



— Hebrew Scriptures

Music in the Bible

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The Bible does not provide us with a treatise or a chapter on music. In order to gain insight into the biblical view of music, we must glean information along the way, as we encounter various events and happenings in the life of Israel. Music in the Bible always accompanies an event. It is not seen as an occupation to be pursued per se—art for the sake of art—for the sheer enjoyment of itself, but it is rather functional. As music is always an expression of a culture, we will find that the development of music in the Bible will reflect the various stages of the development of the people of Israel.

Music for Man

Music played a prominent part in the life of the Israelites and accompanied them in manifold venues. As early as Genesis 4:21, we find out that the father of musical instruments was Jubal the son of Lamech,¹ seven generations after Adam. He invented the lyre (*kinnor*) and the flute (*ugav*). Already

the name of Jubal (*yuvah* = ram's horn) carries in itself a reference to one of the most prominent instruments in Israel, namely, the *shofar* (ram's horn). Jubal had a brother, Tubal-Cain, who is known to us as the one who manufactured tools out of bronze and iron. It has been generally assumed that he probably also tried his hand at the first brass instruments, such as the trumpet. As we pursue the reading of the book of Genesis, chapter 31:27 relates the story of Jacob's flight from Laban, and introduces an additional instrument, the tambourine (*tof*). At the same time, the first social setting of music-making is intro-

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duced to us: it was customary to send people on their way by celebrating with music-making and rejoicing.

The instruments encountered so far (with the exception of the trumpet) were typical of

a nomadic context. They were small and portable, and made out of materials easily found in the geographical and economic settings of nomadism: reeds, animal skins, wood, tortoise shells, etc. They were either played as solo instruments or used to accompany singing.

During the patriarchal period, musical instruments were also an important means of communication. Exclamations or acclamations were used to signal or celebrate, e.g., the discovery of a well (Num 21:17-18), or to mark allegiance to a tribe, chief, or banner (Exod 17:15; Judg 7:18). Later in the history of Israel, during their sojourn in the wilderness, signals by the long silver trumpets (*hatsotserah*) made from the precious metal brought from Egypt (Exod 12:35, 36) and manufactured according to God's instructions (Num 10:2), will communicate the various camp activities, such as gathering, setting out, assembly, war, and feasts and celebrations (Num 10:3-10). As a perpetual law, only the priests were allowed to

play the trumpets (Num 10:8). In a similar manner, the use of the ram's horn was also limited to specific roles, such as signaling war or cultic events. The *shofar* occupies a special place among the instruments of Israel. Surrounded with religious and spiritual symbolism, the history of its use is traced back by tradition to the sacrifice of Isaac. The first reference made by the Scriptures (Exod 19:19) connects the *shofar* with the event of the giving of the Law at Mount Sinai. Both kinds of trumpets (*shofar* and *hatsotserah*) would become for the prophets, as well as the New Testament church, symbols of the Day of the Lord (Isa 58:1; Jer 4:5; Ezek 33:3-4; Hos 5:8; Joel 2:1; Amos 2:2; Zech 9:14; see also Rev 8 & 9; 1 Cor 15:52) and were often associated with the voice of the Lord Himself (1 Thess 4:16; Rev 1:10).

Beyond signals and acclamations, the Bible also mentions songs of triumph (Exod 15:21) or vengeance and lamentation (Gen 4:23-24), to accompany warfare and victory. The book of Numbers (21:14) even makes reference to a collection of epic songs, the "Book of the Wars of the Lord" that recounts the victories of the Lord over Israel's enemies.

Welcoming heroes was celebrated by singing, playing the tambourine, and dancing. Repeatedly, we encounter scenes in the Bible where a group of women or young girls acknowledge victory or victors in this way: Miriam and the Israelite women after the crossing of the Red Sea (Exod 15);

Jephtah's daughter welcoming her father after his victory over the Philistines (Judg 11:34); the young women celebrating David's victory over Goliath (1 Sam 18:6), etc.

Music-making in the Bible

The essential focus of music-making centers around God: it becomes music for adoration.

is also associated with healing and inspiration. David played the harp before Saul to soothe his agitated spirit (1 Sam 16:23) and the prophet Elisha asked to play before him to bring about inspiration (2 Kgs 3:15). During the time of the *nevi'im* (tenth century B.C.E.), we see bands of prophets roaming through the country playing instruments, singing, dancing, and prophesying (1 Sam 10:5).

