

Music in Scripture: Not Just the Psalms

Four Scriptural Representations of Music in Action

For many, the Bible's contribution to music and musical thought begins and ends with the Psalms. This is, of course, not the case. Here are four examples (by no means exhaustive themselves) of how the scriptures quote or refer to song and singing of God's children:

Chronicles/Ezra/Jeremiah

While the material in 1 and 2 Chronicles is covered elsewhere in the Samuel and Kings books, the Chronicler offers details not found in those books, particularly concerning the musicians attached to worship and the activities and songs of that worship. For example, 1 Chronicles 16 offers a roster of musicians attached to ritual worship, including the prolific psalm writer Asaph.

A recurring musical theme is introduced in 2 Chronicles 5-7, in which is recorded the dedication of the Temple under Solomon's leadership. The priests sing "He is good; his love endures forever" (5:13, all citations NRSV), and the Temple is filled with a cloud so that the priests could not perform their service; the cloud is described as "the glory of the Lord" (5:14). Later, in chapter 7 as the offerings on the altar are consumed by fire, that song is echoed by all the people (7:3). This verse resonates further into scripture, appearing again in 1 Chronicles 29, as part of the restoration of Temple worship under Hezekiah, and in Ezra 2-3 as exiles return to rebuild the Temple after exile. It is echoed in Jeremiah 33:10-11 as a promise of the restoration of the Temple and its worship.

Isaiah

Far more than any of the prophets, music and song are part of Isaiah's language. While particular songs are not invoked frequently, the language of music and singing is pervasive.

For Isaiah it is not only humanity that sings; indeed, all of nature offers up its song of praise to God (14:7, 35:2, 44:23, 49:13, 55:12). For the people, songs of joy or thanksgiving are evoked in a number of places (26:9 in which even the dead sing, 38:20, 42:10, 52:8-9, 11, 54:1, 65:14).

Song is most typically associated with expressing joy or thanksgiving in Isaiah. The imagery of song in Isaiah finds echoes in the song of the later church, particularly the images of nature breaking into song.

Epistles

A number of references in the various epistles in the New Testament seem to be partial quotations of songs or hymns familiar to those in the churches served by Paul and others. Probably the most famous such quoted hymn is in Philippians 2:6-11 on Christ's humility and exaltation. Other possible examples include Romans 11:33-36; Ephesians 1:3-14 and 5:14; 1 Timothy 3:16; and 2 Timothy 2:11-13.

Other references in the epistles simply seem to take singing for granted as a part of the gathered church's worship and teaching. Notable examples here are Colossians 3:16, Ephesians 5:19, and two examples in 1 Corinthians 14: verse 15 encourages singing with both heart and mind, while verse 26 suggests that the people might bring a hymn to contribute when the church comes together.

Revelation

Music is not confined to this life, if the author of Revelation has anything to say about it. The scenes of worship in chapters 4-7 offer numerous heavenly beings offering songs of doxology, sometimes echoing earlier scriptures. Chapters 11, 14, and 15 also include references to singing in the heavens.

Singing is the preferred medium of praise in this heavenly vision, and it is portrayed as being unending and shared by all creatures.

Writer: Rev. Charles Freeman
2025 Music and Worship Conference Interest Session Leader
www.presbymusic.org and www.pcusa.org/formation



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