



ASAPH AND HEMAN: Leaders and Innovators of Israel's Musical Worship

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Most likely when one thinks of music in the Bible, David comes to mind. After all, David is described as the sweet psalmist of Israel (2 Sam. 23:1). His name is attached to dozens of psalms in the Psalter. His skill with the harp even soothed the tormented spirit of King Saul (1 Sam. 16:23). It makes sense that David would come to mind. However, David is not the only biblical figure closely associated with music.

Among other biblical figures, Asaph, Heman, and Jeduthun play a prominent role in music, especially in the books of Chronicles. Two have been honored by their names being displayed upon the walls of Cowden Hall: Asaph and Heman. At first, the decision to honor these two may not be as obvious as that of David. Their names do not occur in as many books of the Bible as David's does. In fact, most Christians probably would not initially recognize their names at all.

A closer look at the biblical picture of Asaph and Heman will reveal a prominent significance when considering music in Scripture and especially when considering music in worship. To demonstrate the significance of Asaph and Heman to music and worship, this article will examine the biblical material associated with them, especially the material from the books of Chronicles. The examination will reveal the importance of Asaph and Heman through their roles as musicians, as founders of musical guilds, as cultic officials, as cultic prophets, and as cultic innovators.² Ultimately, the examination will demonstrate why these less prominent names have

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²Throughout this article, I am using the words *cult* and *cultic* to refer to ritual worship, especially tied to particular places and practices. For instance, cultic personnel would refer to those who work at a religious site, usually a temple, and perform aspects of ritual worship there.

been included among those commemorated on Cowden Hall.

ASAPH AND HEMAN AS MUSICIANS

Asaph and Heman both served as musicians during the days of King David. The biblical text does not provide many details regarding their music and even some of those are not clear enough to satisfy contemporary scholarship.³ However, the text does offer some facts. First, other leaders recognized the musical authority of Asaph and Heman. First Chronicles 15:17–19 show that Asaph and Heman were appointed musicians for the transfer of the Ark of the Covenant to Jerusalem. David authorized the selection of musicians while other Levites recognized Asaph and Heman as lead musicians among them. For Asaph and Heman, their acknowledged role as worship musicians began when David successfully transferred the Ark to Jerusalem. During that time, they led the other musicians by playing the bronze cymbals.

Second, as lead musicians, Asaph and Heman continued to play the cymbals while directing other musicians playing other instruments. First Chronicles 16:4–5, 37–42 provide some details regarding Asaph and Heman in their roles as musicians after the Ark of the Covenant was deposited in Jerusalem. Following the Levites' choice of Asaph and Heman as musicians, David then appointed those same musicians for worship after depositing the Ark in Jerusalem. On the one hand, Asaph served as the lead musician in the tent where the Ark remained. As the lead musician, Asaph played the cymbals, directing the musicians playing other instruments. On the other hand, Heman and Jeduthun⁴ served as lead musicians at Gibeon, where the altar of sacrifice remained. As a lead musician, Heman still directed the music produced by other musical instruments although he likely played the cymbals while directing that music.⁵ At the same time, these lead musicians likely could play other instruments when they engaged

³As Moshe Piamenta has put it: "In the absence of a musical notation system, all that remains from the vocal and instrumental customs of the ancient people of Israel is the vague echo that emerges from written sources and archaeological finds. The written sources contain scant information about the typology and technical characteristics of the instruments that they name and about the etymology and meaning of the musical terms that they feature." Moshe Piamenta, "Trumpets and Shofarot in the War Scroll (1QM): Musical and Terminological Insights," *Hebrew Union College Annual* 92 (2021): 16.

⁴Jeduthun is likely another spelling of the name Ethan from 1 Chronicles 15:17.

