

# MUSIC IN OLD TESTAMENT TIMES

## Overview

- I. Musical Instruments Mentioned in the Old Testament
- II. Recapturing the Sounds of Old Testament Music?

## Psalm 150

- <sup>1</sup> **Praise** the LORD.  
**Praise** God in his sanctuary;  
**praise** him in his mighty heavens.
- <sup>2</sup> **Praise** him for his acts of power;  
**praise** him for his surpassing greatness.
- <sup>3</sup> **Praise** him with the sounding of the trumpet,  
**praise** him with the harp and lyre,
- <sup>4</sup> **praise** him with tambourine and dancing,  
**praise** him with the strings and flute,
- <sup>5</sup> **praise** him with the clash of cymbals,  
**praise** him with resounding cymbals.
- <sup>6</sup> Let everything that has breath **praise** the LORD.  
**Praise** the LORD.

## I. Musical Instruments Mentioned in the Old Testament

### A. Horns and Trumpets

#### 1. **Ram's Horn** (*qěřěn häyôbēl*)

*Qěřěn* is the ordinary Hebrew term for “animal horn.” Its basic meaning may be seen, e.g., in Genesis 22:13 (of a ram) or Psalm 22:21 (of oxen). As a musical instrument it appears only in Joshua 6:5 as a synonym for *šôpār*, which appears in the same passage. The Aramaic form *qarnā* occurs in Dan 3:5, 7, etc.

“And when they make a long blast with the **ram's horn**, when you hear the sound of the trumpet, then all the people shall shout with a great shout, and the wall of the city will fall down flat, and the people shall go up, everyone straight before him.” (Josh 6:5)

#### 2. **Horn or Trumpet** (*šôpār*)

The *šôpār* is mentioned 74x, more than any other instrument in the Old Testament. It is made from the horn of a ram or goat. It is a solo instrument, capable of only two or three tones. It was used for celebrations, initiation of religious festivals, signals in war, etc. The *šôpār* could be embellished with carved ornamentations and inscriptions. Both modern and ancient translations fail to distinguish consistently between the animal horn and the metal trumpet (below).

“And when they make a long blast with the ram's horn, when you hear the sound of the **trumpet**, then all the people shall shout with a great shout, and the wall of the city will fall down flat, and the people shall go up, everyone straight before him.” (Josh 6:5)

### 3. **Trumpet** (*ḥāṣṣōṣerā*)

The *ḥāṣṣōṣerā* was a straight, approximately 18”-long instrument with a mouthpiece and broad conical or bell-shaped end. It seems to have possessed a fairly shrill, clarion tone, with a range probably limited to the first three or four harmonic overtones. Unlike the horn it was made of metal, usually bronze, but beaten silver in the case of the temple instruments. It was used primarily for joyous occasions, or for signaling in war or in marches.

“Make two **trumpets** of hammered silver, and use them for calling the community together and for having the camps set out. . . . Also at your times of rejoicing—your appointed feasts and New Moon festivals—you are to sound the **trumpets** over your burnt offerings and fellowship offerings, and they will be a memorial for you before your God. I am the LORD your God.” (Num 10:2-10)

## B. Strings

### 1. **Lyre** (*kinnôr*)

The *kinnôr* is a stringed instrument mentioned 42x in the Old Testament. It featured a quadrilateral framework consisting of a sound box and two uprights, often of unequal length, topped by a yoke or crosspiece. It had 7-10 strings, roughly the same length, which passed over a bridge and were attached either to the base of the sound box or to the bridge itself. It could be plucked with either a plectrum (like a pick) or by one’s fingers for a smoother sound, as David would have needed for soothing King Saul. (As seen in the Beni-Hasan tomb painting.)

“Give thanks to the Lord with the **lyre**; make melody to him with the harp of ten strings!” (Ps 33:2)

### 2. **Harp** (*nēḥēl*)

The *nēḥēl* is mentioned often throughout the Old Testament (e.g., Ps 33:2; 57:9; 71:22; 81:3; 92:4; 150:3). It is similar in function to the lyre, and was often used in times of celebration. It had more numerous and thicker strings than a lyre, and thus had a stronger, deeper tone, serving as a tenor or base instrument.

