# LISTENING TO THE CHALIL: BIBLICAL INSTRUMENT OF FEASTS AND FUNERALS

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The *chalil* was a remarkably durable biblical instrument. Derived from the Hebrew root meaning to "hollow out" or "pierce," *chalilim* (pl.) were most likely single or double reed pipes made variously of wood, clay, bronze, copper, and bone.[1] A number of English translations use the more generic "flute," but this is misleading. Iron Age archaeology has uncovered pipes but no transverse flutes, and examples of the *aulos* (Greek reed pipe) dating to the Hellenistic-Roman period have been found in Jerusalem and elsewhere, and may have been produced locally.[2]

Although appearing just six times in the Tanakh, *chalilim* exhibit a wide range of extramusical functions. They were played at prophetic processionals (I Sam. 10:5), the anointing of kings (I Kgs. 1:40), revelries (Isa. 5:12), victory celebrations (Isa. 30:29), and laments (Jer. 48:36, bis). The first four share positive characteristics, broadly defined as joy. The fifth, lament, implies the opposite. Mishnaic sources continue the *chalil*'s dual functions, describing it being played at pilgrimages and festival sacrifices,[3] as well as accompanying lamenting women.[4] A wagon is discussed bringing "pipers for a bride or for the dead."[5] These disparate uses recall Aristotle's *Problemata*: "Why do those who are grieving and those who are enjoying themselves alike have the flute played to them?"[6]

Other biblical instruments also appear in a variety of settings and contexts. However, their uses are generally connected. For instance, the forty-two occurrences of the *kinnor* (lyre) can be grouped into five subcategories of joy: tranquility, pleasure, gladness, excitement, and ecstasy.[7] Two frequently occurring horns – the *shofar* (ram's horn), referenced seventy-four times, and *chatzotzrah* (metal trumpet), mentioned thirty-one times – are consistently presented as signal instruments blown to alert listeners.[8]

The *chalil* seems to be an outlier with its involvement in both festivities and funerals. Yet, there may be a connective bond beneath the surface. Although the Hebrew Bible avoids suggestions of Ancient Near Eastern cultic, phallic,

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revival, and mythical practices, the existing references to *chalilim* point to similar, albeit de-sexualized and de-mythologized, musical functions. This paper examines the possible symbology of the *chalil* and how it may have informed the instrument's usage, looking specifically at links to fertility, birth, and rebirth.

## FERTILITY

Researchers have traced ties between pipes/flutes and fertility – both of humans and of the natural world – to the Upper Paleolithic period (between 50,000 and 12,000 years ago).[9] The association continued in the Ancient Near East, where these instruments often symbolized agricultural and human fecundity. Pipes were linked to "innumerable phallic ceremonies and with fertility in general,"[10] including both harvests and orgiastic feasts.[11] For instance, texts from the ancient Syrian kingdom of Ebla associate pipes with "cultic dancers,"[12] and Sumerian clay plaques depict pipers playing for dancers and acrobats, with some showing explicitly sexual scenes.[13]

The Tanakh is quiet regarding the *chalil*'s ritual involvement and it is absent from lists of instruments played in the Jerusalem Temple. But this textual omission may have more to do with the authors' or editors' desire to distance biblical texts from inadvertent allusions to pipe-playing fertility cults than with its actual absence from Temple practice.[14] As Alfred Sendrey argues in *Music in Ancient Israel*, the *chalil*'s inclusion among instruments played by *a band of prophets coming down from the shrine, preceded by lyres, timbrels, pipes, and harps* in I Samuel 10:5 suggests a precedent for later Temple practice. "To prophesy with the accompaniment of music was in a way a ritual action," writes Sendrey, "and the 'band of prophets' were the pupils in Samuel's schools of prophets. The musical organization of these schools served as prototype for the forthcoming Davidic and Solomonic sacred musical institutions."[15] The Mishnah affirms the *chalil*'s role in the Second Temple: "On twelve days in the year the pipe was played before the altar: At the slaughtering of the first *pesach*, at the killing of the second *pesach*, on the first festival day of Pesach, on the festival day of Atzeret [Shavuot], and on the eight days of Sukkot."[16] Of particular note is its performance during the autumnal festival of Sukkot, which appealed for rain and fertile crops

and ended with "the pouring of the water on the altar, an act pregnant with cosmic symbolism and sympathetic fertility magic."[17]