⁵This point is not always easy to see in English translations; however, the best way to render the syntax of the Hebrew only suggests that Heman and Jeduthun were accompanied by trumpets, cymbals, and other instruments, not that they played them. The explicit statements regarding the instruments that Heman played in these passages refer only to cymbals (1 Chron. 15:19).

in other activities. For instance, 1 Chronicles 25:1–3 suggest that Asaph, Heman, and Jeduthun could play cymbals and stringed instruments.⁶

Third, as musicians, Asaph and Heman also performed as singers. First Chronicles 15:16 specifies that the musicians should also raise their voices in their performances. First Chronicles 16:8–36 recounts the song lyrics that the musicians performed before the Ark of the Covenant when it was deposited in Jerusalem. They sang the lyrics as they performed with musical instruments. Asaph's career as a singer is more easily identifiable than Heman's because a dozen psalms in the Book of Psalms preserve a heading associated with Asaph (Pss. 50, 73–83).⁷ In contrast, only one psalm heading bears the name of Heman (Ps. 88). The psalm is variably called a song (שִׁיר), psalm (מִזְמוֹר), and a maskil (מִשְׁכִּיל).⁸ Furthermore, the psalm is performed according to "The Suffering of Affliction," likely some note regarding the musical performance or a pre-existent tune to be used. The song is a lament, crying out to God with feelings of abandonment. The psalm is a desperate cry for God's help, but the psalm itself does not show signs that the help ever comes.⁹

Asaph's collection of psalms shows a diversity of content and styles. Like Heman's Psalm 88, Asaph's psalms are variably called a song (שִׁיר), psalm (מִזְמוֹר), and maskil (מִשְׁכִּיל). They include different notes regarding the musical performance (e.g., Ps. 75, "Do Not Destroy"; Ps. 80, "To the Lillies, a Testimony") with different accompaniments (e.g., Pss. 76 and 81 specify stringed instruments). The content of these psalms ranges widely from wisdom themes to laments, from hymns of praise to indictments of Israel's infidelity. At the same time, some scholars have found common

⁶Even though the text only explicitly speaks of Jeduthun playing the harp, the mention of the other instruments in the context of Asaph, Heman, and Jeduthun makes it likely that all three lead musicians could play these instruments.

⁷Even though these psalms are associated with Asaph, the association does not necessarily indicate that he composed or directly performed them. It is not always clear what role the person who is named in the superscription played. For instance, the superscription for Psalm 77 includes both Asaph and Jeduthun. Even though one cannot be certain of the relationship between Asaph and each of these psalms, it is likely that they reflect his own work as a musician in some way.

⁸Amzallag and Yona have suggested that *maskil* (מִשְׁכִּיל) does not refer to the type of song but the type of musical performance called complex antiphony. Nissim Amzallag and Shamir Yona, "What Does 'Maskil' in the Heading of a Psalm Mean?" *Ancient Near Eastern Studies* 53 (2016): 41–57.

⁹Psalm 88 may even play a significant role in shaping the Psalter itself. Strawn points to Psalm 88 not as the climax of the Psalter, but its nadir. He compares its function to a black hole with both its destructive and generative power. He shows that even though the psalm is the saddest of all psalms, other psalms interact with it and show a slow progression up from this nadir; Brent Strawn, "The Black Hole at the Center of the Psalms," *Interpretation* 78, no. 2 (2024): 106–19.

threads running through the collection.¹⁰

Again, the Bible does not provide many details regarding the musical work of Asaph and Heman. From what the Bible does say, Asaph and Heman were competent musicians and music leaders. They primarily performed the cymbals as they directed other musicians; however, they also played stringed instruments. They performed as singers as well, both leading other singers in the performance of song lyrics as well as composing various types of songs.