As in all ancient cultures, music also played an important role in everyday work. Several passages mention how music-making accompanied the work of the harvesters (Isa 16:10, etc.). Instrumental music and

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song were also an integral part of those festivities often denounced by the prophets (Isa 5:12; Amos 5:23; 6:5).

Music was given by God Himself to fulfill an educational purpose. In Deut 31:19-22, the Lord gives Moses the command to write down a song

and teach it to the children of Israel, for the explicit purpose of Israel's remembering through that song what God had done for them. This is a very good illustration of the use of singing for the purpose of memorizing and recollecting, a practice still in use today in Jewish schools and yeshivahs. It illustrates an awareness of the power of music to intensify an experience and drive it deep into the heart. This event also indicates that, in the mind of the biblical writer, God Himself is at the origins of music and the use of music. But we also learn that He bestows the task of transmitting this gift to individuals who are able to put it to good use. God instructs Moses to write this down. And indeed, to this day, Moses is considered in Muslim tradition as the patron of the flute players, an indication how much he must have been revered for his musical skills. It happens that the education he had received at the Pharaonic court included instruction in cultic matters which gave him the necessary skills in compositional techniques and the various genres of music.

The Sound of Music

We might ask ourselves what this music must have sounded like and whether we have any clues as to how it was composed, performed, and transmitted. There are, indeed, indicators that the scale used by the ancient Israelites was our modern diatonic scale made up of seven pitches (the heptachord), rather than the pentatonic scale prominent today in

the Middle East. Evidence for this has come to light by way of ancient Ugaritic tablets that contain treatises which explain the way harps were being tuned in those times.² This is corroborated by the mention, in some of the Psalm superscripts, of “playing in octaves” (*al-hasseminit*, Ps 6:1, Heb.; Eng., in superscript). The way the music sounded would probably not have been strange to our ears.

The compositional process in biblical times was similar to what we still find today in Middle Eastern or oriental regions, namely, based on the principle of centonization and improvisation. These techniques consist in a set repertory of short melodic formulas like the Arabic *maqam* or the Indian *ragas*, which are then combined, through improvisation and according to strict and complex artistic rules, into a musical composition. We find an indicator of this procedure in a number of songs in the Scriptures that appear clearly to be put together, in the manner of a mosaic, from several earlier passages, as for instance in David’s prayer of dedication as

which consists in using hand signals to indicate mainly the contour of the melody.³ Such a technique was very prominent in all of the Ancient Near East



and had also been in use in the Western world into the Middle Ages, especially in the context of plainchant. During the tenth century C.E., at about the same time Western notation was starting to appear, this method of oral transmission was progressively replaced by written accent signs added above the Hebrew text by the Masoretes. A small number of accents, however, can be traced back to as early as the time of Ezra. A scriptural

tive acclamations where groups of people shout their allegiance by uttering short expressions such as “For the Lord and for Gideon” (Judg 7:20). Later in the history of Israel, as a written body of literature and songs emerges, the singing was done in several ways, mainly dictated by the poetic form of the texts. The literary parallelism prominent in the Psalms suggests antiphonal performance wherein two groups of singers respond to each other in alternating fashion. This was a characteristic performance practice in the Ancient Near East, since we find the same genre mentioned for the singing around the golden calf, following the Egyptian custom (Exod 32:18). Responsorial singing is also attested in the Psalms. Here, a leader sings the main part of the song, and groups of people respond with short responses, such as Hallelujah, Amen (Pss 146-150), or as in Psalm 136, with a whole refrain: “His love endures forever” (see also Pss 42:5, 11; 43:5; compare 46:7, 11; 57:5, 11; 67:3, 5; 107:8, 15, 21, 31). Singing was accompanied most of the time by the sound of instruments, particularly harps and lyres that are characterized by their subdued and intimate sound. In more informal settings, such as processions, the moment would be heightened by the addition of tambourines and dancing.

