

# Sing a New Song: Towards a Biblical Theology of Song<sup>1</sup>

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## Introduction

Scotland is a land of song.<sup>2</sup> Whether we think of the traditional 'mouth-music' of the workplace in the Western Isles, or the Gaelic folk-rock of Runrig; the Jacobite songs of centuries ago, or the contemporary songs of Capercallie; whether songs are sung with friends in the front room around the open fire, on the banks of Loch Lomond in the rain, or in a great amphitheatre or stadium, Scotland rings with strong melodies and haunting ballads.

However, the relationship between the Christian community and the lover of songs has often been a rather uncomfortable one. The church has always had a place (often a beloved place) for songs of praise in its worship.<sup>3</sup> The first phrase in the title of this paper is drawn from Psalm 149:1, and I doubt if anyone wishes to object to the singing of the

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<sup>2</sup> In common, of course, with many other countries throughout the world. I trust that readers will contextualise my remarks as appropriate.

<sup>3</sup> See the helpful discussion of S. R. Guthrie, 'Singing, in the Body and in the Spirit' *JETS* 46/4 (2003): 633-46 and the literature he cites.

Psalms! However, the church has often been hesitant of (if not simply antagonistic towards) any acceptance of the ‘secular’ music of the culture in which it finds itself. This may take the form of discouraging Christians from being actively involved in performing non-religious songs, or it may extend to a blanket condemnation of all songs that are not Christian in character.<sup>4</sup>

In some cases, it does not take in-depth research to discover good reason for such antipathy. The lyrics of some songs (ancient, as well as modern) cannot be accepted by a Christian because of their profanity, or violence, or blasphemy, or crudity. Yet other factors often have an impact on the views of Christians also. The character of the singer may well be so godless that his or her songs are rejected. Or the venue in which the songs are sung may well cause concern.

However, valid as these latter concerns may be, they can lead to an attitude to song that is governed by association rather than by a biblical understanding of the place of song in God’s world. For some people, this issue may seem of little significance. For others, music is like the air they breathe. I write this paper openly as one who loves songs, and who loves harmony and musical virtuosity and a driving rhythm. However, I too must submit my appreciation of music to the Word of God. The purpose of this paper is to survey some of the important biblical material relating to song, and to draw some conclusions about the validity or otherwise of this significant aspect of Scottish culture.

Before we turn to the primary texts, it is worth making a few foundational comments.

### **Song is not ‘necessary’**

Song is not ‘necessary’ for true and full communication to take place. ‘In the beginning,’ John tells us, ‘was the *Word*’ (John 1:1), not the song.<sup>5</sup> Yet this ‘word’ brings us a fully reliable exposition of God (John 1:18). In the beginning, according to Genesis 1:3, God said, ‘Let there be light’; and there was light. There is not a hint of musical tone

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<sup>4</sup> One well-known critique of modern popular music is J. Blanchard, *Pop Goes the Gospel* (Darlington: Evangelical Press, 1983). Others from a similar theological perspective have, however, not been so negative in their judgement of modern popular music. See, for example, A. J. MacDonald, *Love Minus Zero* (Fearn: Christian Focus Publications, 1989) 120-34. MacDonald makes frequent reference to another significant book which considers popular music from a Christian perspective, S. Turner, *Hungry for Heaven* (Eastbourne: Kingsway, 1988).

<sup>5</sup> Unless stated otherwise, all Scripture quotations are from the NIV.

in the word that brought the first taste of order to the newly created cosmos.<sup>6</sup> Yet these facts do not reduce the significance of our subject, but rather serve to highlight the vital importance of a proper understanding of song in the life of the Christian. For, though song was not essential to communication between God and human beings, between human beings and God, or between human beings and other human beings, yet the Father who gives good gifts gave human beings song. Thus, we might say that song is ‘necessary’ because God has given this gift to humans for the purpose of using and enjoying it.

### **A Fundamental Principle**

The words of James alluded to in the last paragraph should perhaps stand at the head of this paper as the fundamental principle in our discussion of the place of song in the life of the believer. James 1:17 reads as follows (in the NRSV):

Every generous act of giving, with every perfect gift, is from above, coming down from the Father of lights, with whom there is no variation or shadow due to change.

The Greek text reinforces the strength of this statement by placing two phrases in parallel:

*Pasa dosis agathe*  
*kai*  
*pan dorema teleion*

Each word has a counterpart with substantially the same meaning, and mostly with similar sound. Thus this fundamental text is itself

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<sup>6</sup> Having said this, both Genesis 1 and John 1 display such structure and such careful use of language as to be considered ‘poetic’ in a broad sense of that term. In this paper I do not intend to differentiate strongly between ‘song’ and ‘poetry’. It seems to me that song is simply poetry set to appropriate music and since our access to both biblical songs (which perhaps were sung) and biblical poems (which perhaps were not) is through the written word, it seems unnecessarily pedantic to restrict consideration to texts which make explicit reference to musical accompaniment. For helpful introductions to the way in which Hebrew poetry functions, see P. D. Miller, *Interpreting the Psalms* (Philadelphia, 1986); C. H. Bullock, *Encountering the Book of Psalms* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2001) and G. H. Wilson, *Psalms – Volume 1* (Grand Rapids, 2002). A classic study of the subtleties of biblical language is G. B. Caird, *The Language and Imagery of the Bible* (London: Duckworth, 1980).

poetic in character.<sup>7</sup> The repeated ‘all’ adds emphasis to the thesis that if a gift can be described as ‘good’ or ‘perfect’, then it has certainly come from the Father.