ASAPH AND HEMAN AS FOUNDERS OF MUSICAL GUILDS

Beyond the role of Asaph and Heman as musicians themselves, they also founded musical guilds. First Chronicles 25 provides several details about these musical guilds. First, these musical guilds consisted of the descendants of Asaph and Heman (along with Jeduthun). At first, Asaph, Heman, and Jeduthun themselves led these musical guilds (vv. 2–6). As a way of ensuring the future continuity of the musical guilds, the responsibilities and privileges of the guild were divided among their descendants.¹¹ Asaph and Asaph’s guild held a higher rank among the guilds, but Heman’s guild held a larger proportion of the assigned duties (vv. 9–31); however, neither birth order nor musical ability determined who received which assignments. Verse 8 makes it clear that God’s will, discerned through the casting of lots, determined the rank and responsibilities for these musical guilds.¹² Furthermore, this first generation of the guilds consisted of just the right number of members: 228, that is, twelve musicians assigned to each of the twenty-four assigned duties.

These musical guilds served an important role in Israel’s worship. Chronicles first shows this importance by recording their performance at the construction of the temple. Once Solomon completed the temple and moved the Tent of Meeting with the altar of sacrifice and the Ark of the Covenant into the temple, the musical guilds performed their musical

¹⁰For a brief survey of common characteristics among the Asaph psalms and various themes observed within them, see David Cameron Ray, *Conflict and Enmity in the Asaph Psalms*, *Forschungen zum Alten Testament*, 2nd series 145 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2023), 7–16.

¹¹Some argue that the list determines the rotation of service (e.g., Ralph W. Klein, *1 Chronicles: A Commentary*, ed. Thomas Krüger, Hermeneia [Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2006], 483), but this does not seem likely. See the argument in Sara Japhet, *1 & 2 Chronicles: A Commentary*, *Old Testament Library* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 1993), 446.

¹²The lists of cultic officials in Chronicles emphasizes the legitimate authorities involved in making the appointments. The use of lots ensured that God’s will, free from any human manipulation, determined the final assignments among the officials. See Joshua E. Williams and Calvin F. Pearson, *1 & 2 Chronicles*, *Kerux* (Grand Rapids: Kregel Ministry, 2024), 198.

duties with cymbals and stringed instruments while singing loudly, “He [the LORD] is good; his faithful love endures forever!” Part of the significance of this performance is that all the musicians performed together with the priests, thus unifying Israel’s worship at the temple. Earlier, Israel’s worship was divided because some priests and musicians performed in Jerusalem before the Ark of the Covenant while the other priests and musicians performed in Gibeon before the altar of sacrifice at the Tent of Meeting. The construction of the temple in Jerusalem led to unifying Israel’s musical worship. Such unified worship is a picture of what Israel’s worship was intended to be.

These musical guilds continued their important role long after this first generation during the days of David and Solomon. The musical guilds of Asaph and Heman continued in their musical responsibilities, appearing at other important occasions in Israel’s history of worship, especially moments of renewal. First, these musical guilds performed when Hezekiah reinstated the proper worship of the LORD at the beginning of his reign (2 Chron. 29:3–36). Following the dark days of disobedient idolatry under King Ahaz, Hezekiah turned Israel back to the LORD. Once the priests and Levites restored the purity and sanctity of the Jerusalem temple, Hezekiah led the people in making offerings to the LORD while the musicians led the people in singing the songs of David and Asaph (vv. 25–30).

Second, these musical guilds performed during Josiah’s Passover after he restored proper worship. Second Chronicles 35:15 recounts that the musicians fulfilled their duties while all the people observed the Passover.¹³

Third, the musical guilds performed again at the reconstruction of the Jerusalem temple (Ezra 3:10–11). At that time, the musicians led the people, accompanied by cymbals, in singing loudly, “He [the LORD] is good; his faithful love for Israel endures forever!”

Finally, the musical guilds performed at the dedication of the Jerusalem wall. The construction of the wall marks the final completion of the temple, another important moment in Israel’s history of worship.¹⁴ Nehemiah 12:31–46 recounts how singing accompanied by instruments took place

¹³Even though the text refers only explicitly to the sons of Asaph as musicians, the inclusion of Heman and Jeduthun indicates that all the musical guilds are still actively involved.

