

TEMPLE MUSIC
Temple Studies Group, May 2009
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Music was an important element in temple worship, but it was also controversial. There was something about temple music that was not acceptable to those who changed the ways of the temple in the seventh century BCE, the time of King Josiah. Piecing together the other elements that were purged or discouraged at that time, a picture emerges of the role of music in the temple which is consistent over many centuries, a role that passed into the Church.

There are two accounts of the temple in the Old Testament, both compiled after the time of Josiah, and both drawing on ancient source material. One account, in the books of Samuel and Kings, was written by a group who based themselves on the characteristic teachings of Deuteronomy, a puritanical group who thought that both temple and monarchy were a departure from their people's desert origins; and the other account, in the books of Chronicles, Ezra and Nehemiah, was written by a priestly group who favoured both monarchy and temple.

When the Deuteronomists described David bringing the ark to Jerusalem (2 Sam.6), they mentioned musicians in the procession - but no names were given - and said that the ark was set in its tent, David offered sacrifices and blessed the people, and there was a feast. The priestly account, however, (1 Chron.15-16) describes in detail a procession of named Levites singing, accompanied by named musicians playing cymbals, harps, and lyres, and by named priests blowing trumpets. Did they possess, centuries after the event, records of temple musicians?

After describing the rest of the ceremony, the priestly account has a whole section that does not appear in the Deuteronomists' account. Even before the temple was built, they said, David established musicians to serve before the ark, to invoke, to praise and to thank the Lord (1 Chron 16.4). **Their music was to invoke the divine presence.** Their ranks and duties are listed, and they had to serve continuously before the Lord (1 Chron.16.37).

So too when Solomon brought the ark to the newly built temple. The Deuteronomists' account says the priests brought the ark to the holy of holies, and then a cloud filled the holy place, a sign that the glory of the Lord had come (1 Kings 8.1-11). The Chronicler tells the same story, but includes the music: when the priests had set the ark in the holy of holies and come out again, the Levitical singers, wearing fine linen and playing their instruments, together with the priests and their trumpets, caused the trumpets and the singers to be heard **as one**, to praise and thank the Lord. Then the cloud of the glory came to the temple. This implies that it was the music 'with one voice' that called the glory of the Lord to the temple.

Nobody knows what happened when they saw the glory of the Lord; we can only guess. The psalmist prayed: 'You who are enthroned upon the cherubim, shine forth' (Ps.80.1). Was this a personal sense of illumination, or something else?

The blessing of the high priests suggests that this shining forth of the glory was central to temple worship. 'May the Lord make his face to shine on you and be gracious unto you: may the Lord lift up his face on you and give you peace.' (Lev.6.25-6). Face and presence are the same word in Hebrew, so the blessing of the high priests was that the people should know the shining presence of the Lord and experience **grace and peace**. It was the Levites' music that enabled worshippers to sense the divine presence.

Hallelujah is probably the most familiar word surviving from temple worship, and is said to mean 'Praise the Lord.' The Greek Old Testament kept the same word: 'Allelouia', and did not translate

it. The Hebrew word comes from *halal*, which means 'praise' - but it also means 'shine'. Was hallelujah the command to make the Lord's presence shine with music?

There are places in the Psalms where this makes very good sense. Psalm 22.23-4, for example, which says that the Lord is enthroned on the praises of Israel, has the exhortation: 'Praise him, glorify him, stand in awe of him'. This could also be 'make him shine, make him glorious, stand in awe of him...', especially as it is followed by 'He has not hidden his face/presence from the afflicted'. This meaning for Allelouia - the Lord appearing with the music - was known in 8th century Constantinople. St Germanus said Allelouia means: 'God appears - sing praise and hymns to the living God.' (On the Divine Liturgy 29).

At the head of 55 of the Psalms there is 'to the choirmaster', but the Hebrew verb that gives 'choirmaster' is *naçah*, which also means 'to shine.' Did this heading originally indicate psalms that called on the Lord to appear and shine?

