

Manner And Customs of Bible Lands

by

Fred H. Wight

Copyright @ 1953

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE -

Vocal and Instrumental Music

ORIGIN OF MUSICAL INSTRUMENTS

JUBAL, THE PIONEER MUSICIAN. Concerning him Scripture says: "**He was the father of all such as handle the harp and organ [pipe]**" (Genesis 4:21). Doubtless this means he was the inventor of these musical instruments, and as he was not many generations removed from Adam, we may infer that music has always played an important role in the history of mankind.

Babylonian musical instruments preceding Abraham. Since Abraham spent his early life in Ur of the Chaldees, it is more than likely that some of the musical instruments used by the patriarchs had their origin in that land. Woolley's excavations at Ur brought to light from one of the death pits in connection with a royal tomb, four harps or lyres, one of which was a magnificent specimen. The artistic beauty of these gold and mosaic musical instruments emphasizes the fact that the musical art was at a high level in those ancient days.¹

A cylinder-seal of a queen of the land of Abraham's birth, who reigned about a thousand years before his time, reveals the fact that timbrels were being used at banquets and at religious gatherings.²

Jacob's father-in-law Laban, lived in Babylonian territory, and when Jacob left him in haste, he said to him: "**Wherefore didst thou flee away secretly . . . that I might have sent thee away with mirth, and with songs, with tabret, and with harp?**" (Genesis 31:27). This suggests the possibility that some of these musical instruments as used in Babylonia found their way into the life of the early Hebrews.

Egyptian musical instruments influencing Moses and Israel. Moses received a thorough education at the hands of the Egyptians, and music was an important part of his training. Music was greatly emphasized in Egyptian religious services. The following instruments were used by them: the harp, the lyre, the flute, the tambourine, and cymbals. Dancing was commonly connected with the use of musical instruments.³

Some phases of Egyptian musical customs most probably followed the Israelites from Egypt into the land of Canaan.

MUSICAL CELEBRATION OF RED SEA VICTORY

After the miraculous crossing of Israel through the Red Sea, the victory over the Egyptians was fittingly celebrated with music. **"And Miriam the prophetess, the sister of Aaron, took a timbrel in her hand; and all the women went out after her with timbrels and with dances"** (Exodus 15:20). There was the singing of a song, the words of which Moses gives us. This was accompanied by the use of the timbrel, and along with it was dancing. This timbrel was a circular hoop, made of either wood or brass, and covered with skin tightly drawn, and with small bells hung around it.⁴

ISRAEL'S USE OF TRUMPETS

The trumpets as used by the Hebrews were in three forms. The earliest form was made from the horn of an ox or a ram. A second form was a curved metallic trumpet. And a later form was the straight trumpet, a representation of which is seen on the Arch of Titus.⁵

Moses was commanded of the LORD to make two silver trumpets which were to be sounded forth **"for the calling of the assembly, and for the journeying of the camps"** (Numbers 10:2). Also GOD told them: **"If ye go to war in your land against the enemy that oppresseth you, then ye shall blow an alarm with the trumpets"** (Numbers 10:9). The fiftieth year, or the Year of Jubilee, was ushered in on the Day of Atonement by the blowing of the trumpets (Leviticus 25:8, 9). Throughout the history of Israel, trumpets were used to gather the people together in times of war that they might go to battle, and usually in times of peace that they might come to the sanctuary for the purpose of divine worship.

SPECIAL OCCASIONS FOR THE USE OF MUSIC

Among the Hebrews, vocal and instrumental music together with dancing were employed on most occasions of great joy. Victories in battle were thus celebrated. In this way the women of Israel celebrated the victory of young David and the army of Saul over the Philistines. **"And it came to pass as they came, when David was returned from the slaughter of the Philistines, that the women came out of all the cities of Israel, singing and dancing, to meet King Saul, with tabrets, with joy, and with instruments of musick"** (I Samuel 18:6). At the coronation of the boy King Joash, music was prominent. **"And all the people of the land rejoiced, and sounded with trumpets, also the singers with instruments of musick, and such as taught to sing praise"** (II Chronicles 23:13). Music was also part of the entertainment at banquets. **"And the harp, and the viol, the tabret, and pipe, and wine, are in their feasts."** Thus wrote Isaiah about the feasts of his day (Isaiah 5:12).

THE PROPHETS' USE OF MUSICAL INSTRUMENTS

Beginning with Samuel, the prophets of Israel made much use of music and musical instruments in connection with their prophesying. Samuel told Saul, **"Thou shalt meet a company of prophets coming down from the high place with a psaltery, and a tabret, and a pipe, and a harp, before them; and they shall prophesy"** (I Samuel 10:5). Music helped to create the right atmosphere for spiritual exercises of devotion. Concerning Elisha the prophet it was said: **"But now bring me a minstrel. And it came to pass, when the minstrel played, that the hand of the Lord came upon him"** (II Kings 3:15).