¹⁴Oeming notes several points of theological importance for Nehemiah’s wall, among them the intention to establish “a dwelling place for the name of God,” that is, the final step in constructing a temple. Manfred Oeming, “The Real History: The Theological Ideas behind Nehemiah’s Wall,” in *New Perspectives on Ezra-Nehemiah: History and Historiography, Text, Literature, and Interpretation*, ed. Isaac Kalimi (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2012), 141.

led by several individuals. Among them were descendants of Asaph.¹⁵ These performed their duties according to the instructions left long ago by David and Asaph (v. 46).

In sum, the Bible presents Asaph and Heman as founders of musical guilds during the days of David. These musical guilds consisted of their descendants, who preserved their divinely appointed duties according to the instructions of David and their guild founders. Their musical influence stretched far beyond their own roles as musicians.

ASAPH AND HEMAN AS CULTIC OFFICIALS

Before looking at the roles that Asaph and Heman played as cultic officials, a brief sketch of their genealogical background may be helpful. At first, such a decision may sound strange to our contemporary thinking, but genealogies have played (and continue to play) a significant role in many cultures. Chronicles reveals the importance of genealogies for Israel from the beginning of the book. The first nine chapters are devoted to genealogies and other lists that trace various lines of lineage all the way back to Adam (1 Chron. 1:1). In Israel, as in other cultures, a person's ancestry was influential in determining the range of roles the person could fulfill in the community.

As already seen in the roles of Asaph and Heman as founders of musical guilds, ancestry often played a major factor in determining one's occupation. Regarding Asaph and Heman as cultic officials, it is significant that they belong to the tribe of Levi. As Chronicles points out, the Levites served as consecrated officials within Israel's ritual worship. Some Levites, specifically, the descendants of Aaron, were specified more precisely as priests. The Aaronic priests had more access to holy spaces (e.g., inner rooms of the temple) and may have performed a greater range of sacred duties (e.g., handling the blood of sacrifices). In Chronicles, Levites who are not descendants of Aaron are also just called Levites. They served as assistants to the Aaronic priests (Num. 3:6; 8:26; 1 Chron. 23:28). As Levites, Asaph and Heman had access to spaces and responsibilities that were restricted from others, including the responsibility of leading music in Israel's ritual worship.

As Levitical musicians, Asaph and Heman played an important role among the cultic personnel. When David appointed Asaph and Heman

¹⁵The presence of the musical guild of Asaph is more obvious in other verses, especially Neh. 7:44; 11:17.

to be musicians, he instructed them in the role that they should play in worship. In 1 Chronicles 16:4, he assigned them a threefold task: to remind, to give thanks, and to praise. The musicians fulfilled the task of reminding when they sang about the LORD's marvelous deeds.¹⁶ A look at the terms for giving thanks and for praising through Chronicles demonstrates that the musicians often fulfilled these tasks through the declaration of the LORD's goodness and unending love: "He is good for his faithful love endures forever."

The task of the musicians was also described as "serving" the LORD. This term is a word referring generally to clergy service.¹⁷ Therefore, Chronicles portrays the musicians' activity not simply as music or even worship in general but more specifically as cultic worship only to be performed by consecrated personnel. The musical activity belongs to the same category of cultic activity as performing sacrifices, preparing the sacred bread displayed in the temple, and maintaining all the areas and implements of the sanctuary (1 Chron. 23:24–32).