The source of these ‘good gifts’ is the ‘Father of lights’. There is little doubt that this phrase, which is unique in the NT, relates to the creation account.<sup>8</sup> In Genesis 1:14-18, God creates the sun and moon and stars as ‘lights’ (*phosteres*). The reference is perhaps intended to allude to the fact that God, who created all things, called his creation ‘good’ (Gen. 1:4, 10, 12, 18, 21, 25) and ‘very good’ (Gen. 1:31).<sup>9</sup> If God created ‘good’ things at that earliest point, will he not continue to provide what is good? The answer is yes, because he is not like the shifting shadows. We may, perhaps, develop James’ statement to suggest that the very diversity of good gifts, which God gives reflects his character as creator. Song, with its endless potential for human creativity, reflects the very character of God, and perhaps may be understood as an aspect of the image of God in humanity.

Having made these initial comments, we now turn to consider biblical evidence from the OT relating to song and singing.

### **Song in the Pentateuch**

While no explicit song-vocabulary is found within the first three chapters of Genesis, Henri Blocher has hinted that Adam’s exclamation at the sight of his newly created wife might best be described as a love song.<sup>10</sup> Adam declares,

‘This is now bone of my bones,  
And flesh of my flesh;  
She shall be called Woman,  
Because she was taken out of Man’ (Gen. 2:23).

Gordon Wenham notes that this carefully crafted use of language is not an irrelevance, but rather a means of focusing attention on this most

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<sup>7</sup> ‘The words form an almost perfect hexameter’ D. Moo, *James* (TNTC; Leicester: IVP, 1985) 75 n.1. See also P. Davids, *Commentary on James* (NIGTC; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1982) 86.

<sup>8</sup> See Ps. 136:7-9; Jer. 31:35.

<sup>9</sup> Although the Greek word used by the LXX for ‘good’ (*kalos*) in Genesis 1 is different from the term employed by James.

<sup>10</sup> H. Blocher, *In the Beginning* (Leicester: IVP, 1984) 199. Blocher uses the language of poetry, but the distinction between poetry and song is so minor as to be of no consequence for this study.

precious gift: 'the man's exclamation concentrates all eyes on this woman.'<sup>11</sup> In fact, these are the very first recorded words from a human being, and they are poetic!

What is more, this is a 'secular' song! There is no reference to God and no exclamation of praise; Adam only has eyes for Eve! Yet I trust that the very act of describing Adam's 'song' as 'secular' raises grave reservations about that description, which I will return to later. How could we regard this song, sung within the very boundaries of Eden, as anything other than prompted by the Lord?

The canonical location of this poetic outburst is also significant, in that it is pre-fall. The expression of human delight through the medium of poetry cannot be relegated to the world of imperfection found in Genesis 3 and all that follows. Song may be included in all that was declared 'very good'. Blocher helpfully draws attention to the contrast between the sublime poetry of Genesis 2:23 and the vengeful song of Lamech in 4:23-24:

Adah and Zillah, hear my voice;  
    you wives of Lamech, listen to what I say:  
I have killed a man for wounding me,  
    a young man for striking me.  
If Cain is avenged sevenfold,  
    truly Lamech seventy-sevenfold.

Blocher comments that 'Lamech's poetry oozes hatred,'<sup>12</sup> and so highlights for us the fact that, following the Fall, the devices of poetic language (parallelism, assonance, *etc.*) may be employed for both good and evil ends, for reflecting God's character and for denying it. Thus the moral character of poetry or song cannot be judged on the basis of its form, only of its content.

We have begun our survey by drawing implications from texts which are not explicit in their reference to song. Yet we do not lack explicit reference to song in the OT. Although it would be very exciting to be able to recreate these songs authentically, 'relatively little is known about the way ancient music sounded and was performed'<sup>13</sup> and so we must be content to access these songs through the written word.

One of the most famous songs in the early part of the OT, and, in the judgement of R. Patterson, 'one of the loveliest songs in the corpus

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<sup>11</sup> G. Wenham, *Genesis 1-15* (WBC; Waco: Word, 1987) 70.

<sup>12</sup> Blocher, *In the Beginning*, 199.

<sup>13</sup> G. H. Wilson, 'Song' in *ISBE* IV:581-84, here 584.

of Israel's earliest poetry',<sup>14</sup> is the 'Song of the Sea' found in Exodus 15. In fact, we find two songs in this chapter, or at least two groups of singers with a developing song. In 15:1, we are told,

Then Moses and the Israelites sang this song to the LORD: 'I will sing to the LORD, for he has triumphed gloriously; horse and rider he has thrown into the sea.'

This song follows immediately after the mighty act of Yahweh's deliverance of his people from the hands of the Egyptians, and is an appropriate response to this act of redemption.<sup>15</sup> It is frequently described as a 'victory song'.<sup>16</sup> The words take the form of a confession of praise on the part of the singers, using, initially, the first person singular pronoun. The song does more than talk about God, however. It recounts the event that has just occurred (thus embedding the event firmly in the cultural heritage of the people of Israel), and also presents the interpretation of the event given by Moses. Thus, while a prosaic description of events might say 'an east wind separated the waters of the sea' (cf. 14:21), Moses is inspired to sing (15:8):

At the blast of your nostrils the waters piled up,  
the floods stood up in a heap;  
the deeps congealed in the heart of the sea.

While the former description is entirely accurate, and indeed has its own effectiveness as narrative, there can be little doubt about the impact of the second version on the imagination of the hearer, as there can be little doubt who is responsible for what has happened. This creative interpretation of the act of God in history might be legitimately described as 'poetic theology' or 'theology in song'.

Later in the same chapter, in 15:20-21, we are introduced to the singing of Miriam, and are given a brief taste of her song:

<sup>20</sup> Then the prophet Miriam, Aaron's sister, took a tambourine in her hand; and all the women went out after her with tambourines and with dancing. <sup>21</sup> And Miriam sang to them:

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<sup>14</sup> R. D. Patterson, 'The Song of Redemption', *WTJ* 57 (1995): 453-461, here 453. See Patterson's article for detailed analysis.