“David and the whole house of Israel were celebrating with all their might before the Lord, with [wooden clappers] and with **harps**, lyres, tambourines, sistrums and cymbals.” (2 Sam 6:5)

## C. Woodwinds

### 1. **Flute, or Oboe, or Clarinet, or Double Pipe** (*ḥālîl*)

The *ḥālîl* was a wind instrument of some sort. Braun leans toward an “oboe” or “double oboe,” but it could also mean wind instruments in general. It could be made of bronze, copper, bone, or reeds, and it was used during times of joy and celebration.

“And all the people went up after him, playing **flutes** and rejoicing greatly, so that the ground shook with the sound.” (1 Kings 1:40)

“And you will sing as on the night you celebrate a holy festival; your hearts will rejoice as when people go up with **flutes** to the mountain of the LORD, to the Rock of Israel.” (Isa 30:29)

## 2. **Long Flute** ( *ʿūgāb* )

The nature of the *ʿūgāb* is still unclear. It is mostly considered a type of pipe, perhaps a true end-blown flute, for which no other term is known. It occurs only four times in the Old Testament (Gen 4:21; Job 21:12; 30:31; Ps 150:4)

“. . . praise him with tambourine and dancing, praise him with the strings and **flute**.”  
(Ps 150:4)

## D. Percussion Instruments

### 1. **Wooden Clapper** ( *ʿēš berôš* )

The *ʿēš berôš* is one of the six instruments providing music for David and the people as they transported the ark to Jerusalem.

“David and the whole house of Israel were celebrating with all their might before the Lord, with **songs** [LXX, DSS = “all manner of cypress wood”] and with harps, lyres, tambourines, sistrums and cymbals.” (2 Sam 6:5)

### 2. **Rattles, or Sistrums** ( *menā ʿān ʿīm* )

The *menā ʿān ʿīm* apparently was a percussion instrument consisting of a handle and a U-shaped metal frame, made of brass or bronze. When shaken the small rings or loops of thin metal on its movable crossbars produce a sound that can range from a soft clank to a loud jangling. It is mentioned only in 2 Samuel 6:5, in connection with David’s transfer of the ark to Jerusalem.

“David and the whole house of Israel were celebrating with all their might before the Lord, with [wooden clappers] and with harps, lyres, tambourines, **sistrums** and cymbals.”  
(2 Sam 6:5)

### 3. **Cymbals** ( *mešiltāyim, šelāšālim* ).

Generally found in pairs, cymbals take the form of round flat plates, 4-6” in diameter (finger cymbals), with central bowl-like depressions. They were made of bronze (cf. 1 Chron 15:19; Josephus) and were fitted with finger rings. Larger, thicker cymbals have also been found. A terra-cotta female figurine from a Phoenician tomb shows them held horizontally, presumably played with an up-and-down motion. Mentioned a number of times in the Old Testament, usually in connection with celebrations.

“David and the whole house of Israel were celebrating with all their might before the Lord, with [wooden clappers] and with harps, lyres, tambourines, sistrums and **cymbals**.”  
(2 Sam 6:5)

### 4. **Bells** ( *pā ʿāmônē* )

These were golden bells or “metal jingles” to sound when the high priest walks in and out of the Holy Place.

“On its hem you shall make pomegranates of blue and purple and scarlet yarns, around its hem, with **bells** of gold between them, a golden **bell** and a pomegranate, a golden **bell** and a pomegranate, around the hem of the robe. And it shall be on Aaron when he ministers, and its sound shall be heard when he goes into the Holy Place before the Lord, and when he comes out, so that he does not die.” (Exod 28:33-35)

## 5. **Drum, or Tambourine, or Timbrel** (*tōp*)

The *tōp* is mentioned 16x in the Old Testament (e.g., Ps 68:25; 81:2; 150:4). It was much like our modern tambourine, except with no jingles attached to its side. It was used to accompany celebrations, dancing, processions, and hymns. They were often played by women.

“Your procession has come into view, O God . . . into the sanctuary. In front are the singers, after them the musicians; with them are the maidens playing **tambourines**.”  
(Ps 68:25)

### E. For Further Study

Braun, Joachim. *Music In Ancient Israel/Palestine: Archaeological, Written, and Comparative Sources*. Translated by Douglas W. Stott. The Bible in Its World. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002.

Kolyada, Yelena. *A Compendium of Musical Instruments and Instrumental Terminology in the Bible*. London: Equinox, 2009.

