

MUSIC IN THE TEMPLE SERVICE

THE CHIEF MUSICIAN

THE individual described by Habakkuk as “the Chief Singer” (Hab. 3: 19) is referred to more than fifty times in the titles of the psalms by the same Hebrew word *Natsach* , which is there rendered “the Chief Musician.” (A study of these titles upon the lines indicated in J. W. Thirtle’s “Titles of the Psalms” leaves no doubt in the student’s mind as to their veracity, and the untranslated words accompanying the name of the Chief Musician assume a profound significance.) The word *Natsach* is used elsewhere to describe the “overseers” of Solomon’s workmen, and those who “set forward” the rebuilding in the time of Ezra. It has the significance of leading or superintending. The Chief Musician was therefore the official who was appointed to superintend and train the choir; to lead and be responsible for the musical arrangements in the worship of God. Jeduthan is named as the holder of this office in the titles of Psalms 39 , 62 and 77 .

The order of service in the time of David not only had an impressive meaning for the time then present, but also pointed forward in type to that system of worship which will prevail when David’s kingdom shall be restored, wherein we ourselves hope to serve.

An elaborate system of musicians and singers was organized in the time of David—as elaborate, it seems, as that of the priestly system. 1 Chr. 24 contains a detailed description of the division of the priests into twenty-four courses. The next chapter contains an equally detailed description of the division of the musicians into a similar twenty-four course arrangement. Two hundred and eighty-eight Levites of the sons of Asaph, Heman and Jeduthan were divided up into twenty-four courses of twelve each, and were, as indicated above, under the charge of the Chief Musician. This is peculiarly interesting to us because we know from the exposition of Dr. Thomas that the twenty-four course arrangement of the priests and musicians formed the natural basis for the symbolic “four and twenty elders” of the Apocalypse, who represent the community of the saints. In the words of the Doctor : “There are twenty-four elders because the sons of the High Priest and singers who did the service of the temple under David’s reign were twenty-four orders each; and in the aggregate typified the saints who shall perform the temple service of the restored Kingdom of David” (Eureka II, page 29).

We conclude, therefore, that the musicians and singers in David’s time were prophetic of the saints who will serve in the restored Kingdom of David; and that the Chief Musician represents Christ, their instructor and leader. Appropriately enough, the twenty-four elders are symbolically described as “having every one of them harps,” “and they sung a new song” (Rev. 5 : 8–9).

It is clear that this form of words does more than associate the musicians and singers with the saints, it implies that the instruments and music with which their lives were so largely occupied in the singing of the psalms possess an important spiritual significance. To define this significance will reveal the sense in which Christ can be regarded as our musical instructor and leader.

MUSIC AND MUSICAL INSTRUMENTS

Music was used by Israel in connection with religion at widely separated periods; indeed, all nations seem to have attached much significance to it in the worship of their gods. Perhaps the most familiar example is that of the large number of musical instruments used in the worship of the golden image that Nebuchadnezzar set up in the plain of Dura : “At what time ye hear the sound of the cornet, flute, harp, sackbut, psaltery, dulcimer, and all kinds of musick, ye fall down and worship the golden image that Nebuchadnezzar the king hath set up” (Dan. 3: 5). But we are more concerned with the time of David and the music of the psalms. The great “poet king,” the sweet psalmist of Israel, raised the music by which the psalms were rendered to a plane of spiritual significance far above ordinary music. The instruments used in the house of God in his days are actually called “musical instruments of God” (1 Chr. 16 : 42).

In defining the significance of the music we cannot separate the music from the words that were sung; they are inseparably related. This is evident from the record concerning David’s original organization of the musicians for the service of the house of God. We read : “Moreover David and the captains of the host separated to the service of the sons of Asaph, and of Heman, and of Jeduthan, who should prophesy with harps, with psalteries, and with cymbals” (1 Chr. 25 : 1). Here the prophesying (singing the psalms) is identified with the instruments that produced the music. In verse 7 the musicians are described as being “instructed in the songs of the Lord.” Therefore as the music formed an accompaniment to the songs of the Lord (the psalms), so also must the spiritual significance of the music be interpreted as a corollary to them.

THE MEANING OF THE PSALMS

The psalms are indeed an integral part of God’s word, but they are that word in a peculiar and special form. The psalms are unique among the books of the Bible because they cover the whole range of life’s experiences in the truth. They are the expression of the inmost feelings of imperfect man striving to conform to a perfect law. The spirit of God operating upon the psalmist caused the expression of his heart to become prophetic. Thus the mind or feelings of Christ in combating sin were prophetically revealed in the experiences of the psalmist. That is why we sometimes find the psalmist expressing our own reactions to the experiences that come upon us in the truth. The psalms are the expression of the heartfelt reactions of the word of God in action in real life.

Bearing this in mind we shall see by the following process of association the connection between the word of God and the musical instruments.

THE SIGNIFICANCE OF MUSIC

We have David striving to walk according to the word of God; the emotion or feeling produced in him as a result of that walk; the emotion expressed in the words of the psalms; the psalms sung to music; the instruments that produce the music.

The musical instruments thus may be taken to represent faithful men in whom dwells the word of God. The music represents the word of God in action in their lives. In God's estimation their lives thus become a sweet melody in harmony with His will, a pleasure to Him. David says : "I will also praise thee with the psaltery, even thy truth, O my God : unto thee will I sing with the harp" (Ps. 71: 22).

This consideration helps us to understand why those who are with the Lamb upon Mount Zion are described as "the voice of harpers harping with their harps" (Rev. 14 : 2-3). The saints, having absorbed God's word, have become "God's musical instruments" for use in the true House of God. Their activities with Christ, the Chief Musician, form a joyful melody of praise and thanksgiving. The Doctor describes the prospect in this way : "Mount Zion is still the scene of the vision. Instrumental and vocal music gladdens the hearts and ears of the performers. As the Spirit predicted in Ps. 87: 7 , so it comes to pass; for 'as well the singers as the players upon instruments are there.' 'Every one of them' has his harp; for he is himself a 'harp of the Deity,' and therefore an instrument of joy— Apoc. 5: 8 ; 15 : 2 " (Eureka III., page 388).

The conclusion of this reasoning is that the elaborate system of singers and musicians established by David for the worship of God, finds its true counterpart in the activities of the saints, Christ being the true Chief Musician, their leader and instructor, who never struck a discordant note, or played out of tune with God's word, and who will eventually cause the whole world to become in harmony with the Father—a glorious melody.

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¹. Vol. 79: *The Christadelphian : Volume 79*. 2001, c1942. The Christadelphian, volume 79. (electronic ed.). Logos Library System . Christadelphian Magazine & Publishing Association: Birmingham