<sup>15</sup> See B. Childs, *Exodus* (London: SCM, 1974) 248.

<sup>16</sup> See P. R. House, *Old Testament Theology* (Downers Grove: IVP, 1998) 103. Childs, *Exodus*, 250, prefers 'hymn' although he notes that the 'distinction is not an absolute one'.

‘Sing to the LORD, for he has triumphed gloriously; horse and rider he has thrown into the sea’.

In this case, the song is couched in terms not of personal confession but of exhortation. Yet there is harmony between the two songs as seen in the carefully crafted refrain: ‘sing to the LORD, for he has triumphed gloriously; horse and rider he has thrown into the sea’ (1, 21).

A different type of song is found in Numbers 21.

<sup>16</sup>From there they continued to Beer; that is the well of which the LORD said to Moses, ‘Gather the people together, and I will give them water.’ <sup>17</sup>Then Israel sang this song:

‘Spring up, O well! – Sing to it! –  
<sup>18</sup>the well that the leaders sank,  
that the nobles of the people dug,  
with the scepter, with the staff.’

This would appear to be a working song,<sup>17</sup> perhaps with a rhythm to keep the pace of digging! R. B. Allen, comments,

It is possible that the song is the nearest we come in the Bible to ‘popular music’.<sup>18</sup>

By this reference to ‘popular music’ we should understand music that exists, not to communicate some great truth, but to be enjoyed for its own distinctive character. However, Allen recognises the pervasive theological perspective of the people of God when he continues,

In this song there is a sense of joy of knowing God even though the name of God is not mentioned.

It is this consciousness of living life in the context of a vital relationship with God that will make all the difference to our ability to appreciate the gifts he has given in the world around us.

An interesting reference to a significant song is found towards the end of Deuteronomy in 31:19-30. Yahweh tells Moses in 31:14 that his time as leader of God’s people is almost at an end, and that when he is gone the tendency of the people will be to turn away from God. So

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<sup>17</sup> So W. W. Klein, C. L. Blomberg and R. L. Hubbard, *Introduction to Biblical Interpretation* (Dallas: Word, 1993) 272.

<sup>18</sup> R. B. Allen, ‘Numbers’ (*EBC* Vol 2; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1990) 881.

Yahweh instructs Moses to write down a song and to teach it to the people so that

when many terrible troubles come upon them, this song will confront them as a witness, because it will not be lost from the mouths of their descendants. For I know what they are inclined to do even now, before I have brought them into the land that I promised them on oath (31:21).

This song is therefore not a praise song (although the song does conclude with a call to praise in 32:43-47). It has more of the character of a testimony which will be passed on from generation to generation in order to stand against the generation that departs from the ways of Yahweh. Peter Craigie comments,

The song would serve a solemn function; as the people learned the song and took its words upon their own lips, they would be bearing witness against themselves, not only of their commitment to God, but also of their knowledge of the inevitable consequences of unfaithfulness.<sup>19</sup>

It would appear, then, that the regular act of taking the words of a song on their lips impressed the message on the people more forcefully and more permanently than prose. The song itself is written in Deuteronomy 32. Craigie points out that this song, unusually for Hebrew poetry, is ‘spoken’ (31:30) rather than sung.<sup>20</sup> C. Wright offers a helpful insight into the powerful combination of themes in this song. He comments,

Verse 4, lustily sung as a chorus, affirms the character of God in repetitive, overlapping parallelism. As the Rock, God is utterly dependable, empty of any wrongdoing, the very foundation of all integrity and justice. Verse 5, not so often sung at all, affirms the lamentable opposite in Israel’s case. These people are corrupt, slippery, unstable, warped and crooked.<sup>21</sup>

The juxtaposition of these themes in a single creative composition designed to be repeated again and again by the people of God serves to

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<sup>19</sup> P. C. Craigie, *Deuteronomy* (NICOT; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1976) 372.

<sup>20</sup> Craigie, *Deuteronomy*, 373.

<sup>21</sup> C. Wright, *Deuteronomy* (Peabody: Hendrickson, 1996) 298.



bring before the people of Israel, again and again, from their own lips, the faithfulness of their God and the unfaithfulness of his people. If all of this sounds rather ‘heavy’ for a song, we should not allow ourselves to miss the impact of Moses words in 32:46-7:

Take to heart all the words that I am giving in witness against you today; give them as a command to your children, so that they may diligently observe all the words of this law.<sup>47</sup> ***This is no trifling matter for you, but rather your very life;*** through it you may live long in the land that you are crossing over the Jordan to possess.

Songs, we must recognise, are not always a matter of light entertainment!

### Song in the Prophets

Judges chapter 5 contains a song which was sung by Deborah and Barak.<sup>22</sup> David Gunn writes of this text that,

The song (chap. 5) that crowns the prose account of Jael’s exploit (chap. 4...) brings the prose narrative of Sisera’s death into focus by wordplay as well as by precise repetition. ‘He asked for water – milk she gave’ (5:25) distills the irony of the more prosaic 4:19 (‘and he said to her, “Please give me a little water to drink, for I am thirsty”’; and she opened the skin of milk and gave him some to drink.’<sup>23</sup>

The point of the song, then, is not to impart new information to the reader. For Deborah and Barak, the song immortalised a telling moment in the history of their people; for the modern reader, it brings the story to a fitting and memorable climax to the narrative of chapter 4. We should note, however, that the function of the song is not simply literary but it is theological, providing a theological context for this incident from the battlefield, particularly as it emphasises YHWH’s disposition towards his enemies and those who love him (5:31).<sup>24</sup>

<sup>22</sup> It is introduced with a similar formula to that employed in Exodus 15:1.