Human fertility was a central theme of wedding celebrations, where the pipe was also widely played. According to Curt Sachs, a pioneer of organology (the study of musical instruments), this practice reflected a "masculine impulse" in which the pipe represented a phallos and was typically played for the bride.[18] Texts and artistic renderings depict pipes at weddings in Babylonia and Egypt,[19] and the *aulos* was regularly featured at Greek and Roman weddings.[20] The Mishnah alludes to a shared Jewish practice in referencing "pipers for a bride."[21]

Although the Bible does not place the *chalil* at weddings specifically, it does locate the instrument at general feasting. Isaiah 5:12 cites the *chalil* in its critique of spiritually vacant festivities: *[Revelers] who, at their banquets, have lyre and lute, timbrel, pipe, and wine; but who never give a thought to the plan of the LORD*. This castigation follows verses deriding wealthy landowners who expand their property at the expense of modest farmers (Isa. 5:8–10), implying that these were debaucherous parties of the out-of-touch wealthy class. Whatever the case, Isaiah's condemnation acknowledges the presence of *chalilim* at banquets, which would have included weddings (as attested in later Mishnaic sources).[22] As a general rule, sparse or even singular occurrences of a biblical musical practice indicate broader cultural norms.[23] A classic example of this is David's playing of the *kinnor* (lyre) to soothe the anguished King Saul, which is identified as a conventional remedy despite this being the only such instance in the Hebrew Bible: *Let our lord give the order [and] the courtiers in attendance on you will look for someone who is skilled at playing the lyre; whenever the evil spirit of God comes over you, he will play it and you will feel better* (I Sam. 16:16).

Other festive uses place *chalilim* among the common folk. I Kings 1:40 describes Israelites marching behind King Solomon *playing on pipes and making merry till the earth was split open by the uproar*. Archaeologist Theodore W. Burgh speculates that such large-scale uses of the instrument could have employed "single pipes fashioned from reeds or clay in the same manner that people blow noisemakers at parties and other celebrations. The instruments may have had one or two holes to change the sound or pitches, but the author is not stating that everyone was skillful at playing the

pipes/double-pipes."[24] Primitive pipes of this sort were found at Megiddo dating from the third millennium BCE and were widespread in ancient Israel for a period of some two thousand years.[25] This folk usage suggests the likelihood of *chalilim* being played at festive gatherings of ordinary people, such as wedding feasts.

## REVIVAL

In ancient agrarian cultures, myths involving fertility, death, and resurrection were frequently tied to the agricultural cycle. One such story about the Mesopotamian fertility god Tammuz connects the reed pipe with this cycle of abundance, death, and rebirth. Tammuz was forced to die and descend to the underworld. Ishtar, goddess of love, war, and fertility, descended after him, leaving the earth barren. Other gods intervened, instructing Ishtar in a procedure to revive the dead Tammuz, including letting him play his pipe of lapis. An Akkadian version states: "On the day when Tammuz come up to me, when with the lapis pipe and the carnelian ring come up to me, when with the wailing men and the wailing women come up to me, may the dead rise and smell the incense."[26] The death and rebirth of Tammuz was believed to occur each year in summer and spring respectively, accounting for the changing of seasons and annual death and rebirth of the natural world.[27]

The myth was ritualized with laments for Tammuz involving wailing women and plaintive reed pipes. This practice was apparently familiar to the biblical authors. Ezekiel 8:14 states, *Then he brought me to the door of the gate of the LORD's house which was toward the north; and, behold, there sat women weeping for Tammuz*. Others translate this as "weeping of Tammuz," denoting a special genre of lament originating with but growing beyond the myth and ritual of Tammuz.[28] The Hebrew month of Tammuz (June–July) would also take its name from the Babylonian month honoring the god, and the fast of the Seventeenth of Tammuz, beginning a period of mourning for the Temple's destruction, evidently carried forward the ritualized lament and themes of death and (hoped for) rebirth, albeit without the mythological source material.[29]

The *chalil* is missing from Ezekiel's description of the Tammuz lament. However, weeping women and pipes went hand in hand, and so its presence is strongly implied. This was true among the neighboring Phoenicians,[30] for

instance, and funerary reliefs and murals from Egypt, Etruria, and elsewhere include single and double reed pipe players.[31] Moreover, Jeremiah's oracle concerning the Babylonian destruction of Moab alludes to the *chalil*'s ritualized role in mourning: *My heart moans for Moab like a pipe; like a pipe my heart mourns* (Jer. 48:36).