The examples of music-making that we have encountered so far demonstrate different ways music was used for the enjoyment of men and women. But the Scriptures indicate that music was to play an even more

Music is a God-centered activity.

the ark was set inside the tent at Jerusalem (1 Chr 16:8-36). This prayer is a composite of Psalms 105 (verses 1-15), 96 (verses 2-13), and 106 (verses 1, 47, and 48). This way of composing represents a very high art that requires years of apprenticeship and training. The music was then transmitted to singers and instrumentalists by means of a technique called chironomy

indication of this technique can be found in the expression *al yad David* (1 Chr 25:6) which means literally “at the hand of David” and is generally translated as “under the supervision of the king” (NIV).

The biblical text presents us with several different genres of music and music-making. In the earlier stages of the history of Israel, we find many collec-

important role in the life of the Israelites. As we look at the biblical account of music, we notice that the most lavish and most elaborate musical events are done in His honor. The essential focus of music-making centers around God: it becomes music for adoration.

Music for God

As Israel changes into a sedentary nation, institutions start developing, the most important among them the establishment of a permanent sanctuary. At about the same time, a body of poetic and musical liturgical materials is being put together, an activity that would, ultimately, bring about a full-fledged academy of music.

The creation of this body of liturgical literature had already started before the building of the temple, and was partly in place at the time the ark was brought to Jerusalem (1 Chr 15). Textual evidence points to the fact that these songs were a product of the schools of the prophets. In 1 Chr 15:17, 19 and 16:4-6, 41, 42, we learn that the three head musicians, Asaph, Heman, and Jeduthun (Ethan) are appointed by David for the service of music. As we encounter them again, and their sons, on the occasion of the dedication of Solomon's temple (2 Chr 5:12, 13), their tasks are introduced in terms of "ministry of prophesying accompanied by harps, lyres and cymbals" (1 Chr 25:1). In doing so, the text makes direct reference to the schools of the prophets that were started by Samuel. As a matter of fact, we read in 1 Sam 10:5

that it was customary for those students to gather in "a procession of prophets coming down from the high place with lyres, tambourines, flutes (*halil*), and harps being played before them,

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and they will be prophesying." First Chronicles 25 thus creates a bridge between the musical and liturgical activities that were part of the schools of the prophets, and the musical service in the temple. It appears, then, that the great musician leaders of the temple, David, Asaph, Heman, Ethan, had been trained in the art of poetry and music during their studies at the schools of the prophets. And, indeed, it is their names that we encounter in the titles of the Psalms as the main authors of the Psalms.

Music in the temple was not left to chance happening. The solemnity of the place and the occasions is reflected in the care and attention that was given to the organization of music in the temple of Jerusalem.

Several passages in 1 Chronicles indeed draw an impressive picture of this organization. 4000 individuals were part of this academy (23:5), 288 of whom were professionals (25:7) taking turns in the temple service. We hear about "young and old, teacher as well as student, all of them trained and skilled in music for the Lord." The musicians were grouped into several guilds, according to

their specialty: "saph was named the chief musician; Heman was in charge of the trumpet players (16:42); and Jeduthun (Ethan) was head of the harp and lyre players (25:3); Kenaniah was supervising the singers (15:22). All three leaders used cymbals to signal various activities or changes in activity, and were "under the supervision of the king" David (25:6), who had distinguished himself as composer, author, performer, and instrument builder. According to the Talmud, the training took place until the musicians reached the age of 25 or 30; then they were professionally active until the age of 50. Other duties included the building and maintenance of the instruments. Specific chambers in the temple accommodated the instruments and the garments,⁴ and served also as lodging for those Levite musicians who "were responsible for the work day and night" (9:33). Their duty consisted in "ministering regularly," first at the ark, then at the altar, "according to each day's requirements" (16:37). The main purpose for temple musicians, then, was to sing Psalms to accompany the daily sacrifices, and to produce music for the other special days and festivals.

As one thinks about it, the idea of accompanying the act of a sacrifice by music can strike one as quite unusual and incongruous. The sacrifice in itself is an act of violence and death bringing about a visually and emotionally difficult experience. And yet, God does not hesitate to add an element of beauty and emotion which transforms and

transcends the originally painful experience. As the sacrifice is performed and the Levites sing about the love, mercy, and faithfulness of God, the music intensifies the experience and drives the understanding deep into the heart of the Israelites. A similar situation can be observed as God decides to teach Israel the law through song and instrumental music (Deut 31:19-32:1-47). While for us the law comes across as something dry and technical, God in His wisdom and love draped it in the beauty of song and provided Israel with an affective means to love and remember it (cf. Psalm 19:7-10). It appears as though the “objective” character of the sacrifices or the law needed to be combined with the affective and subjective character of the human experience in order to create a holistic experience. The Psalms themselves are a good illustration of this combination: as they speak of creation, history, law, prophecy, judgment, etc., they do so in subjective terms of poetry and emotions.

