

THE MAGICAL SOUND OF PRIESTLY BELLS

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The Hebrew Bible includes numerous references to musical instruments.¹ Although details of their shapes, sounds, and construction are left out of the text, the instruments can be classified according to the Hornbostel-Sachs system: idiophones (percussion instruments with vibrating bodies), membranophones (drums with membranes), chordophones (string instruments), and aerophones (wind instruments).² Biblical instruments are also grouped into two larger categories: aesthetic and signal. Aesthetic instruments, such as flutes, harps, and lyres, produced dramatizing sounds to accompany a range of activities, from storytelling to worship. Signal instruments, such as rattles, shofars, and bells, delivered sonic messages ranging from battlefield orders to marking time. This paper examines signal bells affixed to the robes of the High Priest. The bells served two main functions, as described in Exodus 28: separating sacred from profane and performing apotropaic magic.

SACRAL VESTMENTS

Religious systems rely on distinctions between sacred and profane.³ In the most basic meaning, sacred refers to anything connected with the divine realm or dedicated to a religious purpose, while profane encompasses everything else. Ideas about holy and mundane impact attitudes, perceptions, and behaviors. Sacred things, like texts, locations, symbols, and times, are attended by prescriptions and prohibitions above and beyond those given to secular things. These designations cannot be universalized, as each conception is tied to a specific cultural group or setting. Virtually any type of object or form of human behavior can potentially be identified as sacred, whether it is a word, dance, food, stone, relic, emotion, or something else. The label can even be applied to individuals.

In ancient Near Eastern societies, the sacred person was the priest. Membership in the priesthood was for the most part hereditary, and entailed ritual obligations far exceeding those of regular folk. Yet, even with these familial

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and behavioral identifiers, the priest still looked like everyone else; he was as human as the least exalted man. To make his sacred status readily discernable, he donned an elaborate, eye-catching outfit that transcended the normal conventions of dress.

Exodus 28 devotes forty-three verses to describing the attire worn by officiating priests. The sacral vestments (*bigdei kodesh*⁴) of the High Priest include a breastplate, ephod, robe, tunic, headdress, sash, frontlet, and breeches,⁵ crafted by artisans who were *wise at heart* and *filled with a spirit of wisdom* (Ex. 28:3). The ordinary priests wore four garments: a tunic, turban, sash, and breeches. The text describes the garb as a status symbol: *Make sacral vestments for your brother Aaron, for dignity and adornment* (Ex. 28:2). Maimonides stresses the importance of wearing these vestments, suggesting that a priest officiating without them was in danger of death from heaven: “While their vestments were upon them, their priesthood was upon them; without their vestments, their priesthood was not upon them, rather they were as outsiders, as it is said: *and any outsider who encroaches shall be put to death* (Num. 3:10).”⁶

Detailed instructions are given concerning yarns, linens, cords, shoulder-pieces, mounted stones, braided chains, embroidery, and other ornaments, along with wool pomegranate-shaped tassels and golden bells affixed to the hem of the robe. With the latter adornment, the priest was not only separated in appearance, but also in sound.

The dangling bells were a type of idiophone: a percussion instrument that vibrates without the aid of strings or membranes. The term used in Exodus 28:33-34 (and again in Ex. 39:25-26) is *pa’amon*, from the verb *pa’am*, meaning “strike.”⁷ *Pa’amonim* enjoy an interpretive consensus in being translated as “bells.” However, they are not mentioned outside of Exodus, and archaeologists have unearthed just ten bells dating to pre-Hellenistic Israel (and some of those may be imports rather than indigenous products).⁸ Most recently, a golden bell with a small loop was discovered in a drainage channel near the Western Wall. Archaeologists believe the bell originated from the robe of a High Priest at the end of the Second Temple period (first century CE).⁹

Extra-biblical sources help fill out the picture. Bells were a common feature of priestly costumes in the ancient world. For example, a statue of a priest

found in northwest Syria includes a row of bells near the hem of the robe.¹⁰ Plutarch (40-120 CE) links bells similar to those on the High Priest's robe to the Dionysian cult.¹¹ The extra-canonical book of Sirach notes their pleasing tones (45:9), while Josephus calls the alteration of fringes and golden bells a "beautiful contrivance."¹² To this day, hem-lining bells are found among Siberian shamans, indigenous South Americans, and elsewhere.¹³