Not only does Chronicles describe musical activity as cultic worship, but it also demonstrates that the musical activity accompanies sacrifice at the center of Israel's worship.¹⁸ When David appointed the Levitical musicians, he commanded them to perform their activities alongside the sacrifices that took place in the mornings and evenings as well as other sacred gatherings (1 Chron. 16:39–42; 23:30–31). In other words, whenever sacrifices took place, the musicians were to perform their tasks, especially the task of praising the LORD.¹⁹ In these cases, the sacrifices were not sacrifices for atonement; they were the regular offerings made to maintain a right relationship before the LORD and to foster his presence within the sanctuary. In fact, the timing of musical worship recounted when Hezekiah restored proper worship indicates that music did not accompany the rite for atonement but only the presentation of the burnt offerings.²⁰ As a result, the synchronization of the sacrifices with musical activity formed part of

¹⁶See the hymn that follows 1 Chronicles 16:4. In those verses (8–36), the musicians call on the worshipers to remember and proclaim the LORD's marvelous deeds (vv. 12, 24) as well as describe the marvelous deeds the LORD performed for the benefit of Israel's ancestors (vv. 15–22).

¹⁷Klein, *2 Chronicles*, 417. The term also occurs several times in Chronicles to describe what the priests and Levites do (1 Chron. 6:17; 23:13; 26:12; 2 Chron. 5:14; 8:14; 13:10; 23:6; 29:11; 31:2).

¹⁸John W. Kleinig, *The LORD's Song: The Basis, Function, and Significance of Choral Music in Chronicles*, *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 156 (Sheffield, England: JSOT Press, 1993), 109.

¹⁹See Kleinig, *The LORD's Song*, 108–9.

²⁰See Kleinig, *The LORD's Song*, 110–13.

the regular rhythm of Israel's ritual worship, nurturing the relationship between the people and the LORD by recalling the LORD's marvelous deeds and celebrating his faithful character.

Because the musicians performed a task that accompanies sacrifice at the center of Israel's worship, they occupy a special role within the cultic personnel. First Chronicles 23–26 describes how David arranged the cultic personnel for future generations of Israel's worship. The structure of those chapters reveals a pattern in which the order of presentation corresponds to access to the holiest spaces; therefore, the officials appearing first had access to the holiest spaces while those occurring last had least access.²¹ After an introduction to the Levites as a whole (1 Chron. 23), the order flows as follows: priests (1 Chron. 24:1–19), cultic Levites (1 Chron. 24:20–31),²² musicians (1 Chron. 25:1–31), gatekeepers (1 Chron. 26:1–19), temple treasurers (1 Chron. 26:20–28), and officials serving outside the temple (1 Chron. 26:29–32). The order reveals the relative importance of the musicians and their access to holy space. The order shows that the musicians did not serve directly with the priests in the handling of sacrifices and offerings, especially those related to atonement; however, as pointed out above, they did perform their duties within sacred spaces before the LORD and performed their musical duties with the regular offerings intended to foster the relationship between the LORD and his people.²³

In Israel's worship, Asaph and Heman were cultic officials. Their role as musicians placed them at the center of Israel's regular worship before the LORD, fostering the relationship between the LORD and the people.

ASAPH AND HEMAN AS CULTIC PROPHETS

Asaph and Heman performed another function in Israel's ritual worship: the function of cultic prophet. A cultic prophet is one who mediates divine

²¹ See H. G. M. Williamson, *1 and 2 Chronicles*, New Century Bible Commentary (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987), 160.

²² Following the suggestion of Louis C. Jonker, *1 & 2 Chronicles*, Understanding the Bible (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2013), 148–49, the terminology of “cultic Levite” intends to clarify the distinction between a small number of Levites who work specifically to assist the Aaronic priests in their priestly tasks. For instance, 2 Chronicles 35:11 describes how some Levites flay the Passover lambs while the priests sprinkle the blood. The text refers to this group only as Levites; however, these Levites are distinct from other categories of Levitical cultic personnel such as musicians.