This element of beauty was also present in out-of-doors events. As the ark was brought to Jerusalem, it was with a grandiose procession including singers, followed by the instrumentalists playing their harps and lyres, by trumpet players, and accompanied by the sound of cymbals and the ram’s horn.⁵ Dressed in fine linen, they sang joyful songs to the sound of musical instruments (1 Chr 15:16, 28) and were accompanied by shouts and acclamations of the people. Later, at the dedication of Solomon’s temple, the celebration again

includes scores of musicians (2 Chr 5:12-13; 7:2-6): “All the Levites who were musicians . . . , playing cymbals, harps and lyres . . . were accompanied by 120 priests sounding trumpets. The trumpeters and singers joined in unison, as with one voice” (2 Chr 5:12-13) sounding Psalm 136, “He is good; His love endures forever.” The festivities were to last two full weeks. A similar celebration, as spectacular as the previous ones, will take place later again, at the return from exile, to “celebrate joyful-

We find many parallel and similar patterns in the musical practices in the temple and in the contemporary practices in surrounding cultures.

ly” the dedication of the newly built wall of Jerusalem (Neh 12:27). Two large choirs were to proceed on top of the wall, in opposite directions. The first choir was led by Ezra followed by the leaders of Judah; then came the priests with trumpets and the instrumental musicians. The second choir was followed by Nehemiah and half of the people. As the two choirs met at the Gate of the Guard, they joined their voices in thanksgiving to the Lord (Neh 12:27-40).

The mere fact of how sacred music was organized in ancient Israel already yields an impressive picture. It is clear from these illustrations that music played a leading role in these

great national celebrations and was not considered merely as an accessory to adoration. But as we turn our attention to the motivation of the performers and the philosophy that lay behind their music-making, we find ourselves at the heart of biblical music.

The purpose of these splendid manifestations was not to convey a worldly picture of wealth and power. On the contrary, they grew out of a desire to honor and acknowledge God’s greatness and supremacy. As we take a closer look at the motivations that accompanied the preparation and performance of the temple service, we come across meaningful insights as to the purpose of music-making in the Bible.

The most striking and central idea is that music is a God-centered activity. This becomes clear not only by looking at specific expressions from the Psalms which are at the core of liturgical literature, but also from performance practices in the Temple itself.

Time and again, the Psalms put the accent on the fact that music is not performed for the pleasure and entertainment of the musician or the audience, but rather as an homage directed toward God. The *raison d’être* of the musician in the Bible is to speak *about* God and to make music *toward* God: “I will praise you, O Lord, with all my heart; I will tell of all Your wonders. I will be glad and rejoice in You; I will sing praise to Your name, O Most High” (Pss 9:1-2; 27:6; 30:4; 81:1; 98:1; 105:1-3; etc.). Music-making here is theocentric, doxological, entirely focused

on God. The same principle can be verified in the book of Revelation where the creatures circle around God's throne to worship Him and sing to Him: "Then I looked and heard the voice of many angels, numbering thousands upon thousands, and ten thousand times then thousand. They encircled the throne and the living creatures and the elder. In a loud voice they sang: Worthy is the Lamb" (Rev 5:11-12; cf. 7:9-10; etc.).

This focus on God as the Receiver of music was expressed by the Temple musicians even in the way the musicians were placed. The Bible and the Talmud give us a detailed description of how the musicians performed as they ministered at the altar. While, today, the musicians often face the congregation in a gesture as if they were playing and singing to them, at the time of the Temple the musicians were turned away from the congregation, facing each other from both sides of the altar: the Levites with the harps and lyres stood on the east side of the altar (2 Chr 5:12), and the priests with their trumpets faced them from the other side of the altar. As the sacrifices were performed, they sounded their music towards the offering, thus giving glory and honor exclusively to God.⁶

But the biblical musician is not satisfied with simply directing his music toward God. He also wants to make sure that his music *pleases* God: "May the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be pleasing in Your sight, O Lord, my Rock and my Redeemer"

(Ps 19:14; see also Ps 104:33-34; and Rom 12:1 in the New Testament). What we see happening here is not a concern to



please or entertain the audience or oneself, but rather an intentional effort to produce music that is worthy of the One to whom it is addressed.

