 with 70; 31: 1-3 with 71: 1-3; 60: 7-14 with 108; 8-14. Asaph (or his family) was responsible for Psalms 73-83, and Korah (or his descendants) for Psalms 42-49. The psalter collection was completed before about 200 B.C.

In addition to the five-fold division, the Psalter can be analysed in other ways. (1) According to type *T'hillah* - a song of praise; *Mizmor* - a song accompanied by musical instruments; *Shir* - a song to be sung, not chanted. (2) According to mood: i.e. praise, thanksgiving, malediction, wisdom poems, lament. (3) According to purpose: Ps. 92, for the Sabbath; Ps. 24, for Sunday; Ps. 48, for Monday; Ps. 93, for Friday; Ps. 100, for thanksgiving; Pss. 113-118, for the Passover (Hallel psalms); and various *Tamid* psalms used at morning burnt-offering sacrifices. All these specific purposes are of course related to the Temple ritual. The same types and moods of songs are found elsewhere in the O.T. as well.

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The Temple cult gave focal expression to Israel's life and worship. But to appreciate why music was so central in the culture and worship of God's people, let us go back to the beginning and briefly note how music developed in biblical history. The first mention of music in Scripture is found in Gen. 4. An incident is referred to in the middle of a narrative, and once mentioned is passed over without further comment. We are told that Jubal was either the inventor of certain musical instruments, or the first teacher of music. His father, Lamech, is the first singer mentioned in Scripture (4: 23, 24). His "song" would not be regarded by us as very "melodious" and essentially was simply an expression of emotion (conceit) and probably took the form of a shout, perhaps repeated a few times. This incident took place at the very dawn of history, and there is no mention of music made for some time after.

The next step in the history of music after the primitive "shout" is apparently exclamation—cf. Num. 10: 35-36; Judg. 7: 20; 15: 16; Ex. 15: 21. A glance at, e.g., Judg. 15: 16 shows that this took the form of a twice repeated assertion concerning some great occurrence. The tone is of exultation. What is not apparent from the translations is the fact that these exclamations had set tonal forms; there is a staccato rhythm to the words. In the case of Miriam in Ex. 15: 21 this was accompanied by the rhythmic movement of the body (cf. v. 20, "dances").

From this it is but a short step to the characteristic feature of Hebrew poetry, namely, parallelism. The repetition of the same idea in different words was accompanied by a heavy beat, the same concept in each line being accentuated. The purpose (or at least the effect) of this was to aid the memorization of the truth. It has to be remembered in this connection that most Hebrew instruments were of the *percussion* type; the Temple orchestra, with its driving rhythm and loud brass, would not have sounded very "melodious" to our ears, but this is incidental; the point is that it was effective for its purpose. As the purpose of music was to highlight and facilitate the remembrance of truth, it is not surprising to find that Moses, in summarizing the covenant in Dt. 32 did so in song so that it would be better

recalled (cf. 32: 46; 31: 19). Similarly the patriarchal blessing of Dt. 33, which gave to each tribe its identity and character, was sung, so that each generation might memorise it.

The important thing for us to appreciate today is that music in the O.T. was *purposefully* employed; it was *functional*. "Good" music is not music which is aesthetically good, but music which is *ethically* good. Music served to impress the words upon the heart by working on the emotions, in order to engrave them on the mind. The remarkable musical history of the American negro is instructive at this point. The survival of the American negro is often in part attributed to his love of music; but this concern with music was not an aesthetic concern. He sang while he was working (as did the Hebrews) because the rhythmic beats of the music helped his work and kept his mind alert. Like the ancient Hebrew, he could improvise on a given theme on the spot. He sang loudly and clapped his hands at worship because that was one of the few ways he had of expressing his emotions. Some of the blues songs now on record were handed down from generation to generation. The same process was doubtless at work among the children of Israel until such time as the Scriptures began to be written. All this time the function of music was to drive home the spoken word to the heart so that it would be retained in the mind accurately.