The music and the vision of the glory were one. To hear the music was to see the Lord. Isaiah saw the Lord enthroned and heard the seraphim (Isa.6.1-5); St John saw the Lord enthroned and heard the songs of the heavenly host (Rev.5.6-14). The visions described in non-biblical material also emphasise the music.

That vision and music were inseparable can be seen from the Greek translation of Exodus, in the passage where Moses and the elders went up Sinai. They saw the vision of God, and here the Greek text, but not the Hebrew, says 'And none of them sang in discord.' For Greek speaking Jews, and for the Christians who used the Greek Old Testament, the song was the response to the vision. Philo, the Jewish scholar in Alexandria in the time of Jesus, linked this passage to the harmony of creation: '[God] is everywhere because he has made his powers [i.e. his angels] extend through earth and water, air and heaven... and uniting all with all he has bound them fast with invisible bonds that should never be loosed, **on account of which I will celebrate it in song...**' (Philo, *Tongues*, 136). The unity of creation was, for Philo, expressed in music.

All these aspects of temple worship and music appear in the New Testament. Christian worship as described by Paul - calling on the Lord, hymns, revelations, prophecy and giving thanks - 'making melody to the Lord with all your heart' (1 Cor.14.26-32; Eph.5.19) - is so familiar that it causes no comment, but *the Christians worshipped in the same way as the temple Levites*. St John said that the Word 'tabernacled' among us and 'we beheld his glory...' (John 1 14), again, familiar words, but claiming for the Christian community what had been the privilege of those who invoked the Lord in the temple. Why did St John describe the incarnation as the glory 'coming to the tabernacle'? Then there is the Christian greeting: 'Grace to you, and peace' (Rom. 1.7; 1 Cor.1.3; 2 Cor.1.2 etc.). Grace and peace were the gifts of the high priestly blessing, for those who had seen shining face of the Lord. And in St John's vision of heavenly worship, all creation - heaven and earth, sang the praises of the One who had been enthroned (Rev.5).

It is clear that the roots of Christian practice lie in the priestly account of the temple and its music, not in the account of the Deuteronomists.

Other aspects of temple worship omitted by the Deuteronomists are significant. They did not mention the temple veil, nor the throne of the Lord in the holy of holies. Both were described by the Chronicler (1 Chron.28.18; 2 Chron.3.14) and both were important for the Christians: the temple veil was torn, and in St John's vision of heaven, the Lord was enthroned. Other elements of temple worship purged by King Josiah included the veneration of the heavenly hosts, and the shrines of the holy ones or angels (2 Kings 23.5,7).

The Deuteronomists also rejected the world of the angels and any interest in the secret things of the Lord (Deut.29.29), and this is why they did not mention the veil, the throne or the angels; and the title Lord of Hosts is not found in their writings, even though Isaiah, heard 'Holy Holy Holy is the Lord of Hosts' as the song of the seraphim (Isa.6.3).

The Deuteronomists emphatically denied that the Lord was seen at Sinai - there was only a voice (Deut.4.12); and they did not write about the creation. They emphasised the history of their people and the commandments. Keep the Sabbath, they said, and give everyone rest from labour, thus acting like the Lord who had set them free from slavery in Egypt.

The priestly writings were very different. The Lord **was** seen on Sinai, and the priestly writers spoke freely of angels. Keep the Sabbath, they said, and act like the Lord who rested on the seventh day of creation (Exod.20.11). The people who related the commandments to the creation also emphasised the role of music in the temple.

What, then, is the link between, the creation, the vision of God, the angels and the meaning of temple music?

The story of creation in Genesis 1 has neither angels nor music, but the Old Testament has other creation stories. The Lord asked Job if he had watched when the foundations of the creation were set in place, 'when the morning stars sang together and the sons of God shouted for joy' (Job 38.7). Morning stars and sons of God are names for the mighty angels. Job knew there were angels singing at the creation. From other sources it seems that angel music was part of the process of creation.