APOTROPAIC MAGIC

The unspecified purpose of the priestly bells has elicited various conjectures. Nahum M. Sarna includes a representative sample in his commentary on Exodus: alerting other priests to vacate the premises (specifically on Yom Kippur); announcing the High Priest's presence before God; attracting the attention of worshipers; signaling that no harm has come to the High Priest; and attuning the High Priest to his solemn duties.¹⁴ These interpretations overlook an anthropological reading. Throughout antiquity, bells and other noisemakers were used for apotropaic magic: the scaring off of evil spirits. This function seems to be retained in Exodus 28:35: *Aaron shall wear [the bell-lined robe] while officiating, so that the sound of it is heard when he comes into the sanctuary before the Lord and when he goes out—that he may not die.*

Dangerous spirits in thresholds and liminal spaces are staples of world mythology and Jewish folklore.¹⁵ The motif is implied with Aaron, who was safe *inside* the holy place, where ostensibly only the *Shekhinah* resides, but needed protection when entering and exiting. More specifically, the bells were thought to summon divine power to frighten off the hovering spirits. Josephus touches on this in comparing the golden bells to thunder and the pomegranates to lightning—signs of divine might.¹⁶ The Egyptian *sistrum*—a shaker comprising a handle, U-shaped metal frame, and thin metal loops on movable crossbars—was similarly shaken to drive away Set, the demon of death (known to the Greeks as Typhon).¹⁷ Church father John Chrysostom referenced apotropaic bells hung around the necks and wrists of Christian children.¹⁸ Magic bells were hung from Chinese temples and pagodas,¹⁹ and were occasionally used in exorcisms.²⁰

To be sure, an apotropaic function is not the only conclusion that can be drawn from the Exodus passage. A surface reading might suggest that the

bells, along with the rest of the priestly attire, were simply a requirement of the ritual, and that their sound as the priest entered and existed was a sign of honor (*kavod*). This interpretation resonates with the idea that biblical religion did not evolve from or have discernable ties to pagan practices, but was a new and *sui generis* phenomenon. Yehezkel Kaufmann popularized this perspective in *The Religion of Israel*, which, among other things, attempts to distance the Israelites from the magical beliefs of surrounding peoples.²¹ He argues that just because Israel's priesthood, priestly garb, and sacrificial rites resembled those of their neighbors does not mean they shared an evolutionary lineage. Frank Moore Cross maintains the opposite: "The empirical historian must describe novel configurations in Israel's religion as having their origin in an orderly set of relationships which follow the usual typological sequences of historical change. Kaufmann's insistence that Israelite religion 'was absolutely different from anything the pagan world ever knew' violates fundamental postulates of scientific historical method."²² An "empirical historian" would reason that, while the bells may have outgrown their apotropaic origin as biblical civilization advanced—and while that function may have been minimized in the text—hints of magic are nevertheless preserved in Exodus 28.²³

Bells were not the only biblical or ancient Jewish instruments believed to harness supernatural power. According to musicologist Alfred Sendrey, the shofar was originally blown to frighten off spirits. The blasts were "connected with the belief in magic and sorcery, but in the long run their original meaning was lost and survived only subconsciously in the minds of the Israelites."²⁴ Purim noisemakers also predate associations with the Book of Esther and the drowning out of Haman's name. Hayyim Schauss explains: "The beating...comes from ancient times, when Purim was still a nature festival, bound up with the passing of winter and the approach of spring. It is an ancient belief with people that at the time when the seasons change the evil spirits have great power and strive to do mischief to all. One of the surest safeguards against these spirits was noise."²⁵ Although the origins of Purim are cloudy, Schauss and others speculate that it grew from a pagan seasonal festival, either Persian or Babylonian.²⁶

These sonic displays demonstrate the perceived magical-mystical power of sound. Unlike a physical or seeable object, sound has no tangible shape or

substance. It enters the invisible pathway of hearing and is processed through the mysterious channels of emotion. Consequently, sound is conceived as a line of communication with the equally invisible supernatural realm.

OTHER BELLS

As a species of bells, *pa'amonim* were not restricted to the sacred domain. A tiny bell found at Caesarea was used in jewelry, and an animal bell was uncovered at Masada.²⁷ Similar bells were likely used elsewhere in Israelite society. There was nothing inherently holy about them; they dangled and chimed as bells should. Yet, when incorporated into the priestly garb, they were heard as a sacred soundtrack.

A bit of this associative potency remains in Jewish communities, where Torah scrolls are customarily dressed in mantles and bell-adorned breastplates, crowns, and/or *rimonim* (lit. pomegranates). These adornments are also referred to as *bigdei kodesh*.²⁸ The “scroll-as-priest” imagery signals the transfer of authority from the sacred person to the sacred text. On a spiritual-psychological level, the jingling Torah bells act as a shield against negative energies.