The development from shouted prose to exclamation to parallelism to rhythmic prose continued, and became *chanting* or cantillation. This can be seen at a glance in the Hebrew text of the Scriptures, which contains a bewildering array of cryptic symbols. There are in fact 28 accent marks, 3 marking stops, the other 25 marking stresses of various kinds, and the raising or lowering of the voice. The skilled Hebrew Reader (it took him 5 years to train) could thus chant at sight, with perfect accuracy, any portion of Scripture. It is not only the psalms which are so accented; almost the whole of the O.T. is thus marked, because not only were the psalms sung (or chanted) in worship, but the entire Scripture was. The favourite portions were the Pentateuch, and then the Psalms, but all Scripture (or at any rate, most) was regularly chanted, both by the Reader and by the congregation.

At first chironomy was the practise (the rise and fall of a finger or hand to mark the accents), but in time the accents were developed and incorporated into the text. The relevance of this feature of worship is underlined by today's authority on chanting, Rabbi Binder: he writes, "The Hebraic accents had to be specifically adjusted to *meet the meaning* of the Biblical texts. . . . When expertly chanted, the whole strikes one with its singular *effectiveness in making clear the meaning of the text* and impressing it on the mind of the listener" (*Biblical Chant*, N.Y., 1959, p.14). In other words musical accompaniment was subservient to and determined by the theological content of the material. To cite Binder again, "Biblical chant is not influenced by any musical metrical character of the tropes,¹ but rather by the accentuation ingrained in the text which determines its musical flow" (*op. cit.*, p.15). This principle was regarded with such importance that in the 18th century we find Rabbi Abraham Ibn Ezra urging that "all interpretations which are not according to the logic of the tropes—do not follow or listen to them".

¹ *Trope*: an insertion of music or words into the text by another hand.

The fundamental criterion of biblical music is thus its *functionality*. Music is the handmaid of truth. It is not a “thing-in-itself”; rhythm, harmony and melody are all elements of one instrument—music. As an instrument, music must not call attention to itself, and must not detract from the truth. If it does, it is bad music. Music is a servant, a vehicle. The question we must ask of it therefore, is not: “Is it enjoyable?” Nor should we ask primarily “Is it dignified?” or “Is it nice?”, or “Is it exciting?”, or “Is it musically sophisticated?” The criterion is simply, “Is it *effective*?” The purpose of music in worship is the *intensification* of the truth: what does this mean today in terms of congregational praise?

46 First, we may say that songs must be scriptural, both in the sense that they are doctrinally orthodox, and also in the sense that they should give the same degree of emphasis to particular doctrines that is given to them in Scripture itself. Second, we may say that since song is a form of speech, the same aspects of speech which are found in prayer, proclamation, etc., should be reflected in song: e.g. request, exhortation, confession, praise, prayer, proclamation, teaching, assertion, etc. Third, it must be stressed that whatever form of musical accompaniment is employed, it must be judged in terms not of aesthetic quality primarily, but in terms of ethical quality above all. (This is not, of course, to argue *for* aesthetically bad or mediocre music. Poor standards in any human activity are not glorifying to God! What I am arguing for is correct *priorities*.) *We should ask how efficient* the accompaniment is in getting the truth of the words through to the person so that his whole emotional and intellectual being is involved in the activity of worship. Finally, on the basis of the above survey, it seems that we ought to re-examine our traditional forms of musical worship rather carefully. Is the organ sacrosanct? Are choirs a biblical or musically helpful notion? Should some Christians sing while others listen? How many of our hymns are concerned with God and how many with ourselves? Should congregations expect to have and benefit from a multiplicity of musically gifted people? Should our services be designed like a “hymn-sandwich”, or could a time of concentrated hymn-singing be profitable? Can individuals be taught to involve themselves more seriously and completely in the musical worship of the Lord?

Whatever our answers to these questions may be, it would seem to be true that the centrality and importance of music to God’s people in biblical times is lacking in the churches today. If our public worship is to be properly balanced, we need to understand anew the essential *functionality* of music and its role as a potentially effective vehicle of response to and glorification of God.

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