The funerary custom was known in Mishnaic times. Rabbi Judah commented, "even the poorest man in Israel must provide no less than two pipes and one lamenting woman."[32] Still, it is unclear if earlier ideas of the riving pipe were also preserved, or if the *chalilim* and weeping women merely continued through inertia. Hanoch Avenary makes this point in his classic essay, "Flutes for a Bride or a Dead Man," writing that after the fall of the Second Temple, the *chalil*'s "extra-Biblical symbolism of fertility came to stand outside the four cubits of religious law" and that its "representing idea of life and revival" also faded.[33]

Despite this apparent loss of ancient symbology, the reed pipe remained a feature of both weddings and funerals, implying that its *musical* appropriateness for such occasions – even when removed from conceptions of a fertility phallos or revival magic – still effectively answered the question: "Why do those who are grieving and those who are enjoying themselves alike have the flute played to them?" This is consistent with sources on the *aulos*, the related Greek reed pipe, which describe its tonal qualities as both "strong and resonant" (celebratory/"fertile") and "soft and gracious" (mournful/"reviving").[34]

NOTES

1. J. Braun, *Music in Ancient Israel/Palestine: Archaeological, Written, and Comparative Sources*, trans. D. W. Stott (Grand Rapids, MI: W. B. Eerdmans, 2002) p. 13.
2. Ibid.; T. W. Burgh, *Listening to the Artifacts: Music Culture in Ancient Palestine* (New York: T & T Clark, 2006) p. 29. The Septuagint and Vulgate fairly consistently translate *chalil* as *aulos*.
3. m. *Bikkurim* 3:3; m. *Arakhin* 2:3.
4. m. *Ketubot* 4:4.
5. m. *Bava Metzia* 6:1.
6. Aristotle, *Problemata*, book 19, 917b.
7. See J. L. Friedmann, "The Character of the Kinnor: An Instrument of Joy," in *Kinnor: The Biblical Lyre in History, Thought, and Culture*, ed. J. L. Friedmann and J. Gereboff (Claremont, CA: Claremont Press, 2020) pp. 43–60.