NOTES

1. See J. Montagu, *Musical Instruments in the Bible* (Lanham, MD: Scarecrow, 2002).
2. E. M. von Hornbostel and C. Sachs, “Systematik der musikinstrumente,” *Zeitschrift für Ethnologie* 46 (1914) pp. 553-590. Sachs added a fifth category, electrophone, in 1940.
3. See two classic treatises: M. Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane: The Nature of Religion*, trans. W. R. Trask (New York: Harcourt, 1987); M. Douglas, *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of Concepts of Pollution and Taboo* (New York: Routledge, 2002).
4. Rabbinic literature devises additional names for the sacral vestments, including *bigdei zahav* (golden attire), *bigdei serad* (service vestments), *bigdei sharet* (officiating vestments), and *bigdei lavan* (white vestments) for the white linen garments prescribed for Yom Kippur. See N. M. Sarna, *The JPS Torah Commentary: Exodus* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1991) pp. 177-186.
5. The breeches are listed separately (v. 42) because they are not worn outwardly for “dignity and adornment.” As a result, they are sometimes excluded from lists of sacral vestments. See, for example, J. H. Tigay, “Exodus,” in *The Jewish Study Bible*, ed. A. Berlin and M. Z. Brettler (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999) pp. 171, 174-175.
6. Maimonides, *Mishneh Torah, Hilkhot Klei ha-Mikdash* 10.4.
7. Some interpreters give the verbal sense of “strike, hit.” See F. Brown, S. R. Driver, and C. A. Briggs, *A Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1907) p. 822. See HALOT, 3:952 for the range of possible meanings.

8. J. Braun, *Music in Ancient Israel/Palestine: Archaeological, Written, and Comparative Sources*, trans. D.W. Stott (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2002) p. 195.
9. "A Rare Gold Bell was Discovered in IAA Excavations in the Drainage Channel from the Second Temple Period," Israel Antiquities Authority, July 24, 2011.
10. Braun, *Music in Ancient Israel/Palestine*, p. 25. See also H. Seyrig, "Antiquites syriennes: La grande statue parthe de Shami et la sculpture palmyrenienne," *Syria* 20 (1939) pp. 177-183.
11. Plutarch, *Quaestiones convivales*, 672a.
12. Josephus, *Ant.* iii. 7.4.
13. C. Sachs, *The History of Musical Instruments* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1940) p. 109.
14. Sarna, *The JPS Torah Commentary*, p. 183.
15. See I. Pintel-Ginsburg, "Demons," in *Encyclopedia of Jewish Folklore and Traditions*, vols. 1-2, ed. R. Patai and H. Bar-Itzhak (New York: Routledge, 2013) pp. 122-124.
16. Josephus, *Ant.* iii. 7.7.
17. A. Z. Idelsohn, *Jewish Music in Its Historical Development* (New York: Henry Holt, 1929) p. 15.
18. R. MacMullen, *Christianity and Paganism in the Fourth to Eighth Centuries* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1997) p. 240, n. 142.
19. J. Cooper, *Chinese Alchemy: Taoism, the Power of Gold, and the Quest for Immortality* (Newburyport, MA: Weiser, 2016) p. 116.
20. Braun, *Music in Ancient Israel/Palestine*, 25.
21. Y. Kaufmann, *The Religion of Israel: From Its Beginnings to the Babylonian Exile* (New York: Schocken, 1960) pp. 78-87.
22. F. M. Cross, *Canaanite Myth and Hebrew Epic: Essays in the History of the Religion of Israel* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1997) p. viii.
23. See I. Caine, "Apotropaics in Biblical Civilization," *Jewish Civilization: Essays and Studies, Volume 3*, ed. R. A. Brauner (Philadelphia: Reconstructionist Rabbinical College, 1985) pp. 3-30.
24. A. Sendrey, *Music in Ancient Israel* (New York: Philosophical Library, 1969) p. 362.
25. H. Schauss, *The Jewish Festivals: History & Observance*, trans. Samuel Jaffe (New York: Schocken, 1938) pp. 265-266.
26. See, for instance, C. A. Moore, *Esther: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995) pp. vlvi-xlix; S. I. Crawford, "Esther," in *Eerdmans Commentary on the Bible*, ed. J. D. G. Dunn and J. W. Rogerson (Grand Rapids, MI: W. B. Eerdmans, 2003) p. 329.
27. Braun, *Music in Ancient Israel/Palestine*, p. 196.
28. J. Gutmann, *The Jewish Sanctuary* (Boston: Brill, 1983) p. 5.