## II. **Recapturing the Sounds of Old Testament Music?**

### A. A Recent Proposal

The actual sound of biblical psalms is largely thought to have been lost to us in the modern era. In 1976, however, Suzanne Haïk-Vantoura proposed a mechanism by which the ancient melodies might be recovered. Haïk-Vantoura regarded the cantillation marks (*te' amim*) of the Masoretic Text (MT) primarily as musical cues, not merely as chanting or syntactical cues as many had assumed. By viewing the marks this way—as musical hand gestures representing notes (“cheironomy”)—she recovered what she thought was the intended music scale of the Bible, dating back to at least the Second Temple era.

Note: The MT of the Hebrew Bible was copied, edited, and distributed by a group of Jewish scribe-scholars known as the Masoretes between the 7<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup> centuries A.D. They compiled a system of pronunciation and grammatical guides in the form of diacritical marks on the external form of the Biblical text in an attempt to fix the pronunciation, paragraphing, verse divisions, and cantillation of the Hebrew Bible for the worldwide Jewish community. Their claim was that the MT is faithful to both the content and the “sound” of the Old Testament as it was read and heard in Ezra’s day.

E.g., the MT of Genesis 1:9a (“And God said, ‘Let the waters be gathered . . . .’”) looks like this:

וַיֹּאמֶר אֱלֹהִים יִקְוּ הַמַּיִם

- Black: Hebrew Consonants
- Red: Vowel Points and Other Pronunciation Marks Added by the Masoretes
- Blue: Cantillation Marks Added by the Masoretes

### Ezra 3:10

“And when the builders laid the foundation of the temple of the LORD, the priests in their vestments came forward with trumpets, and the Levites, the sons of Asaph, with cymbals, to praise the LORD, according to the **directions** (*yād*, lit., hand) of David king of Israel” (cf. 1 Chron 6:31; 2 Chron 23:18, etc. Was *yād* originally a reference to David’s cheironomy, which over time came to mean “musical directions” in general, or is *yād* to be understood here as a simple metonymy?)

## B. Assessment

There has been surprisingly little scholarly assessment of—and therefore agreement on—Haïk-Vantoura’s original proposal and its subsequent refinements. ISBE lists her 1976 book in the bibliography of its article on “Music” (*La Musique de la Bible Révélée*) but offers no evaluation.

### 1. **Original Proposal**

Suzanne Haïk-Vantoura, *The Music of the Bible Revealed: The Deciphering of a Millenary Notation*. Translated by Dennis Webber. Edited by John Wheeler. Berkeley: BIBAL Press; San Francisco: King David’s Harp, 1991.

### 2. **Affirmation**

Wheeler, John. “Music of the Temple.” *Bible and Spade* 2:1 (1989): 12-19.

Wheeler, John. “The Origin of the Music of the Temple.” *Bible and Spade* 2:4 (1989): 113-21.

### 3. **Critique**

Jeffery, Peter. “Review of *The Music of the Bible Revealed* by Suzanne Haïk-Vantoura.” *Biblical Archaeology Review* 18:4 (1992): 6.

### 4. **Rejoinder**

Wheeler, John. “A Rejoinder to a *BAR* Article on Music of the Temple.” *Bible and Spade* 6:1 (1993): 25-26.

### 5. **Reaffirmation**

Wheeler, John H. “The Hebrew Old Testament as a Vocal Score.” *Hymn* 44:3 (1993): 10-15.

### 6. **Wheeler’s Assessment of the Discussion**

“[Haïk-Vantoura’s] work, by its very implications, was destined to draw the fire of critics (among whom are Masoretic scholar Gerard Well of France and famed Jewish musicologists Israel Adler and Eric Werner). Yet despite such criticism, no one has ever refuted her methods or conclusions—let alone offered an alternative explanation capable of accounting for *every feature* of the notation (which, we should note, neither the Masoretes nor their successors to this day have been able to do). A number of prominent musicologists, rabbinical authorities (including several Chief Rabbis of France), musicians, and composers have ardently backed her methods and conclusions. Despite opposition, *The Music of the Bible Revealed* has received generally positive and sometimes unqualified acclaim in Europe and Israel.” (John Wheeler)

## C. Haïk-Vantoura’s Reconstruction of Ancient Hebrew Music

An audiovisual summary of Haïk-Vantoura’s theory, along with the performance of several biblical songs and their translations, can be found here:

- URL: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WRJ0osUNqBY>

Other resources can be found online. Do remember, however, that the theory is disputed.