This concern can be verified

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in a number of attributes that characterize music-making in the Bible. The choice of the temple musicians, the Levites, already indicates the importance of the function. It was because the Levites had distinguished themselves by their faithfulness at the time of the adoration of the golden calf at Mount Sinai, that they had been set apart for various services of the temple, including music (Exod 32:29).

Making music to the Lord required skillfulness (Ps 33:3); the leaders of the different musical ensembles of the temple were chosen on the basis of their knowledge of the art: "Kenaniah the head Levite was in charge of

the singing; that was his responsibility because he was skillful at it" (1 Chr 15:22). As we go back to the time of the building of the tabernacle, we notice that this qualification was a condition for any artisan of the tabernacle. Not only were they filled with the Spirit of God, they also were "filled . . . with skill, ability and knowledge" (Exod 35:31). It is interesting to notice that this passage (Exod 35:31-36:2) which speaks about Bezalel and Oholiab, the head artisans/artists at the tabernacle, uses the word "skill" five times as if to underline that, when we deal with matters that pertain to the house of God, in addition to the Spirit there also needs to be ability, skill, and knowledge.

In a similar way, the head musicians of the temple were in charge of teaching others in the art of music. In doing so,

they demonstrated their concern for quality and things well done. Talent alone was not sufficient; it needed to be developed, sharpened, and brought to artistic maturity. First Chronicles 25:6, 7 speaks about the leaders who were under the "instruction" (*al yad*) of David, "all of them trained and skilled in music for the Lord." Music for the Lord, in order to please the Lord, had to be prepared and performed in such a way that it would be "worthy" of Him.

It appears that the Bible does not present us with a list of music that would be either "good" or "bad." Also, we can see the same instruments (harps and

lyres, e.g.) being used for sacred purposes as well as for occasions that were reproved by the prophets. Indeed, the text rather dwells on matters of direction and purpose in music-making, associating it with the beautiful, and giving us clear instructions on how to use it. Once this point is made, and we understand the biblical model of music as being performed *for* God and pleasing to *God*, the question of “good” or “bad” music becomes obsolete. The *why* takes care of the *what* and *how*. The same will happen on the level of our quest with regard to styles. Is there any evidence that there was a particular style used for temple music, untouched by the surrounding cultures? Was there only one single style of music that was presented as proper for the temple service?

As we observe the musical practices in the temple and compare them to contemporary practices in surrounding cultures, we find many parallel and similar patterns. We noticed earlier the absence of tambourines in the Jewish temple, but, on the contrary, the prominence of the place of lyres and harps. These two instruments, indeed, were also present in the pagan temples of the same period, while tambourines were also absent from these pagan places of worship. This seems to indicate that there were generally accepted standards for liturgical instrumentation for a whole region and/or time period. Another parallel between liturgical practices can be found in the use of cymbals for signaling musical events, by both the Jewish tem-

ple musicians⁷ and Canaanite cultic musicians. This case, in fact, illustrates a key principle in the Bible that one should never lose sight of. In order to avoid the danger of syncretism, existing concepts or symbols often underwent transformation and reinterpretation of meaning. In our case it is noticeable that the term *tseltselim*, used to designate the cymbals in earlier texts

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(2 Sam 6:5), was traditionally associated with the pagan orgiastic Canaanite cult. In later texts (1 Chr 13:8) these cymbals are designated by a different word, *metsiltayim*, probably to avoid any connotation with pagan practices.⁸ What we learn from this, then, is the concern of the biblical writer to keep a liturgical situation clear of any ambiguity. While we do notice the use of similar instruments and musical practices in both pagan and Israelite worship, care is taken to change the meaning and symbolism of a given instrument or practice when the context changes and when there is a danger of syncretism or ambiguity of meaning. While Israel uses the cultural patterns of the surrounding nations, it may reinterpret the meaning of certain elements of it, steeped in the concern of appropriate music-making.