<sup>23</sup> R. Alter and F. Kermode, *The Literary Guide to the Bible* (London, 1987) 106.

<sup>24</sup> For a recent discussion of this passage which is sensitive to its literary and theological contributions, see K. L. Younger, *Judges/ Ruth* (NIVAC; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2002) 132-66.

2 Samuel 1:18 makes reference to the ‘Song of the Bow’. David, we are told, ‘ordered that the Song of the Bow be taught to the people of Judah’. In fact, the Hebrew text makes no reference to a ‘song’; it simply records that David said to teach the sons of Judah ‘the bow’. However, it seems clear that ‘the bow’ is a title for the following lament. This view is reinforced when the reader is then informed where this song can be located (‘It is written in the Book of Jashar’).

The lament of David in the verses that follow is very significant indeed, although perhaps it causes preachers some uncertainty as to how to tackle it. It is a lament for David’s dear friend Jonathan, and because of its significance I will reproduce it in full:

Your glory, O Israel, lies slain upon your high places!  
How the mighty have fallen!

Tell it not in Gath,  
proclaim it not in the streets of Ashkelon;  
or the daughters of the Philistines will rejoice,  
the daughters of the uncircumcised will exult.

You mountains of Gilboa,  
let there be no dew or rain upon you,  
nor bounteous fields!  
For there the shield of the mighty was defiled,  
the shield of Saul, anointed with oil no more.

From the blood of the slain,  
from the fat of the mighty,  
the bow of Jonathan did not turn back,  
nor the sword of Saul return empty.

Saul and Jonathan,  
beloved and lovely!  
In life and in death they were not divided;  
they were swifter than eagles,  
they were stronger than lions.

O daughters of Israel,  
weep over Saul,  
who clothed you with crimson,  
in luxury,  
who put ornaments of gold on your apparel.

How the mighty have fallen in the midst of the battle!  
Jonathan lies slain upon your high places.  
I am distressed for you, my brother Jonathan;  
greatly beloved were you to me;  
your love to me was wonderful,  
passing the love of women.

How the mighty have fallen,  
and the weapons of war perished!

Interestingly, as with Adam's song, there are no references to God or to his activities, there are no exclamations of praise, or petitions of prayer.<sup>25</sup> And yet only a very shallow reading of this text would allow the reader to come to the conclusion that God had nothing to do with this text. The text is evidence of a friendship lived in the light of God's covenant to his people, and the fact that there is no explicit reference to God does not lessen the fact that this song is indelibly marked with his character. What the reader finds here is a human heart exposed in grief. The depth of friendship is glimpsed. The loyalty of David to Saul, even in the face of persecution, touches the heart.

What is this song? In at least some respects, it is a love song: not in any sentimental way, and certainly not in any improper way as some modern commentators,<sup>26</sup> with modern ethical perspectives, would like to suggest, but a love song, nonetheless.<sup>27</sup> David can say,

I am distressed for you, my brother Jonathan;  
greatly beloved were you to me;  
your love to me was wonderful,  
passing the love of women.

and in doing so he demonstrates the power of a song to say what prosaic words never could. The impact of the song on the

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<sup>25</sup> See R. F. Youngblood, 'Judges' (*EBC* 3; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1992) 810: 'The poem is strikingly secular, never once mentioning God's name or elements of Israel's faith.' An example of a song of David extolling the character of Yahweh is found in 2 Samuel 22.

<sup>26</sup> E.g. T. Horner, *Jonathan Loved David: Homosexuality in Biblical Times* (Philadelphia, 1978).

<sup>27</sup> See the helpful discussion of B. T. Arnold, *1 & 2 Samuel* (NIVAC; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2003) 411-14.

consciousness of the people of Israel may be seen in the fact that when the Jewish hero, Judas Maccabaeus, died in about 160 BC, many centuries after David's time, it was David's dramatic refrain ('How the mighty are fallen!' 1:19, 27) that came to the lips of his family (1 Macc. 9:21).

Perhaps the prophetic books do not appear to be a rich quarry for song, but Isaiah may take us by surprise (as also his original hearers) when in 5:1 he beckons,

Let me sing for my beloved  
my love-song concerning his vineyard:

'My beloved had a vineyard on a very fertile hill.'<sup>28</sup>

The lush imagery of this song whets the appetite for more rich metaphor, but it does not take more than a few lines before we discover that this is a love song with teeth! The vineyard produces nothing of value and so will be destroyed. Then verse 7 makes everything plain:

For the vineyard of the LORD of hosts is the house of Israel,  
and the people of Judah are his pleasant planting;  
he expected justice, but saw bloodshed;  
righteousness, but heard a cry!

Even in these words, the symmetry and parallelism maintain the poetic quality. This passage clearly indicates the power of song to be used as a medium of irony and rebuke.

### **Song in the Writings**

Standing as a majestic opening to the Hebrew 'Writings' there is no overlooking the substantial proportion of the OT that is devoted to the Psalms. These songs of praise to 'the God who rules'<sup>29</sup> have been treasured and used by the people of God through the years for several reasons. One important reason for this is that Jesus and the NT writers quote the Psalms frequently, drawing out the messianic implications of psalms such as 2 and 110.<sup>30</sup> However, further reasons will include the

<sup>28</sup> Klein, Blomberg and Hubbard, *Introduction to Biblical Interpretation*, 224, helpfully demonstrate the use of word repetition in this verse.

<sup>29</sup> See the analysis of P. R. House, *Old Testament Theology*, 402-23.

