

INTERPRETING PSALM 68 THROUGH CHORAL CRITICISM

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When we approach the Psalms today, we usually just read them. We treat them as silent literature, forgetting that these words were originally composed as lyrics and libretto. Many Psalm introductions give directions concerning the music, and the different instruments, voices, and singers that were involved. What instruments did they play? We know that there were lyres, harps, trumpets, cymbals, but we do not know anything about several of the instruments mentioned (*Mishneh Torah, Sefer Avodah, Hilchot Klei HaMikdash* 3:4).

The simple fact that different psalms were supposed to be sung accompanied by different instruments shows that different moods were to be produced to inspire and accompany the singing of different kinds of psalms. For example, *For the leader; with instrumental music. A psalm. A song* (Psalms 67:1), and *For the leader. On shoshannim. Of David*. The melodies and the specific arrangements of the instruments are lost to history, but we must remember that the music was once an inseparable part of the text itself.

Our understanding of the Psalms is heavily filtered through centuries of editorial decisions by scribes and scholars who never heard the original music. The structures we see in a modern Bible are actually quite late impositions:

- The Verse Endings: The Jewish Masoretic scribes added the *sof pasuk* notation around the 900s CE – over a millennium after the Psalms were written.
- Chapter Divisions: The person credit with dividing the Bible into chapters is Stephen Langton, Archbishop of Canterbury, in the early 13th century (1207-1228 CE).
- Verse Numbers: Robert Stephanus (Robert Estienne) created a verse numbering system in the mid-16th century CE and was the first to print a Bible with verse numbers in each chapter.
- White Space: Modern translations often insert blank lines between sections, creating "mini-poems" where a single, continuous song once flowed.

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Because of these artificial breaks, we are often led to read the Psalms as disjointed fragments rather than a unified musical performance.

CASE STUDY: THE "INCOHERENCE" OF PSALM 68

Psalm 68 is widely considered the most difficult of the 150 psalms to interpret. Modern scholars, such as the famed archaeologist William Foxwell Albright, have gone so far as to label it a "catalogue" of 30 separate song fragments. Because they cannot find a logical "prose" progression, they assume it lacks unity.

However, the psalm itself insists on its musical identity. It opens with an instruction to the Choirmaster and repeatedly commands the reader to "Sing to God" or "Chant hymns." It even describes a musical procession: *First come singers, then musicians, amidst maidens playing timbrels* (vv. 24-27).

DISREGARDING THE WHITE SPACE

If we ignore the modern verse numbers and white spaces, the "incoherent" parts of Psalm 68 begin to harmonize. For example, look at the transition between verses 7 and 8: *7 God restores the lonely to their homes . . . while the rebellious must live in a parched land. 8 O God, when You were at the head of Your army when you marched through the desert, Selah , , ,*

Scholars often separate these verses into two different poems. But when read continuously, we see a thematic thread: the "rebellious" dwell in a parched land, while the "needy" Israelites are sustained by the bountiful rain God sends in the desert mentioned in verses 9 and 10. The "lonely" of verse 7 find their home in the "tribe" of verse 11. The music bridges the gap that the editors created.

THE MYSTERY OF SELAH

The word *Selah* appears 71 times in the Psalms, yet its meaning remains a mystery. In Psalm 68:8, it appears right in the middle of a thought: *"when you marched through the desert, Selah, the earth trembled..."*

Rather than a punctuation mark, *Selah* is likely a musical instruction. It may mean "hold the note." In this context, the singer or instrument would hold a sustained, vibrating tone to mirror the physical "trembling" of the earth as God

marched through the Sinai. It is a moment where the music completes the meaning of the words.

A NEW APPROACH: CHORAL CRITICISM

To understand Psalm 68, we must move beyond traditional "Source" or "Literary" criticism. We should instead adopt what I will call Choral Criticism. While scholars see "incoherence" because the psalm jumps between victory songs, epiphanies, and ascensions, Choral Criticism hears these as different "voices"—sopranos, tenors, lyres, and drums—all part of a single ensemble. Just as a young philosopher's mind might race with passionate, non-linear ideas, this early psalm captures the raw, energetic origin of several genres at once.

We will never know the exact notes of Psalm 68, but by respecting the unity of the chorus, we can hear the themes that flow through the text—from God as the "Rider of the Clouds" in the beginning to His thundering voice at the end.

In ancient Israelite music, instruments weren't just background noise; they were rhythmic punctuation marks designed to highlight the wordplay we just discussed. In Choral Criticism, we view the instruments as "voice actors" in the drama.