Music in the Bible was not a static phenomenon. We do

observe changes that happened through time. For instance, the instruments of the first temple are listed as the lyre, harp, cymbal, and trumpet. Documents describing the second temple service, however, mention also the flute and the tambourine among its instruments. In a similar fashion, as we move to the New Testament and observe the musical practices of the apostolic church, we notice that in addition to the “old” genres of music, the Psalms and Canticles, a “new” genre was also introduced, namely, the hymn (see Eph 5:19). What we observe here is a very normal phenomenon that can be verified time and again in the history of sacred music: a new experience calls for a new expression.⁹ In this case, the new experience was brought about by the person and ministry of Christ. Indeed, in his message to the Emperor Trajan (around 111 C.E.), the historian Pliny the Younger directly associates hymn-singing with Christ: “They usually met before light on an appointed day to utter in turn songs to Christ as to a god.”¹⁰

The “sound of sacred music” in the Bible comes definitely with the connotation of being set apart. This can be seen in the choice of the musicians, the way the music was performed, or the absence of certain instruments from the Temple service. All these facts convey the idea that there was a selective process at work. It also transpires through the way the liturgical texts were delivered, namely, by chanting rather than just being spoken, a common practice of the ancient

world. A “special” language was needed to transcend the ordinary.

Music in the Bible certainly was perceived as a gift received from God that was to be returned to Him with awe, that is, performed with awe and respect, as an offering pleasing to God. It was not art for art’s sake, but art for God. To the biblical musician, the highest attainment of his/her art consisted in singing and playing to the Lord as an offering of oneself, acceptable to Him. Psalm 137, which relates the story of the Hebrew musicians taken into exile, illustrates this attitude in a very vivid manner and at the same time summarizes the biblical view of music: “By the rivers of Babylon we sat and wept when we remembered Zion. There on the poplars we hung our harps, for there our captor asked us for songs. . . . How can we sing the songs of the Lord while in a foreign land? If I forget you, O Jerusalem, may my right hand forget its skill. May my tongue

cling to the roof of my mouth if I do not remember you, if I do not consider Jerusalem my highest joy” (Ps 137:1-6).

¹See Flavius Josephus, *Antiquities* 1.2.2.

²See Anne Draffkorn Kilmer, “The Cult Song with Music from Ancient Ugarit: Another Interpretation,” *Reallexikon der Assyriologie* 68 (1974): 69-82.

³See *b. Talmud* Ber. 62a.

⁴See *b. Talmud* Middoth, ch. 11, Mishnah 6.

⁵Out-of-doors events also include the tambourine (1 Chr 13:8) which is never encountered within the Temple.

⁶There were, though, also moments where the musicians would face the congregation, e.g., at the occasion of the Feast of the Tabernacles, which was conducted within the women’s court of the Temple and consisted in great rejoicing by the people in general. At that occasion, the Levite singers would stand on top of the great stairs that led into the women’s court and move down a step each time they sang one of the 15 “songs of ascent” (Pss 120-134); cf. *Mishna Sukà* 5:4.

⁷The cymbals were considered ceremonial cultic instruments and

only male Levites would use them (1 Chr 16:5; 15:19, 28; 16:42; 2 Chr 5:12, 13; 29:25; Ezra 3:10). Compare Joachim Braun, *Music in Ancient Israel/Palestine: Archaeological, Written, and Comparative Sources*, transl. by Douglas W. Stott (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002), p. 20.

⁸See Braun, p. 107.

⁹See, e.g., the renewal of music by Luther, John Wesley, William Booth, etc., each one accompanied by a new repertoire and new styles of music.

¹⁰*Letters, Book 10, No. 96*, quoted in David W. Music, *Hymnology: A Collection of Source Readings*, Studies in Liturgical Musicology, no. 4 (Lanham: Scarecrow, 1996), p. 4.

Talmudic Wisdom

Rabbi Judah said: “In our days the harp had seven strings, as the Psalmist wrote: ‘By seven daily did I praise Thee.’ In the days of the Messiah the harp will have eight, as it is said: ‘On the eighth’ (Psalm 6:1). In the World-to-Come the harp will have ten strings, as it is written: ‘With the harp of ten strings sing unto Him’ (Psalm 33:2).”

(Pesikta Rabbati, 21.I)