The creation story in Proverbs says that Wisdom was present before the visible world was created, she was beside the Creator and held all things together in harmony, *harmozousa* (Prov.8.30 Lxx). Other texts say that Wisdom, an enigmatic figure in biblical tradition, held the creation in good order, renewing all things (Wisdom 7.27; 8.1). Many images were used to describe Wisdom, and music was one of them. She holds all things together in harmony and renews them.

A recurring theme in the Bible is the 'new song', but the word translated 'new' comes from a verb which means 'to make new' that is, to restore or to renew. The song was not a 'new' song but a '**renewing** song,' and later usage confirms that this was the original meaning.

A 'renewing song' restores the original meaning in the psalms, because the 'renewing song' is found in the context of creation. In Psalm 33, for example, the righteous are exhorted to praise the Lord with lyre and harp and to sing a **renewing** song. Then there is a description of the Lord's work in creation. Psalm 96 exhorts the people to sing a **renewing** song, and then describes how the Lord establishes the earth. Psalm 144 promises to sing a renewing song to the Lord, so that families may flourish and the land be fertile. There are places in the Second Isaiah where the renewing song accompanies the Lord's restoring his people (e.g. Isa.42.10; 44.23; 49.13), and in the Book of Revelation, there is a renewing song as the Lamb is enthroned and creates a kingdom of priests to reign on earth (Rev.5.9-10).

The praises of the earth were vital for upholding the creation. The high priest Simeon, about 200BCE, taught that the creation was sustained by the Law, the **temple service** and deeds of loving kindness (Mishnah Aboth 1.2). The music had to be performed at the correct time. The Qumran community linked their precisely timed praises to the statutes of the creation (1 QS X); and later Jewish mystics knew that the angel song to keep creation in harmony was sung in response to the praises sung on earth: 'All the ministering angels... when they hear the sound of the hymns and praises which Israel sings from below, begin from above with the 'Holy Holy Holy'. (Hekhalot

Rabbati 179). When Enoch ascended in his vision to the sixth heaven, he saw the glorious angels who sustained the creation: 'They make all life in heaven peaceful, and they preserve the commandments and instructions, the sweet voices and the singing, and every kind of praise and glory.' (2 Enoch 19.1-6).

When heaven and earth were singing together, the creation blossomed and the earth was fruitful. As early as Hosea, in the 8th century BCE, the renewal of the earth was described as restoring the covenant of peace and the music: 'And on that day, I will make the heavens sing, and they will make the earth sing, and the earth shall sing with corn and wine and oil, and they will sing that God sows...' (Hos.4.22, literally).

In the temple, the annual renewal and healing of the creation was ritualised as the day of atonement. It was part of the new year festival. The details are complex, but, very briefly: the high priest sprinkled blood, which represented new life from the Lord, to cleanse the earth from the effects of sin, to consecrate and renew it. But the Levites, the temple singers, also made atonement, according to Numbers 8.19. The traditional Jewish explanation is that the music of the Levites made atonement and so renewed the creation (j. Ta'anit 4.2, attributed to R Benaiah, early 3rd century CE).

This was also known in the early Church. Clement of Alexandria, writing about 200CE, a generation or so before R Benaiah, contrasted the music of the Christians and the music of the Greek temples. Christian music, he said, was 'the immortal measure of the new harmony which bears God's name, **the new song of the Levites.**' 'Behold the power of the new song. It has made men out of stones, men out of beasts. Those who were as dead because they did not partake of the true life, have come to life simply by becoming listeners to this song.' (Clement, *Exhortation to the Greeks* I). For the early church, music, described as the song of the Levites, restored the creation and brought new life.

When the biblical writers said that the angels praise the Creator, they were saying that all the powers of creation work together in harmony; and so when people on earth sing with the angels, they are joining in the praise of the Creator and so sustaining the creation. The familiar words of the Benedicite: 'All ye works of the Lord, bless ye the Lord...' are an exhortation to the whole creation, visible and invisible, to praise the Creator. The canticle begins by exhorting the angels, then the powers, then the sun, moon and stars, the weather and, after a long list, the earth, plants, waters, sea creatures, animals and eventually people.

