

*March 8, 2015*

# What About Instruments in the Old Testament?

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As most people already know, I take the presently unpopular position that mechanical instruments have no place in Christian worship. However, every time I write on this subject someone inevitably asks, “What about the instruments in the Old Testament?” That is a great question. As the argument goes: If God authorized instruments under the Old Law, then without some kind of New Testament prohibition against them, why would anyone teach they are not allowed today? I believe if the average person understood the context in which instruments were authorized in the Old Testament, they would understand why they have no place in the church.

## **1. God Authorized Instruments**

There are a few isolated instances of instrument playing about which we are not told if God approved (ex. 2 Samuel 6:5-8). But there are some who claim God only tolerated – and never authorized – instruments in the temple worship. They claim David alone was responsible for their introduction. Yes, the instruments of the temple were often called “the instruments of David,” but it is specifically stated that David had God’s authorization to implement the instruments in the temple worship:

“And [Hezekiah] stationed the Levites in the house of the Lord with cymbals, harps, and lyres, according to the commandment of David and of Gad the king’s seer and of Nathan the prophet, for the commandment was **from the Lord** through his prophets” (2 Chronicles 29:25).

As you can see, it is made pretty clear that “the commandment was from the Lord.”

## **2. God Authorized Specific Instruments**

We often make blanket statements like, “God approved of instruments in the Old Testament.” It would actually be more accurate to say God approved of *certain* instruments in the Old Testament. The commandment “from the Lord through his prophets” was that specific instruments be played in the temple worship. Whenever reformers, like King Hezekiah, restored temple worship to its intended state, they would go back to the “commandment” God gave David through the prophets.

Undoubtedly, there were other instruments in existence that could have been added to the worship, but they did not presume to add to the Lord’s command. To bring in an instrument that had not been commanded would have been sinful. It would have been like the “unauthorized fire” offered by Nadab and Abihu, for which they “died before the Lord” (Numbers 3:4).

## **3. God Authorized Specific Musicians**

Again, when people speak of Old Testament worship with instruments they seem to imply that anyone could have played an instrument to the Lord in worship. However, the truth is that only the Levites were authorized to be stationed in the house of the Lord with cymbals, harps, lyre, and trumpets.

People from other tribes – regardless of their musical ability or desire – were not authorized to play with the Levitical musicians. For someone else to have been so presumptuous would have been similar

to King Uzziah's burning of incense in the temple, for which he was struck with leprosy (2 Chronicles 26:16-23).

#### **4. God Rebuked Unauthorized Music**

Amos, the shepherd turned prophet, was sent to the Northern Kingdom of Israel to rebuke and admonish them. Israel, in order to keep people from traveling to Jerusalem in Judah, built their own temples in Israel. These temples were not authorized places of worship and their priests were not Levites. Their lives and their worship were extremely paganistic. And although they still attempted to worship Jehovah God, they did so in an unauthorized fashion.

Amos was sent to tell them God was not pleased:

“Even though you offer me your burnt offerings and grain offerings, I will not accept them; and the peace offerings of your fattened animals, I will not look upon them. Take away from me the noise of your songs; **to the melody of your harps I will not listen**” (Amos 5:22-23).

“Woe to those who lie on beds of ivory and stretch themselves out on their couches, and eat lambs from the flock and calves from the midst of the stall, who sing idle songs to the sound of the harp and **like David invent for themselves instruments of music**” (Amos 6:4-5).

As we've already seen, David had been authorized to appoint Levites to play harps. However, Israel was not authorized to do what they were doing. As the New Living Translation puts it, these musicians of Israel “fancied themselves” to be like David. They were presumptuous enough to believe they could do whatever they wanted in worship and God would be pleased.

#### **5. God Replaced the Physical with the Spiritual**

As you can see, God authorized only the Levites to worship with certain instruments and only in the temple worship. And surely we know that the temple and its worship were “a shadow of the good things to come” (Hebrews 10:1). In Christ, we are the temple (1 Corinthians 3:16), we are all priests (1 Peter 2:5), and we offer up – not the sound of clanging symbols or lifeless strings but – “a sacrifice of praise to God, that is, the fruit of lips that acknowledge his name” (Hebrews 13:15). Our hearts are the instruments we play (Ephesians 5:19).

God does not have to specifically *prohibit* the use of instruments in the church today anymore than He has to prohibit the burning of incense, the priestly robes, or any of the other parts of the temple worship. We understand that these things have passed away. A great number of notable theologians over the centuries have understood this and have opposed the use of mechanical instruments.

I believe John Calvin said it well,

Musical instruments in celebrating the praises of God would be no more suitable than the burning of incense, the lighting of lamps, and the restoration of the other shadows of the law. The Papists therefore, have foolishly borrowed, this, as well as many other things, from the Jews. Men who are fond of outward pomp may delight in that noise; but the simplicity which God recommends to us by the apostles is far more pleasing to him” (John Calvin, Commentary on Psalm 33).

I love you and God loves you.