²³ Regarding sacred spaces, David makes two assignments when the Ark of the Covenant is transferred to Jerusalem: he assigns Asaph to perform his musical duties before the Ark (1 Chron. 16:4–6, 37) and assigns Heman and Jeduthun to perform their musical duties before the LORD's tabernacle (1 Chron. 16:39–42). In both cases, the location indicates proximity to holy spaces. Later, David appoints Asaph, Heman, and Jeduthun to function as musicians in the temple, in this case referring to the sacred spaces in which priests and Levites operate (1 Chron. 25:6).

revelation as an official within the framework of Israel's ritual worship, most often associated with a sanctuary such as the Jerusalem temple. The Old Testament presents prophets who work within established institutions and those who work outside them.²⁴ For instance, Amos is not trained as a prophet, employed by a king, nor an official within any sanctuary (Amos 7:14–15). In contrast, 2 Chronicles 29:25 and 2 Samuel 24:11 refer to Gad as King David's seer. Many prophets (e.g., Isaiah) have close connections to the king and/or the temple; however, few texts explicitly describe prophets as those operating within Israel's cultic organization.

Chronicles presents Asaph and Heman as cultic prophets in two ways. First, when 1 Chronicles 23–26 lists how David organized the cultic personnel for Israel's future worship, it introduces the Levitical musicians as those who “prophesy” with cymbals and stringed instruments.²⁵ Even though the Old Testament only associates music with prophecy in a few contexts, the connection may help explain the significance of Asaph and Heman. For instance, in 1 Samuel 10:5–10 Saul encountered a group of prophets who were playing instruments when the Spirit came upon him so that he also prophesied. Furthermore, in 2 Kings 3:15, Elisha called for a musician to promote his reception of a divine message. These examples show that the musical prophecy associated with Asaph and Heman was not a unique phenomenon. What distinguishes Asaph and Heman from these other examples is that they occur within the framework of Israel's cult. Their prophecy is not sporadic or spontaneous but part of the rhythms of Israel's worship.

One could argue that the author of Chronicles describes the Levitical musicians as prophesying because he wants to communicate that the songs preserved in the Book of Psalms (the vast majority of which the author of Chronicles would have known) are divinely inspired.²⁶ Such an argument

²⁴For a classic treatment of the interaction between prophets and society, especially an exploration of those who operate within institutions (central prophets) and those who operate beyond them (peripheral prophets), see Robert R. Wilson, *Prophecy and Society in Ancient Israel* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1984).

²⁵Regarding the act of prophesying, Jonker states, “It is not exactly clear what the relationship between the musical role and the prophetic role of these Levites was. Some argue that the uttering of prophecies was accompanied by music, while others hold that the music in itself had a prophetic function.” Jonker, *1 & 2 Chronicles*, 153. Merrill distances this prophecy from traditional prophetic activity when he points out that the verb sometimes refers only to singing and playing music without any notion of prophetism involved. (See Eugene H. Merrill, *A Commentary on 1 & 2 Chronicles*, Kregel Exegetical Library [Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2015], 281.) The rest of my analysis draws on other examples within Chronicles to clarify the various notions communicated when describing the musicians as “prophesying.”

²⁶Knoppers claims that one reason for associating prophecy with the musicians is “that they

could be important since the Psalms rarely represent the point of view of God speaking to people but that of people speaking to God. In fact, one reason for the author of Chronicles to include this note regarding Asaph and Heman is likely to emphasize that they communicate God's message to humanity. If the author of Chronicles only intends to address the Psalms, then the musical prophecy is identical to the regular practice of giving thanks and praise to the LORD. The content of this musical prophecy would be equivalent to the content of the Psalms (compare 1 Chron. 16 to Pss. 96, 105, and 106). However, the regular practice of song does not exhaust what Chronicles portrays in cultic prophecy.

Chronicles provides an example of cultic prophecy in 2 Chronicles 20:14–17 which extends beyond the general praise preserved in the Psalms. As King Jehoshaphat and all Judah faced a multinational alliance threatening to attack them, they assembled at the Jerusalem temple “before the LORD” (v. 13). At that time, the LORD’s Spirit came upon Jahaziel, a descendant of Asaph, who revealed the LORD’s word to the people. The LORD’s word consisted of exhortation, specific instructions, and further exhortation. Following Jahaziel’s comforting message, the people bowed in worship while the Levitical musicians stood up to praise the LORD. One point worth noting is that the prophecy consisted of several exhortations that could apply in numerous situations of distress (the kind of exhortations found in many of the Psalms), but it also contains instructions specific to the immediate need of the people. As a result, the prophesying depicted in Chronicles likely includes content from the Psalms, but it also extends to prophecy prompted by a specific threat and communicating specific instructions only applicable at the time of the prophecy.