8. See J. Montagu, "The History and Ritual Uses of the Shofar," in *Qol Tamid: The Shofar in Ritual, History, and Culture*, ed. J. L. Friedmann and J. Gereboff (Claremont, CA: Claremont Press, 2017) pp. 11–30.
9. See L. Neal, *The Earliest Instrument: Ritual Power and Fertility Magic of the Flute in Upper Paleolithic Culture* (Hillsdale, NY: Pendragon, 2015).
10. C. Sachs, *The History of Musical Instruments* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1940) p. 44; A. Shiloah, *Jewish Musical Traditions* (Detroit, MI: Wayne State University Press, 1992) p. 44.
11. H. Avenary, "Flutes for a Bride or a Dead Man," *Encounters of East and West in Music: Selected Writings* (Tel Aviv: Tel Aviv University, Faculty of Visual and Performing Arts, 1970) p. 14.
12. M. V. Tonietti, "The First Ancient Near Eastern Written Sources on Musicians' Activity and Performance: The Ebla Archives – A Glance at the 3rd Millennium BCE Syrian Evidence," in *The Study of Musical Performance in Antiquity: Archaeology and Written Sources*, ed. A. Garcia-Ventura, C. Tavolieri, and L. Verderame (Newcastle upon Tyne, UK: Cambridge Scholars, 2018) p. 24.
13. A. Kilmer and S. Mirelman, "Mesopotamia," *Oxford Music Online*, 2001, https://musicircle.net/wp-content/uploads/2018/08/Mesopotamia-in-Oxford-Music-Online.pdf .
14. Shiloah, *Jewish Musical Traditions*, p. 44; Avenary, "Flutes for a Bride or a Dead Man," p.
22. *Mena'anim*, most likely clay rattles, appear just once in the Bible (II Sam. 6:5) and were also likely censored due to their folk nature. See J. L. Friedmann, "Mena'anim: Musical Instruments of the People," *Jewish Bible Quarterly* 49:1 (2021) pp. 43–49.
15. Alfred Sendrey, *Music in Ancient Israel* (New York: Philosophical Library, 1969) p. 311.
16. m. *Arakhin* 2:3.
17. J. Feldman, "'A City that Makes All Isreal Friends': Normative Communitas and the Struggle for Religious Legitimacy in Pilgrimages to the Second Temple," in *A Holy People: Jewish and Christian Perspectives on Religious Communal Identity*, ed. J. J. Schwartz and M. Poorthuis (Boston, MA: Brill, 2006) p. 121. The Mishnah describes the *chalil* being played throughout the eight days of Sukkot, when themes of nature's fertility were most prominent (m. *Arakhin* 2:3).
18. Sachs, *The History of Musical Instruments*, p. 44.
19. G. Wolf, *Lexical and Historical Contributions on the Biblical and Rabbinic Passover* (New York: George Wolf, 1991) p. 136; J. L. Friedmann, "Music in the Ancient Near East," *Bible Odyssey*, August 16, 2024, https://www.bibleodyssey.org/articles/music-in-the-ancient-near-east/. Pipers were also often, though not exclusively, portrayed as women. See, for instance, the female pipers in a Neo-Assyrian palace relief depicting a banquet for King Ashurbanipal (reigned 668–631/627 BCE) and his queen, and a painting of a female piper and dancers from the Tomb of Nebamun, Egypt, c. 1350 BCE. A. W. Lassen and K. Wagensonner, ed., *Women at the Dawn of History* (New Haven: Yale University Babylonian Collection, 2020) pp. 16–17; S. S. Khalifa, "Banquets in Ancient Egypt," *Heritage: Journal of Multidisciplinary Studies in Archaeology* 2 (2014) pp. 474–480.
20. Avenary, "Flutes for a Bride or a Dead Man," p. 14.
21. m. *Bava Metzia* 6:1
22. Ibid.; m. *Shabbat* 23:4 adds: "One may go to the Shabbat border before nightfall in order to attend to the affairs of a bride or of a corpse to bring him a coffin and shrouds. If a non-Jew

brings reed pipes on Shabbat, one must not bewail an Israelite with them, unless they came from a near place."

23. J. L. Friedmann, *Music in Biblical Life: The Roles of Song in Ancient Israel* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2012) p. 12.

24. Burgh, *Listening to the Artifacts*, p. 29.

25. Braun, *Music in Ancient Israel/Palestine*, pp. 110–112.

26. Avenary, "Flutes for a Bride or a Dead Man," p. 14.

27. A. Jeremias, *The Old Testament in the Light of the Ancient East, Volume 1* (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1911) p. 126; T. Prosic, *The Development and Symbolism of Passover* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2004) pp. 84–85.

28. D. I. Block, *The Book of Ezekiel, Chapters 1–24* (Grand Rapids, MI: W. B. Eerdmans, 1997) pp. 293–294.

29. C. Richman, "The Month of Tammuz and the Cult of Tragedy," *Jerusalem Lights*, August 11, 2020, https://www.rabbirichman.com/post/the-month-of-tammuz-and-the-cult-of-tragedy.

30. Avenary, "Flutes for a Bride or a Dead Man," p. 13.

31. For example, a painted relief depicting a flute player and a singer at a funerary banquet, from the Tomb of Nenkhefetka, Saqqarah, Old Kingdom, c. 2400 BCE, and a musician playing a double pipe, from the Etruscan Tomb of the Triclinium, c. 470 BCE.

32. m. *Ketubot* 4:4.

33. Avenary, "Flutes for a Bride or a Dead Man," p. 22.

34. G. Burgess and B. Haynes, *The Oboe* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2004) p. 15.

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