

HARPS OF DAVID AND OF GOD

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The Old Testament contains numerous references of harps being used in the religious practices of the Jews. The New Testament contains three references to harps in heaven. The question is: Do these passages authorize Christians to use mechanical instruments of music to worship God on earth? A careful study of God's word shows that the answer is No.

Harps in the Old Testament

Many people like to selectively use the Old Testament for religious authority for man today, particularly with the issue of the use of mechanical instruments of music in worship. Yes, it is quite easy to find many references to that practice in the Old Testament. The first such reference is on King David's first attempt to bring the ark of the covenant into Jerusalem. At that time, "*David and all the house of Israel played before the Lord on all manner of instruments made of fir wood, even on harps, and on psalteries, and on timbrels, and on cornets, and on cymbals*" (2 Sam 6:5; 1 Chr 13:8). He also did the same on the second (successful) attempt (1 Chr 15:16,21,28). This became a permanent part of ministering before the ark (1 Chr 16:1-6). David extended this to accompany prophecy and the service of the house of God (1 Chr 25:1-7). There are more than a dozen references to harps and other mechanical instruments of music in the context of worship in the Book of Psalms. The key point about David's harps and other mechanical instruments of God is found in 2 Chronicles 29:25-26, when King Hezekiah "set the Levites in the house of the Lord with cymbals, with psalteries, and with harps, according to the commandment of David, and of Gad the king's seer, and Nathan the prophet: *for so was the commandment of the Lord by his prophets.* And the Levites stood with the instruments of David, and the priests with the trumpets." Here, we find that David's use and command for the use of mechanical instruments of music in Jewish worship was "the commandment of the Lord." It would have been just as wrong for David and the rest of Israel to engage in an unauthorized religious practice then as it is for man to do so today. But David had God's authority! But the Old Testament is not man's authority today. Jesus Christ fulfilled it (Matt 5:17-18). It was taken out of the way and nailed to his cross (Col 2:14). The *New Covenant* made the first one "old" (Heb 8:13). To follow the Old Testament laws today makes Christ profitless and with "no effect" to a man, and will cause him to fall from grace (Gal 5:1-4).

Harps in Revelation

What does the New Testament teach about the use of mechanical instruments of music in worship? The Book of Revelation contains three references to harps in heaven. In Revelation chapters 4-7, we read about four beasts and twenty-four elders who were in heaven before God's throne. In chapter 5 verse 8, each one of them had harps and golden vials full of odors, which are the prayers of the saints. In Revelation 14:2-3, the Apostle John "heard a voice from heaven, as the voice of many waters, and as the voice of a great thunder: *and I heard the voice of harpers harping with their harps:* and they sung as it were a new song before the throne, and before the four beasts, and the elders: and no man could learn that song but the hundred and forty and four thousand, which were redeemed from the earth."

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Revelation 15:2 says, “And I saw as it were a sea of glass mingled with fire: and them that had gotten the victory over the beast, and over his image, and over his mark, and over the number of his name, stand on the sea of glass, *having the harps of God.*” Some people do argue that the use of “harps” in heaven in Revelation authorizes us to use mechanical musical instruments in the church. But this argument is incorrect. First of all, mechanical instruments are material things, which are by definition temporal: “While we look not at the things which are seen, but at the things which are not seen: *for the things which are seen are temporal; but the things which are not seen are eternal.*” (2 Cor 4:18). Heaven, on the other hand, is an eternal, physically “unseen” place. Therefore, there cannot possibly be literal trumpets, harps, organs, or any kind of physical object in heaven.

Something figurative does authorize something literal. In other words, a figurative description of harps in heaven does not in any way authorize us to use real mechanical instrumental music in worship to God on earth. The same would be true of Revelation’s mention of incense (Rev 8:3-4). In fact, it would be difficult to list every mistake men have made by misunderstanding and misapplying the figurative language of the last book of the Bible.

Authorized music for the churches of Christ

To find the answer to *any* question regarding what God has authorized for man to practice in religion today, we must search the New Testament. The New Testament is referred to as “the law of Christ” (Gal 6:2; see also 1 Cor 9:21), the “royal law” (Jas 2:8), the “perfect law of liberty” (Jas 1:25; 2:12). Christ’s law must be obeyed, or else there will no eternal salvation (Heb 5:9; 2 Thes 1:7-9). Christ himself said, “*He that rejecteth me, and receiveth not my words, hath one that judgeth him: the word that I have spoken, the same shall judge him in the last day*” (John 12:48). His words contain “all truth” (John 16:13), “all things that pertain unto life and godliness” (2 Pet 1:3), and what is able to make the man of God perfect, thoroughly furnished unto all good works (2 Tim 3:17). Therefore, we are governed by the New Testament, and this is certainly true concerning the issue of what kind of music is authorized by God for worship. Congregational singing is the only form of music which is authorized by the New Testament to be used in worship. Ephesians 5:19 says, “*Speaking to yourselves in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody in your heart to the Lord.*” Colossians 3:16 says, “*Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly in all wisdom; teaching and admonishing one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing with grace in your hearts to the Lord.*” Christians are to sing with the spirit and with the understanding (1 Cor 14:15). When the church came together, they each had a psalm (1 Cor 14:26), just as Ephesians 5:19 and Colossians 3:16 teaches. James 5:13 also authorizes the singing of psalms. In Acts 16:25, “Paul and Silas prayed, and sang praises unto God.” None of these passages mention any mechanical instruments of music. The silence of the New Testament *prohibits* their use (Heb 7:13-14). Yes, David had harps. Yes, there is a figurative mention of their use *in heaven* in Revelation. But, no, we may not use mechanical instruments of music in the church today with God’s approval.