A SPECULATIVE EXERCISE

As mentioned, the melodies and the specific arrangements of the instruments are lost to history, but we should remember that the music was once an inseparable part of the text itself. To try to illustrate this theme, in the spirit of pure speculation, here is how the three main instrument groups mentioned in Psalm 68 and the Song of the Sea might have functioned as part of the "orchestration." I want to emphasize that everything that follows is a series of guesses. This is an attempt to open our minds to the way these psalms may have been presented in their ancient contexts.

THE TIMBREL (*TOPH*): THE HEARTBEAT

amidst maidens playing timbrels (Ps. 68:25)

The *toph* was a hand-drum, likely similar to a modern frame drum or tambourine (without the jingles).

- The Musical Role: It provided the pulse. In the Song of the Sea (Exodus 15:20), Miriam leads the women with timbrels to celebrate the rhythmic "sinking" of the Egyptians.
- Punctuation: When the text uses "galloping" wordplay (like the *way-yarqîdēm* of Psalm 29), the *toph* would strike on the accented syllables to mimic the hooves of the "skipping" calves. It turned the poem into a physical dance.

THE LYRE (*KINNOR*) AND HARP (*NEBEL*): THE TEXTURE

The *Kinnor* (David's harp) was a lyre with strings made of sheep gut.

- The Musical Role: These instruments handled the melisma – the long, "whirling" vowel sounds.
- Punctuation: When the text describes the wind "whirling" the oaks (*yəḥōlēl*), the lyre player would likely use a "glissando" (sliding the pick across all strings) to create a rushing, wind-like sound.
- The "Selah" Moment: In Psalm 68, when the *Selah* appears in the middle of the "trembling" earth, the harps would likely play a sustained, vibrating tremolo. This kept the "energy" of the verse alive while the singer paused to let the image of the earthquake sink in.

THE TRUMPET (*SHOFAR* AND *CHATZOTZRAH*): THE "VOICE" OF GOD

While not explicitly in every verse, the "Voice of the Lord" in these Psalms is often musically represented by the Shofar (ram's horn).

- The Musical Role: It provided the staccato "blasts."
- Punctuation: In Psalm 29:7, where God "strikes (*ḥōṣēb*) with flashes of fire," a sharp, piercing blast of the Shofar might act as the "audio effect" for the lightning. It was a terrifying, non-melodic sound that commanded immediate silence and awe (the "Glory!" shout).

THE "CHORAL" ARRANGEMENT: PUTTING IT TOGETHER

If we were to "score" the end of Psalm 68 or Psalm 29, the arrangement might have looked something like this:

Textual Action	Instrument	Musical Instruction
The Marching	<i>Toph</i> (Drum)	Steady, low-pitched beat
The Thunder/Lightning	<i>Shofar</i> (Horn)	Sharp, dissonant blasts
The "Selah" (Hold)	<i>Kinnor</i> (Lyre)	Rapid tremolo/vibration
The "Glory!" Shout	The Chorus	Full-volume vocal explosion

WHY THIS MATTERS

When we "only-read," we see a list of words. When we "Choral-Critique," we see a multimedia event. The "white space" in your Bible is actually a missed opportunity for a drumbeat; the "verse number" is a missed cue for a lyre glissando.

By understanding the instruments, we realize that the "incoherence" scholars complain about is actually just syncopation – the music was pulling the listener through the gaps in the logic.

To truly "hear" the music of Psalm 68, we have to look at the section where the text itself describes a parade. This is the "Musical Procession" (Verses 24-27). We will treat the text like a conductor's score. The "white spaces" and verse numbers are gone – replaced by musical cues.

MORE SPECULATION: A LISTENING GUIDE TO THE PROCESSION (PS. 68:24-27)

I. The Overture: The Approach

Text: *Men see Your processions, O God, the processions of my God, my king, into the sanctuary* (68:25)

- The Sound: Low, rhythmic chanting.
- The Instrument: The Nebel (Harp). The deep, resonant strings create a sense of anticipation as the parade moves toward the Temple.
- Choral Note: The voices are "antiphonal"— one group calls out "Men see Your processions," and a second group answers "the processions of my God."

II. The Entry: The Three Layers

Text: *First come singers, then musicians, amidst maidens playing timbrels* (68:26)

- Layer 1 (The Singers): They set the melody. This is the "Lead Vocal."
- Layer 2 (The Musicians): The Kinnor (Lyres) enter here. They provide the "texture," playing rapid, shimmering notes behind the melody.
- Layer 3 (The Maidens): The Toph (Timbrels/Drums) enter with a sharp, percussive beat.
- The Effect: This is a Crescendo. The music is building from a single voice into a wall of sound as they cross the threshold of the sanctuary.