<sup>30</sup> See S. Moyise and M. J. J. Menken (eds), *The Psalms in the New Testament* (London: T&T Clark International, 2004).

depth of human experience reflected in these songs, and the beauty of the poetry used by the authors as they were ‘carried along by the Holy Spirit’ (2 Pet. 1:21). Psalm 19 exemplifies the beauty of the language with its personification of creation and its rich metaphors, while, with respect to human emotion, few Psalms can match Psalm 22 in depth of pathos and Psalm 23 is a masterful expression of peace and security.

Psalm 40:3 speaks of a ‘new song’. Van Gemeren is surely right when he argues that this does not necessarily mean that a new composition has been written, but that the saving activity of God (40:1-2) has put every song into a new perspective.<sup>31</sup> The same phrase in Psalm 33:3 is combined with the exuberance of thankful praise, while it is used in Psalms 96:1 and 98:1 in the context of recounting the mighty acts of God.

Since the Psalms are so familiar and comparatively well-known, I will spend no further time discussing them. However, their significance for appreciating the great gift of song must not be under-estimated, and can scarcely be over-estimated.

One of the most important texts for the purposes of this paper, and one of the most intimidating portions of Scripture to Christian believer and professional interpreter alike, is the Song of Solomon, or the Song of Songs. Surprisingly, the term ‘song’ appears only once in this document, in the title (where the song is described as a *shir* or *asma*).<sup>32</sup> However, this is not so surprising since what we find in this text is not an instruction manual on how to sing, or even as we find in other parts of Scripture, an injunction to sing; the whole of this work is an example of a song in action. It is a song that is sung.

In fact, the phrase in the title is ‘song of songs’: this document is the most sublime of songs, the pinnacle of the craftsmanship of the songwriter. Yet the question remains: What kind of song is this?

There is a long tradition in Christian interpretation to treat this work as an allegory of the love of Christ for his people,<sup>33</sup> and there is some biblical evidence to add support to this view in that the NT on several occasions likens Christ to a bridegroom coming for his bride.<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> W. A. Van Gemeren, ‘Psalms’ (*EBC* 5; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1991) 318.

<sup>32</sup> A good discussion of this remarkable document can be found in I. Provan, *Ecclesiastes/ Song of Songs* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2001).

<sup>33</sup> See T. Longman, III, and R. B. Dillard, *An Introduction to the Old Testament* (Leicester: IVP, 1995) 259-63.

<sup>34</sup> Cf. Ephesians 5 and Revelation 22.

However, in the case of the Song of Songs, this approach can only be worked out by a studious avoidance of certain portions of the song.

The most natural reading of the dramatic and sensual language is as a love song (or a collection of love songs) between two married<sup>35</sup> human beings who have been gripped by the reality of the words 'they shall become one flesh'.<sup>36</sup> It seems to me that the church's reluctance to accept that position stems, at least partly, from the conviction that a 'non-religious' song has no valid place in the canon of Scripture. Longman and Dillard write,

As can happen in any age, cultural presuppositions biased interpreters against the original meaning of the text and a spiritual, rather than a sexual, interpretation of the Song was the result.<sup>37</sup>

In fact, an interpretation of this song as a love song between two humans has a hugely significant impact on our understanding of human relationships. In the garden, the disobedience of the first pair led to the devastation of the original wholeness between them. Nakedness without shame (Genesis 2:25) gave way to rather pathetic patchwork coverings (Genesis 3:7) indicating the great gulf that sin had brought between them. The Song of Songs points the way to a renewed wholeness in the relationship between a husband and wife, extending not only into their spiritual life but into their physical relationship also. Paul House points the way to a valid reading of this song when he writes,

Read in isolation, Song of Solomon is artistically and thematically lovely but not particularly theologically enriching. As part of a unified canon, however, as part of an ongoing interactive, authoritative whole, this book confirms earlier teachings about marriage while adding its own unique contribution about pre- and postmarital passions. As part of

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<sup>35</sup> Longman and Dillard, *Introduction*, 261, write: 'Nowhere in the book are the lover or the beloved said to be married. Also, although there are wedding songs, no marriage ceremony is explicit in the book. However, the canonical context of the book makes it clear that this poem describing such intense lovemaking between the two requires that we presume they are married. In other words, the Song must be interpreted within the context of the law of God, which prohibits any kind of pre- or extramarital intercourse.'

<sup>36</sup> Longman and Dillard, *Introduction*, 259

<sup>37</sup> Longman and Dillard, *Introduction*, 261.

the canon Song of Solomon testifies to the one God who created men and women for loving, permanent relationships with one another.<sup>38</sup>

The Song must be read in the light of the totality of Scripture to have its true impact, and, when read in that light, there is no need to provide the 'real meaning' in terms of spiritualising allegory. House points the way forward in appreciating the awe-inspiring beauty of this song, rather than mutilating it in the search for 'lessons'.

One further piece of literature to be mentioned is Lamentations. This largely unfamiliar document further illustrates the fact that song is not a medium reserved for the expression of joy. The document is carefully constructed according to the conventions of a 'dirge' or 'lament'. Among the characteristic features of the dirge, the contrast between past blessing and present disaster is particularly striking. Thus, Lamentations 1:1 reads,

How lonely sits the city  
that once was full of people!  
How like a widow she has become,  
she that was great among the nations!  
She that was a princess among the provinces  
has become a vassal.