THE CONTRIBUTION OF DAVID TO THE MUSIC OF ISRAEL

David the boy musician. Through the centuries Palestine shepherd boys have played their simple dual-piped flutes made of reed, in the presence of their flocks. The strains of the music are minor, but it appeals to both the shepherd and the sheep. No doubt David's musical experience began with this instrument, when he cared for the family flock. But in addition to playing on this shepherd's instrument, young David became famed for his ability to use what our Bible versions have called "**a harp.**" Now the instrument was not large enough to be like what Westerners today would call a harp. It would be more appropriate to call it "a lyre." Such an instrument is actually a modified form of harp, being portable.

The sound-chest forms the base of it. "From the end of this arise two rods curved or straight connected above by a crosspiece, and the strings are stretched upward from the base to the crosspiece."⁶

When Saul's servants were asked to look for someone who could play on this instrument with ability, one of their number said: "**I have seen a son of Jesse the Bethlehemite, that is cunning in playing**" (I Samuel 16:18). And thus David came to play for King Saul when he had one of his fits of sadness, in order to refresh him.

David the writer and collector of Psalms. David not only played on instruments, he also under all kinds of situations, penned beautiful Psalms that helped to make up the Hebrew hymn book, we call the Book of Psalms. He drew upon his boyhood experiences to write his immortal Shepherd Psalm (Psalm 23). He wrote of his experiences when he fled from the hand of King Saul and hid in a cave (Psalm 57). And he celebrated the deliverance which the LORD gave him over all his enemies by writing Psalm 18. When he repented of his great sin, he gave to the world his Penitential Psalm (Psalm 51). Thus in writing down under the Spirit's inspiration his personal experiences, men and women through the centuries have been spiritually blessed. But it must be remembered that these Psalms of David (and of other Hebrews) were originally songs of Israel. No doubt many of the Psalm not written by David were collected by him and inserted in the king's musical selection of poems for use in divine worship.

David the originator of certain musical instruments. The chronicler of the Hebrew kings says of David, "**Four thousand praised the LORD with the instruments which I made, said David, to praise therewith**" (I Chronicles 23:5). And again, "**And the Levites stood with the instruments of David**" (II Chronicles 29:26). Either King David was himself the inventor of these instruments for worship, or at least he was responsible for their invention, for they were called his instruments.

David the organizer of Hebrew musical worship. It would appear that the Hebrew liturgy for many years following David's life was what was originally prescribed by him.

The musical service rendered by the Levites in the worship of the sanctuary was organized by David. He was responsible for appointing certain ones to this task. "**And with them Heman and Jeduthun with trumpets and cymbals for those that should make a sound, and with musical instruments of God**" (I Chronicles 16:42). We are told that Heman had fourteen sons and three daughters. And "**all these were under the hands of their father for song in the house of the**

LORD, with cymbals, psalteries, and harps, for the service of the house of GOD, according to the king's order to Asaph, Jeduthun, and Heman. So the number of them, with their brethren that were instructed in the songs of the LORD, even all that were cunning, was two hundred fourscore and eight" (I Chronicles 25:6, 7).

No doubt these singers and players sang Psalms accompanied by instruments. When King David became organizer and director of Hebrew sacred music, it may be said that he made his nation famous for its music for years to come.⁷

CHARACTER OF SOME OLD TESTAMENT MUSICAL INSTRUMENTS

It has already been indicated that the Old Testament word "harp" describes a "lyre." The word "organ" is the "pipe," and is more like our flute than any other instrument. The "psaltery" and "viol" are stringed instruments, there being much uncertainty concerning their exact nature. "The cymbal consisted of two large and broad plates of brass, of a convex form; which being struck against each other, made a hollow ringing sound. They form in our days, a part of every military band."⁸

The "dulcimer" (Daniel 3:5) is rendered is the same as the "bagpipe."

SOME SONGS OF THE HEBREW BIBLE

In addition to the Book of Psalms, there are numerous Hebrew poems that were originally sung as songs and are now a part of the Hebrew Bible. Some editions of the Scriptures print these in poetic form. The Song sung by Moses and Miriam at the Red Sea is one such a song (Exodus 15). When GOD gave Israel water in the wilderness, they sang the Song of the Well (Numbers 21:17,18). And Moses put his final warnings and instructions to Israel into a song which he taught them (Deuteronomy 32). The Song of Deborah (Judges 5) was sung in order to celebrate a victory over the Canaanites. The Song of Hannah (I Samuel 2) was sung as a mother's thanksgiving for the birth of her son Samuel. And the Song of Solomon was a song celebrating the love between the LORD and Israel His bride. Other songs might be added to this list.

ABSENCE OF MUSIC IN THE CAPTIVITY

In predicting the judgment of the captivity days for Israel because of her sins, the prophet said: **"The mirth of tabrets ceaseth, the noise of them that rejoice endeth, the joy of the harp ceaseth"** (Isaiah 24:8). Music largely ceased among the captive Hebrews in Babylonia. The exiles composed a psalm in which they said:

"By the rivers of Babylon, there we sat down, yea, we wept, when we remembered Zion. We hanged our harps (lyres) upon the willows in the midst thereof. For there they that carried us away captive required of us a song; and they that wasted us required of us mirth, saying, Sing us one of the songs of Zion. How shall we sing the LORD's song in a strange land? If I forget thee, O Jerusalem, let my right hand forget her cunning" (Psalm 137:1-5).