Second, Chronicles portrays Asaph and Heman as cultic prophets by referring to them as King David’s “seers.” As mentioned above, David appointed these musicians to serve both within the sanctuaries of Jerusalem before the Ark and of Gibeon before the altar of sacrifice. At the same time, as seers, these men would have served as advisors within the royal court as well.²⁷ By describing the musicians as royal seers, Chronicles emphasizes the divinely inspired authority behind their instructions, instructions preserved

are deemed to be composers and performers of psalms sung at the Temple”; Gary Knoppers, *1 Chronicles 10–29*, Anchor Bible 12A (New York: Doubleday, 2004), 859. One could follow from such an argument that what applies to the songs sung at the Temple applies to all the songs preserved in Psalms.

²⁷See Mark J. Boda, *1-2 Chronicles*, Cornerstone Biblical Commentary 5a (Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale House Publishers, 2010), 195.

for future generations. This divine authority becomes an important point in other moments of Israel's history. For instance, when Hezekiah restored proper worship, he charged the Levites to praise the LORD using the psalms of David and Asaph. Since King Ahaz stopped the worship of the LORD, Hezekiah recalled the legitimate songs of worship to start Israel's proper worship again (2 Chron. 29:30). Furthermore, during Josiah's observance of the Passover, the Levitical musicians took up their duties in the proper manner, that is, the manner prescribed by David, Asaph, Heman, and Jeduthun (2 Chron. 35:15).²⁸

Thus, Asaph and Heman, as well as their descendants, functioned as cultic prophets within Israel's history. They wrote and performed psalms, some of which are preserved in the Book of Psalms, but they also responded with a specific word during times of crisis.

ASAPH AND HEMAN AS CULTIC INNOVATORS

When describing Asaph and Heman as cultic innovators, what is in view is not some additional activity that these musicians accomplished but the context in which their previously discussed roles took place. The musicians served as cultic innovators within King David's expansion and organization of Israel's ritual worship. The first significant moment in regulating and organizing Israel's ritual worship took place at Mount Sinai. There the LORD commanded Moses regarding the rhythms of worship (including sacrifices and sacred times; see Lev. 1–7, 16, 23, and 25) and the personnel involved with the sanctuary of worship (e.g., the consecration of Aaronic priests and the rest of the Levites as assistants; see Exod. 28 and Num. 18). The second significant moment in regulating and organizing Israel's ritual worship took place during the days of David. David preserved the rhythms and organization of the Mosaic Law, but he also innovated by expanding them.²⁹ Asaph and Heman played an obvious role in the innovation.

David, with Asaph and Heman, innovated Israel's worship in several ways. First, David introduced music into Israel's worship. The Law of

²⁸The account of Josiah's Passover emphasizes the proper observance of the celebration by mentioning several sources that authorize the various aspects of the celebration. See Louis C. Jonker, *Reflections of King Josiah in Chronicles: Late Stages of the Josiah Reception in 2 Chr 34f*, *Textpragmatische Studien zur Hebräischen Bibel 2* (Gütersloh: Gütersloher Verlag, 2003), 36–47.

