

MUSIC IN THE OLD TESTAMENT

(W. Dennis Tucker, Jr.)

Introduction

Music was foundational to all cultures in the ancient Near East, and those cultures that dwelled in Israel/Palestine were no different. Nearly two millennia prior to the Davidic monarchy, music played a central role in the cultures located in the region of Palestine, and it remained an important part of the cultures in that region. Archaeological-iconographic evidence is extensive. Terra-cotta figurines playing a variety of musical instruments have been found, as well as actual clay rattles, cymbals, and flutes. Numerous drawings depict dancing and the playing of instruments. For example, archaeologists have unearthed floor stones in rooms adjacent to an altar in the city of Megiddo (3000 BC). Those stones depict warriors and hunters, but also dancers, a female harpist, and a drummer.

The Old Testament literature itself suggests something of the antiquity of music. The earliest mention of music appears in Genesis 4:21. There Jubal is mentioned as the ancestor of all those who played the lyre and pipe. The occupation of musician is mentioned alongside those of herdsman (4:20) and of metallurgist (4:22), suggesting that music was not considered an ancillary part of life, but rather central to the composition of society itself.

Social Settings

War

The biblical text records the close connection between war and music or musical instruments. For example, Gideon's military assault on the Midianites included the blasting of horns (*sopar*) as war began (Judg. 7:19–20). When David and Saul returned from battle, women met them who were singing and dancing as well as playing the tambourine (*top*) and the sistrum (*salis*). A similar scene appears in Exodus 15, when Miriam and the other women sing and play the tambourine following the rout of the Egyptian army.

Royal Court

Musicians were part of the royal retinue. Saul lauded David's ability as a court musician (1 Sam. 16:23). Singing men and women are mentioned in 2 Samuel 19:35. Amos's social statement of the northern kingdom included a critique of the wealthy rulers who stretched out upon couches and sang songs to the sound of the harp (*nebal*).

Prophecy

Music was frequently associated with prophecy in the Old Testament. Biblical texts suggest music was used to induce a state of prophetic ecstasy. In 1 Samuel 10:5, Samuel tells Saul that he will encounter a band of prophets playing the harp (*nebal*), the tambourine (*top*), the flute (*halil*), and the lyre (*kinnor*). Upon hearing the music Saul will fall into a prophetic frenzy, and the spirit of the Lord will be upon him (cf. 2 Kings 3:15).

Temple

Music was central to worship in the temple, and the book of Psalms provides ample evidence for the use of singing and instrumental music in the temple. Numerous instruments are mentioned throughout the Psalter, as is the frequent command for the people to sing or lift up a song (cf. Ps. 81:3–4). The superscriptions contain what many believe are musical expressions such as "According to the Lilies" (Psalms 45 and 69), but the precise meaning of these directives has been lost to history.

Other Occasions

Music, singing, and dancing were a part of everyday life as well (Gen. 31:27; Judg. 21:20–21; Isa. 16:10–11).