The Babylonian captors had heard of the songs of Zion for which Jerusalem was noted, and asked their captives to sing one of them for them. But the Jewish religious singing was so vitally

connected with the temple of Jerusalem that they refused to sing such a song in a foreign land.

REFERENCES TO MUSIC IN THE LIFE OF JESUS

There are four references to music in the ministry of Jesus.⁹

The first of these has to do with music used in mourning the death of a loved one. When JESUS came into the home where the ruler's daughter had died, Matthew says: "**He saw the minstrels**" (Matthew 9:23). The minstrels were flute-players. In the Orient even today, professional mourners are called in to express sorrow for the loss of the deceased one. And if the family can afford to do so, as would be true of the ruler, flute-players are also brought in to express mourning through these instruments.¹⁰

A second reference is when JESUS spoke of the children playing in the market place. "**We piped unto you, but ye have not danced. We have mourned to you, and ye have not wept**" (Luke 7:32). There are two groups of children represented here. One of them has a pipe, perhaps a shepherd's flute, and plays upon it as is done at a wedding procession all the way to the feast, saying:

"Let's play wedding." But the other group refuses to join in the play. Then the one group begins to sing and wail as is done in a funeral procession, suggesting, "Let's play funeral," but the other group continues obstinately to refuse to co-operate.

A third reference to music is in CHRIST's famous story of the Prodigal Son. When the wayward boy returned home, his father celebrated with a banquet. And when the elder brother came in from the field it is said "**he heard music and dancing**" (Luke 15:25). It was customary at banquets to have singers and players on instruments, especially flute-players, along with dancers.

The fourth reference is what happened at the end of the Last Supper. The record reads: "**And when they had sung an hymn, they went out into the Mount of Olives**" (Mark 14:26). Unquestionably what JESUS and his disciples sang was from the Psalms. It was the custom of the Jews to sing at the close of the Passover meal, Psalm 115 to 118. The manner of singing was what we would call chanting, and the music itself was in the minor key. Orthodox Jews today observe similar customs.¹¹

NEW TESTAMENT SONGS AND MUSIC

The New Testament contains a number of songs, not all of which are ordinarily considered to be songs. There is the Magnificat, or Song of Mary, sung in anticipation of the birth of JESUS (Luke 1:46-55); and the Benedictus, or Song of Zacharias, sung after the birth of John the Baptist (Luke 1:67-79); and the Song of the Angels, sung to the Bethlehem shepherds upon the birth of JESUS (Luke 2:14); the Apostle Paul's Hymn of Redemption (Ephesians 1:3-14)¹²; and a Hymn of the Early Church (I Timothy 3:16).

John's book of Revelation contains several references to songs and music. "A new song" is sung in Heaven in chapter 5:9, 10. "The Song of Moses" and "The Song of the Lamb" are sung in chapter 15:3, 4. Babylon's fall is described graphically, and concerning it John said: "**And the**

voice of harpers, and musicians, and of pipers, and trumpeters, shall be heard no more at all in thee" (Revelation 18:22).

In his vision of Heaven John "**heard the voice of harpers harping with their harps,**" and a song was sung before GOD's throne (Revelation 14:2,3). The word for "harp" used here is not the equivalent of the Old Testament word, more correctly rendered "lyre," which was a portable harp. Rather it is indeed a harp, the music of which is sweeter than that of earth's most beautiful instruments.

1. For information about these discoveries at Ur, see: C. Leonard Woolley, *Ur of the Chaldees*. pp. 65-66. For photograph of this beautiful gold lyre, see: M. E. L. Mallowan, "New Light on Ancient Ur," *The National Geographic Magazine*, January, 1930, p. 114.
2. Miller, *Encyclopedia of Bible Life*, p. 289.
3. William M. Taylor, *Moses the Law-Giver*, p. 28. (New York: George H. Doran Company, 1907.)
4. Thomas Hartwell Horne, *An Introduction to the Critical Study and Knowledge of the Holy Scriptures*, Vol. II, p. 183.
5. E. P. Barrows, *Sacred Geography and Antiquities*, p. 459.
6. *Ibid.*, p. 458.
7. Miller, *op. cit.*, p. 285.
8. Home, *op. cit.*, pp. 183, 184.
9. See Miller, *op. cit.*, p. 293.
10. John A. Broadus, *Commentary on the Gospel of Mark*, p. 118. (Philadelphia: American Baptist Publication Society, 1905.)
11. For arrangement and character of this hymn, see: Westcott, *The Epistle to the Ephesians*, p. 4 f. (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1906.)

~ end of chapter 23 ~

<http://www.baptistbiblebelievers.com/>