²⁹For a fuller reflection on these innovations, see Joshua E. Williams, "The Stable but Dynamic Nature of Biblical Worship: Reflections from 1 & 2 Chronicles," *Southwestern Journal of Theology* 66, no. 1 (Fall 2023): 9–26

Moses says virtually nothing about music.³⁰ With Asaph and Heman, music played a central role in the regular rhythm of Israel's ritual worship. Second, since David introduced music, he also introduced Levitical musicians into the cultic personnel. According to 1 Chronicles 23:25–26, David introduced new roles for the Levites because once the Ark of the Covenant was transferred to Jerusalem, they no longer needed to perform the duty of transporting the sanctuary and its implements as required by the Mosaic Law.³¹ Since the sanctuary transitioned from a mobile tabernacle to a stationary temple, this historical development required changes to Israel's cultic practices, which David implemented. Third, David assigned Asaph and Heman the roles of prophesying with the accompaniment of musical instruments. Even though the Law of Moses addressed prophecy (e.g., Deut. 13:1–5; 18:15–22), it does not associate prophecy specifically with the cult nor with the Levites.

Under the authority and supervision of King David, Asaph and Heman served as critical players in the innovation of Israel's worship from the ritual worship at the tabernacle founded by Moses to the ritual worship at the temple expanded by David. This transition shifts Israel's worship from a tabernacle that served as a sanctuary of silence to the Jerusalem temple, a place of prophecy and musical performance.

CONTEMPORARY REFLECTIONS

When considering how the activity of Asaph and Heman contributes to our understanding of contemporary worship, four concerns stand out. First, their musical performance with cymbals and stringed instruments helps to justify the use of musical instruments in contemporary worship. Since God accepted and sanctioned Israel's sacrifices that were synchronized to singing and instrumental music (see especially 2 Chron. 29:25–36), then it follows that at least during some periods of history, God has accepted worship accompanied by musical instruments.

Second, the selection of Asaph and Heman as lead musicians—as described in Chronicles—speaks to two important aspects of that selection: (1) God appointed them as Levites to serve as assistants to the priests

³⁰The only regulations regarding music in the Law of Moses are found in Numbers 10:2–10. The verses command the priests (and only the priests) to use the silver trumpets: (1) to assemble the people to the sanctuary, (2) to signal the people to prepare for travel, (3) to warn the people of an incoming military attack, and (4) to call attention to the people's offerings before God on special occasions.

³¹See Williams, "The Stable but Dynamic Nature of Biblical Worship," 23–24.

within the sanctuary and (2) their fellow Levites appointed them because they recognized their musical authority. It would be wise in our contemporary settings of worship to consider these two aspects as well. In other words, to follow the biblical example of Asaph and Heman, music leaders should have divine approval (or a calling, to use contemporary language) and musical ability.

Third, the primary tasks of these musicians were to recall the LORD's marvelous deeds, give thanks to the LORD, and praise him (1 Chron. 16:4). The psalms attributed to Asaph and Heman show the diversity of musical forms and content that can fulfill these tasks. Whether a lament, a hymn of praise, a psalm of confidence in the LORD's deliverance, or a musical reflection on the LORD's faithfulness despite Israel's wrongdoing, these musical pieces point to these tasks. To follow the biblical example, music leaders should hesitate to include music in worship that does not accomplish one of these three tasks.

Fourth, Asaph and Heman served as intermediaries between God and his people by drawing the people's attention to God in recalling God's marvelous deeds and drawing God's attention to the people through their thanksgiving and praise. Sometimes, in our contemporary setting, there is little thought given to the role of the lead musician. Somebody who can sing well enough and perhaps play the guitar is often viewed as an adequate leader, in spite of a lack of calling or specialized training. However, the biblical portrait of Asaph and Heman points to the seriousness of their task. Since these past musicians played such a significant role in the regular rhythm of Israel's past worship, it would be wise to consider the role of musicians within our contemporary church settings and carefully select our musical leaders.

CONCLUSION

The names of Asaph and Heman are engraved on Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary's Cowden Hall as a reminder of their importance to Israel's worship. These two musicians played a significant role innovating Israel's ritual worship. They were remarkable as musicians, as founders of musical guilds, as cultic officials, and as cultic prophets. Their impact stretched far beyond their own lives and work, shaping Israel's worship for generations upon generations and continuing to shape Christian worship even to this day.