The expression of heart-rending emotion in Lamentations is quite overwhelming, yet, remarkably, Lamentations clearly demonstrates that it is not an unpremeditated wail but is a composition of astonishing creative artistry. Of the five chapters which compose Lamentations, four are acrostic poems, beginning each successive unit of the poem with a letter of the Hebrew alphabet. The fifth and final chapter is not an acrostic, but it resembles chapters one, two and four in that it too has twenty-two verses, corresponding to the twenty-two characters in the Hebrew alphabet. Chapter three forms the fulcrum of this delicately balanced composition by modifying the acrostic structure so that instead of successive substantial verse beginning with a different letter of the Hebrew alphabet, the author composes a group of three short verses, each beginning with the same character, followed by another group of three verses each beginning with the next character, and so on through the whole alphabet. Anyone who has attempted to write an acrostic poem will realise what mastery of language is required to move

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<sup>38</sup> House, *Old Testament Theology*, 469.

beyond banal verse. God chose to move his chosen author in such a way that he expresses a broken heart and also a living hope in the Covenant God, through delicate and intricate poetic structure. Interestingly, although modern Christians do not tend to empathise with the sombre tone of Lamentations, the familiar hymn ‘Great is Thy Faithfulness’ is based upon Lamentations 3:22-23, which is the point on which the whole dirge balances.

### **A Cautionary Note**

We have seen the pervasive presence of song in the OT. Yet there is not unqualified praise for those who sing. The southern prophet Amos, sent to proclaim God’s judgement on the wayward northern kingdom of Israel, has typically biting words for certain music-lovers (6:4-7):

<sup>4</sup> Alas for those who lie on beds of ivory, and lounge on their couches, and eat lambs from the flock, and calves from the stall; <sup>5</sup> who *sing idle songs* to the sound of the harp, and like David improvise on instruments of music; <sup>6</sup> who drink wine from bowls, and anoint themselves with the finest oils, but are not grieved over the ruin of Joseph! <sup>7</sup> Therefore they shall now be the first to go into exile, and the revelry of the loungers shall pass away.

The reference to David in the midst of this prophetic woe oracle suggests that it is not the activity of these people that is condemned, since David is extolled for his skill in music. It is the last phrase of verse 6 that provides the key to the problem – music was more important than the issues of God’s people.

### **The Function of Song in the Old Testament**

We have found songs in each of the major sections of the OT: the Law, the Prophets and the Writings. In drawing our survey of OT texts together, we can make a number of comments relating to the function of song in the OT.

- 1) Song is a gift of creative and evocative communication that has been given to human beings by a gracious God whose creativity is reflected in the words of human songs. Thus song may be legitimately used as a form of expression where there is no explicit reference to faith in God.
- 2) Songs are frequently used to express praise and thankfulness to God, yet they are often addressed to other human beings to share in the act of singing. They frequently recount (in vivid and



memorable form) the saving acts of God among his people through the ages. They therefore act as a potent form of education, encouragement and exhortation within the community of believers. Songs may not always be 'enjoyable' but may be the bearers of words of rebuke.

- 3) Songs are neither inherently good nor inherently bad. They may be misused when the form of a song is filled with ungodly content, or when perfectly good songs are used in a way that is unacceptable to God.

### **Song in the New Testament**

Discussions relating to song in the NT have often gravitated all too quickly to the several famous 'hymns' (particularly in Colossians 1 and Philippians 2) and to the (for some) contentious issue of the meaning of 'psalms, hymns and spiritual songs' (Colossians 3:16; Ephesians 5:19). In choosing to pass over discussion of these texts here, it is not my intention to devalue these passages of Scripture – these exegetical questions deserve careful discussion – but it is my intention to indicate that there are a number of texts in the NT that shed light on the value of song, and yet which are too often neglected.

Discussion could well focus on several references to song or singing in the NT documents. For example, Acts 16:25 tells of Paul and Silas singing praise at midnight in the prison in Philippi. Or, turning to Paul, tucked away in the lengthy passage on the proper outworking of the gifts of the Holy Spirit (1 Corinthians 14:15) are the words, 'I will sing praise with the spirit, but I will sing praise with the mind also' which beg for elucidation. James also has a commendation of song, once again in the context of worship, and yet not necessarily in the context of a 'formal' Christian gathering: 'Are any cheerful? They should sing songs of praise' (5:13).

However, I intend to limit my discussion in this paper to two NT documents where songs are not simply commended or described, but actually reproduced, and clearly identified in the body of the document within which they occur.<sup>39</sup>

### **The Gospel of Luke**

Luke's Gospel provides a rich vein of biblical material for exploring the theology of song. Luke, distinctively among the three Synoptic

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<sup>39</sup> Cf R. E. Brown, *An Introduction to the New Testament* (ABRL; New York: Doubleday, 1998) 489.

authors, records several ‘songs’ in some detail in the early chapters of his gospel. Though they are not described with the language of song or singing, it is clear from their structure that they are song-like in character, and it is worth our while taking a few moments to consider them.<sup>40</sup>

*The Magnificat (1:46-56)*

The overwhelming news that comes by the angel to the young Middle-eastern girl, Mary, does not result in hysterics or dramatics, but results in a song! The song stands in a worthy tradition of the songs of God’s people through the ages, and the character of the song indicates that Mary was well established in the history of her people.<sup>41</sup> Indeed, the personal aspect of the song is very short-lived as the song becomes an expression of confidence in the God who cut a covenant with Abraham. And so the origins of God’s people in an act of God’s grace are identified, confessed and conveyed to those who will come afterwards, by means of one more song. Thus, Mary’s song functions in a very similar way to ‘the Song of the Sea’ and other OT songs by providing theological reflection on God’s mighty acts on behalf of his people. The song, including its poetic mode of expression, is not a quaint reflection on Mary’s personal experience but it is a valid – indeed God-breathed – act of theological interpretation, setting God’s remarkable act of incarnation in the wider context of his covenant commitment to his people through the ages.

*The Benedictus (1:67-79)*

Zechariah’s song has added poignancy from the fact that it was the first expression that came from a tongue mute for nine months. It is clearly the Holy Spirit who so fills Zechariah in his moment of obedience that he ‘prophesied’ this poetic composition (67),<sup>42</sup> and so once again we are confronted with the divine choice to communicate in poetic language. As with Mary, Zechariah recognises the part he and

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<sup>40</sup> See in particular, S. Farris, *The Hymns of Luke’s Infancy Narratives* (JSNTS; Sheffield: JSOT, 1985).