The full song is found in the Greek version of the Book of Daniel, but the opening verses are not sung as the Benedicite, and so the setting can be overlooked. The opening verses describe the Lord enthroned in his temple, looking out at the whole creation and receiving its praise. This is exactly what St John saw and heard when the Lamb was enthroned: every creature in heaven and on earth and under the earth and in the sea was praising the Lord (Rev.5.11-14). The music of the temple, as depicted in St John's vision, was the creation praising the Creator.

Philo described angels as the powers of God throughout creation, binding it together, and he said they were a **choir**, serving their leader and following Him.' (On the Confusion of Tongues 174). He also said that people could not express their gratitude to the Creator by buildings and ceremony, but only by silent hymns of praise from a pure mind. (On Planting 126). The pure mind, when it had explored the arts and sciences, 'is borne yet higher to the ether and circuit of heaven, and is whirled around with the dances of the planets and fixed stars, in accordance with the laws of perfect music, following that love of Wisdom who guides its steps.' Eventually the pure mind perceived the light of the great King himself (Philo, On Creation, 70-71). Jesus said something similar:

‘Blessed are the pure in heart’ - and for his culture, the heart was the seat of the intellect - ‘Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God.’ (Matt. 5. 8).

This is what Enoch saw too. In his vision, there were angels in white robes encircling the holy of holies, and Enoch was dazzled by the light (1 Enoch 71.1,8). The Therapeuts, a monastic group in northern Egypt whom Eusebius said were the earliest Christian communities, used to sing, and as they sang they danced, the ‘wheeling and counterwheeling of a choric dance.’ (Philo, *Contemplative Life* 84). We do not usually imagine the early Christians worshipping with circle dances, but Eusebius, writing early in the fourth century, knew a good deal more about the early Christians than we do, and he found nothing in their dancing to make him doubt they were Christian. (Eusebius, *History* 2.17)

In contrast, the fallen angels, those who rebelled and thus destroyed the harmony of creation, could not sing. When Enoch stood in the fifth heaven, his angel guide explained that he was looking at the fallen angels; they were dejected and silent ‘and there was no liturgy in the fifth heaven.’ (2 Enoch 18). This also passed into Christian teaching. Gregory of Nyssa, writing towards the end of the fourth century, preached a Christmas sermon on this theme. The Lord had come, he said, to restore the original unity of all creation. The mouths of those who had once offered praise there had been closed by sin, and the symphony of celebration had ceased because the human creation did not join with the praises of heaven. As a result of the work of Christ, people excluded by sin could rejoin the liturgy of heaven and earth, and so the Christians once again worshipped with the angels. (PG XLVI 1127-8). The Bethlehem angels sang this too: ‘Glory to God in the highest, and on earth, peace to men.’ (Luke 2.14).

When St Basil the Great described the music of the monasteries in Pontus in the mid fourth century, he wrote: ‘What is more blessed than to imitate here on earth the chorus of the angels?’ (St Basil, *Letter 2* PG XXXII.225). Three centuries later, St Maximos the Confessor taught that singing with the angels showed that the singer had been transformed into an angel. (*Mystagogy* 23).

The song of the angels throughout temple and church tradition is ‘Holy Holy Holy’, the Sanctus. The earliest record of the angelic hymn is Isaiah’s vision of the holy of holies in the mid 8th BCE. Even then, the song of the angels was associated with atonement and healing. Isaiah must have been a high priest, because only a high priest entered the holy of holies, once a year, on the day of atonement. He was conscious of his own sin and experienced cleansing - the seraph purified his lips with a burning coal. The Greek text of Isaiah says he saw that the temple – which represented the creation – was full of the glory of the Lord, and then he heard the song of the seraphim echoing what he had seen : ‘Holy Holy Holy is the Lord of Hosts, the whole earth is full of his glory.’

When Isaiah saw the shining glory of the presence, this was his experience of the Lord coming forth to heal and recreate the earth as the seraphim sang. It seems that the song of the Sanctus was part of the atonement, which may explain why the Sanctus was incorporated into the Eucharistic prayer.