III. The "Fountain" Variation

Text: *In assemblies bless God, the LORD, O you who are from the fountain of Israel* (68:27)

- Wordplay: The Hebrew word for "fountain" (*maqôr*) has a flowing, liquid sound.
- The Instrument: The Harps shift from rhythmic plucking to a Glissando – running a finger across all strings to mimic the sound of flowing water.
- The Shift: The drums drop out for a moment of "liquid" harmony before the final shout.

IV. The Grand Finale (The Shout)

Text: *There is Benjamin, the youngest, ruling them, the princes of Judah in their throng, the princes of Zebulun, the princes of Naphtali* (68:28)

- The Sound: This is the Staccato section. The names of the tribes are barked out rhythmically.
- The Instrument: All instruments—Drums, Lyres, and the Sho-far (Horn)—hit at once on every tribe's name.
- The Resolution: The "throng" (*riḡmāṭām*) is a thick, heavy word. The music ends on a massive, unified "Major Chord" where the voices and instruments merge into one.

WHY THIS CHANGES THE "DIFFICULT" PSALM

When scholars read these verses, they often ask, "Why are these specific tribes mentioned? It's geographically incoherent!"

But through Choral Criticism, the answer is musical. The names aren't a map; they are a rhythm. The names were chosen for their syllables and how they fit the "beat" of the procession. The "incoherence" vanishes when you realize the goal was a triumphant, percussive ending to the parade.

Let's look at the opening movement of Psalm 68 (Verses 1–5). This is the Introduction, and the music is designed to transition from the chaos of a battlefield to the majesty of the heavens.

SCORE: THE "RIDER OF THE CLOUDS" (PS. 68:1–5)

I. The "War Cry" (Verses 1–2)

Text: God shall arise, His enemies shall be scattered... as smoke is driven away... as wax melts before the fire.

- The Sound: This starts as a low, ominous drone.
- The Instrument: The Shofar (Ram's horn) gives a long, steady blast—not a melody, but a signal.
- Wordplay: The Hebrew for "scattered" (*yippāšû*) has a sharp, explosive "P" sound. The music here is dissonant and chaotic to represent the scattering of the enemy.
- The Visualization: Imagine the musicians hitting a sharp, percussive accent every time an "enemy" is mentioned, mirroring the "cracking" of smoke.

II. The Shift to Joy (Verse 3)

Text: But the righteous shall rejoice; they shall exult before God; they shall be jubilant with joy.

- The Sound: A sudden shift from a minor key to a major key.
- The Instrument: The Kinnor (Lyre) enters with a "bright" picking pattern. The rhythm speeds up from a march to a dance.
- Choral Note: The voices move from a deep, guttural chant to a higher, more "airy" register.

III. The "Selah" Bridge (Verse 4)

Text: *Sing to God, chant hymns to His name; extol Him who rides the clouds; the LORD is His name. Exult in his presence –*

- The Sound: A massive Unison. Everyone – the choir and all instruments – hits the name "The LORD" (Yah) at the same time.
- The "Rider" Motif: The Hebrew *rōkēḥ bā'ārāḥōt* ("Rider on the clouds") is a rolling, triplet rhythm. The music mimics the thumping of chariot wheels.

IV. The Great Hold (The "Selah" Logic)

Text: *God in His holy habitation. SELAH.*

- The Musical Instruction: Even though the text mentions *Selah* later in verse 8, the musical principle applies throughout. This is the Fermata.
- The Effect: The instruments stop their rhythmic "chariot" beat and move into a sustained, vibrating chord. It creates a sense of "Holy Space." The listener is forced to wait in the silence before the next movement begins.

I want to repeat; these last sections are a primitive, creative attempt to open our minds to the music of the psalms.

CHORAL CRITICISM

Choral criticism hears voices and instruments that are as different as sopranos from tenors, lyres from drums, but all part of the ensemble. It is not literary criticism, pretending that there is one voice. It is not source criticism, seeing the different voices as antiphonal. It is not canon criticism, which sees everything as a monolithic bloc. Choral criticism means listening to the harmonies of the different voices and hearing the music of the text as it was meant to be heard. If we read Psalm 68 in this way, we may begin to hear the chorus that is the Bible.