<sup>41</sup> D. L. Bock, *Luke 1:1-9:50* (BECNT; Grand Rapids: Baker, 1994) 44-45. Mary’s song shares some common themes with the Song of the sea and Deborah’s song. Perhaps it recalls Hannah’s prayer (1 Sam. 2) most closely; a fact which reinforces the need to be sensitive to form and content rather than explicit description in our present discussion.

<sup>42</sup> J. B. Green, *The Gospel of Luke* (NICNT; Grand Rapids, Eerdmans, 1997) 111, describes the prophesy as ‘Zechariah’s Song’.

Elisabeth play in a much greater drama, tracing God's faithfulness back to his promise to Abraham, using concise and evocative expressions to highlight the significance of what is happening to him and his family.<sup>43</sup> Thus, not only *has* God visited his people in the past (68) but he *will visit* (78) in the future act of grace to which Zechariah and Elizabeth's son will bear witness. Yet, we should not so emphasise the theological function of the song that we neglect the context of the birth of the child, John, to astonished parents. This is surely a song that comes from Zechariah's heart, and we can perhaps imagine him gazing lovingly at his son as he begins the second part of this balanced composition with the words of direct address, 'and you, my child' (76) and then alludes in delightfully poetic terms to the new sunrise which John will usher in upon the people of God. The medium of song allows for the combination of rich theology and rich rejoicing in one remarkable exclamation.<sup>44</sup>

*The Nunc Dimittis (2:28-32)*

The final 'hymn' of Luke's infancy narrative is much briefer than the previous two, and less wide ranging. It is not so obviously song-like, yet it has a literary quality that justifies the description, and in the context of the previous songs is easily recognised as 'the finale in a narrative cycle leading from *promise* to *fulfilment* to *response* of praise'.<sup>45</sup> Simeon's words are, at the same time, a God-given interpretation of the little child whom he holds in his arms and a personal expression of gratitude for the realisation of his long-held hopes; both a declaration of theology and a personal exclamation of praise. In one of the most potent prophetic utterances of the NT, the medium that is chosen is song/poetry.

Leaving for the moment these masterful expressions of 'poetic theology', we find one other text in Luke's Gospel which might have a bearing on our subject. There is an interesting reference to 'cultural' music in Luke 15:25, where the Elder Brother in Jesus' masterful tale 'heard music and dancing'. This is clearly a description of a celebration, not of a worship event (though the Father would, no doubt,

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<sup>43</sup> I discuss Zechariah's prophecy against the background of the OT covenants and particularly the 'New Covenant' in my article 'Luke and the New Covenant: Zechariah's Prophecy as a Test Case' in , *The God of Covenant* (Leicester: Apollos, 2005), edited by J. A. Grant and A. I. Wilson, 156-177.

<sup>44</sup> J. B. Green provides a helpful discussion of the 'structure and role of Zechariah's Song' in *Gospel of Luke*, 112-14.

<sup>45</sup> Green, *Gospel of Luke*, 143.

have been deeply thankful). While it is tempting to take this text and draw far-reaching conclusions from it, a safer course of biblical interpretation is to avoid placing emphasis on peripheral details in a parable of Jesus. Nothing is said by Jesus, in the text, either to commend or to condemn this manner of celebration – it is simply beside the point. However, it is to the point that there should be rejoicing when the lost are found, and the dead are raised, and the text hints at the place music and song might legitimately take in such celebration.

## **Revelation**

Turning to the final document of the NT canon, the Revelation to John resonates with the sound of song. Only an attentive reading of the text, taking care to note all relevant references, can truly indicate how much of this extraordinary work is couched in the form of song. We might identify the following passages, at least, as relevant: 4:8, 9-11; 5:9-10, 12-14; 7:9-12; 11:15-18; 14:3; 15:3-4; 19:1-4, 6-8. Though these passages are not lengthy, they punctuate the text in a significant manner. Each main vision section incorporates at least one song of praise, and the songs focus on the character of God so as to impress on the persecuted listeners the majesty of the Sovereign Lord. Thus, Wu and Pearson write,

In view of the readers' predicament under imperial persecution, the writer's inclusion of these praise hymns into his vision narratives serves not only to present an exalted view of God and Christ in Christian worship but more specifically to provide a coherent message of comfort to the readers. God, who is the Creator of the universe, is still in sovereign control despite the hardships they are experiencing.<sup>46</sup>

Among the numerous references to song, there are two references to a 'new song' in Revelation – 5:9 and 14:3. Drawing particularly on Isaiah 42:10, 13 and Psalm 149:1, 6-9, Longman argues that the 'new song' in the OT is closely linked to the victory of the Divine Warrior.<sup>47</sup> Although it is not clear that all references to a 'new song' have this background, Longman's point is appropriate in the context of

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<sup>46</sup> J. L. Wu and S. C. Pearson, 'Hymns, Songs' in *DLNTD*, 524-5.

<sup>47</sup> T. Longman III, 'The Divine warrior: The New Testament Use of an Old Testament Motif' *WTJ* 44 (1982): 290-307, here 300-302.

Revelation where the various songs extol the Lion-lamb (5:5-6) who is victorious through his sacrificial death, and is declared to be Lord of all. Song is the appropriate means of expressing the hope of certain victory.

A particularly striking passage, in the light of our discussion so far, is found in 15:3-4:

<sup>3</sup> And they sing the song of Moses, the servant of God, and the song of the Lamb: 'Great and amazing are your deeds, Lord God the Almighty! Just and true are your ways, King of the nations! <sup>4</sup> Lord, who will not fear and glorify your name? For you alone are holy. All nations will come and worship before you, for your judgments have been revealed.'

The reference to the 'song of Moses' appears to recall the events of Exodus 15. This is biblical theology at its best, as the Song of Moses becomes also the Song of the Lamb; as the great act of liberation through a parted sea in Exodus is interpreted by the great act of liberation accomplished through a broken body in Revelation. The song that became a reminder of the very origins of a people continues to be the song of a people created by grace. The foundation of the identity of God's people – the character of God himself – is once more declared in song.

This extends to the 'judgements' of God. As Moses' song told of the overthrow of horse and rider, so the song of Moses and the Lamb rejoices in the righteous character of God. Of the full impact of this song, Guthrie comments,

It is intended to be reassuring, but the sense of awe and righteous wrath of God is unmistakable.<sup>48</sup>

The totality of Revelation presents the marvelous image of the singing saints. Those who have most awareness of the wonder of their Creator and Redeemer cannot keep themselves from song, and need not try for songs will ring out forever.

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<sup>48</sup> D. Guthrie, 'Worship in the Book of Revelation' in M. J. Wilkins and T. Paige (eds) *Worship Theology and Ministry in the Early Church: Essays in Honor of Ralph P. Martin* (JSNTS 87; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1992) 81.

## The Function of Song in the New Testament

The character and function of the songs found in the NT are not nearly as diverse as in the OT. The songs which are reproduced in the NT are without exception 'religious' songs, in the sense that they are songs with God, his character and his activity as their theme. However, once again we must protest against this distinction between 'secular' and 'sacred' that comes all too easily to us.

A song with God as its theme is acceptable to the Lord if it brings honour and glory to 'the one seated on the throne, and to the Lamb' (*cf.* Rev. 5:13). Exactly the same is surely true of a song that has some other matter as its theme. Likewise, a song with God as its theme may be unacceptable to the Lord if it does not bring honour and glory to himself (*cf.* Amos 5:21-24).

## Practical Implications

If the contention of this paper is correct, and we have no biblical authority for distinguishing between 'Christian' and 'non-Christian' songs, or between 'sacred' and 'secular' songs, then we must rejoice in the songs that God has given to us by talented songwriters, and sing them for the glory of God, according to the principle laid down by Paul in 1 Corinthians 10:31:

Whether, then, you eat or drink *or whatever you do*, do all to the glory of God.

Thus we should encourage those who have been gifted with singing talent to use that talent. Likewise, those who demonstrate facility with words and music should be encouraged to direct their talents towards the glory of God, even when – perhaps especially when – their creative productions make no mention of their Lord.

On the other hand, we must be careful not to allow culture to dominate our principles. Let me suggest a controversial area where Scottish Christians need to give some consideration to the implications of a biblical theology of song. Similar issues may arise for people of other nationalities also.

Sports enthusiasts may be aware that over a period of years, the famous and hugely popular Corries song, 'Flower of Scotland', has replaced 'God Save the Queen' as the 'official'<sup>49</sup> national anthem to be

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<sup>49</sup> That is, the anthem that is played by a band as part of the opening ceremony. 'Flower of Scotland' was already an 'unofficial' anthem long before it was accepted by the organising authorities.

played before a sporting event involving a Scottish national team. There is no denying its marvelous anthem-like qualities: a lilting melody that is simple enough to be carried by the largest crowd, and a simple march-like rhythm that gives the song a dynamism that is captivating. Most of all it has a distinctive Scottish character that takes it to the hearts of Scots as to no others. It is no surprise to me that it quickly overturned ‘God Save the Queen’ as Scotland’s anthem.

However, on the basis of what we have said so far, I have a cautionary note to sound. You will expect, I trust, that it has nothing to do with the singing of the song, as such. The combination of melody and rhythm finds no challenge from Scripture, and indeed the strength of the song would be commendable as an expression of creativity at work. My concern has nothing to do with the idea of an anthem, either. Indeed, we might describe some of the biblical songs as ‘anthems’ in that they are expressions of the nation’s identity. They declare what the nation is, and this is not condemned in any way.

However, I must voice concern at the sentiments of the song. Not the language – there is nothing obscene, blasphemous or otherwise offensive in the lyrics – but the sentiments. This concern does not relate primarily to the recounting of war, or to the actions of those ‘who fought and died for, their wee bit hill and glen;’ there may be true selfless character demonstrated in such dreadful experiences. Particularly, my concern relates to the attitude of the lines that speak of those who

Stood against him  
Proud Edward’s army  
And sent him homeward  
Tae think again<sup>50</sup>

It seems to me that this tends towards a rejoicing in nationalistic victory over another people which is unacceptable for those who confess that Jesus Christ is ‘our peace’, that he has ‘made the two one’ and that he has ‘broken down the dividing wall of separation’ (Ephesians 2). If my reading of the words of the song is in any way on target, and if Paul felt so strongly about the reconciling power of the cross of Christ, then perhaps the Scriptures must be allowed to challenge this song that has become a foundational element of Scottish culture.

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<sup>50</sup> ‘Flower of Scotland’, written by Roy Williamson, one half of the duo ‘The Corries’ who made the song famous.

**Conclusion**

There is no commandment in Scripture to delight in the blending of voices in harmony, or the intertwining of voice and instrument. For some, there will be no fire kindled by a love song or a poignant ballad. But equally, there is no commandment to abandon God's good gifts, of which song is one. What is rejected in this world must be rejected because it stands against God and his design for humanity, not because some misuse it. William Booth's question (echoed in song by Cliff Richard), 'Why Should the Devil Have All the Good Music?' hit the nail on the head, except that it seems to suggest that he does, and that we should do something about it. He doesn't! The Lord God, who made all things well, has all the good music, and all the good songs.