

References to O-R-G-A-N in the Bible

Depending on which English translation of the Bible is being read, one might find references to organs in the Old Testament. However, do not jump up and down with excitement thinking, “Wow! There were organs in Old Testament times!” This was *not* the case. Let’s find out how these Old Testament references came to be.

Earliest English translations of the Old Testament

1382 Early Version of the Wycliffe Bible

John Wycliffe and John Purvey hand-printed translation

1395 Later Version of the Wycliffe Bible

After John Wycliffe’s death in 1384, John Purvey revised and released another hand-printed version of the earlier translation.

1539 The Great Bible

Authorized by King Henry VIII of England

1568 The Bishops’ Bible

1557/76 The Geneva Bible

1611 King James Bible

Almost 100 years after the outbreak of the Protestant movement, another English translation was undertaken in the Anglican Church during the reign of King James I, commonly called King James Bible.

Here is how these earliest English translations of the Old Testament translated the following passages:

Genesis 4:21

And the name of his brother was Jubal; he was the father of the singers in harp and organ. (John Wycliffe)

His brother’s name was Thubal, which was the father of such as handle harpe & organe. (The Great Bible)

His brother’s name was Jubal, which was the father of such as handl Harpe and Organ. (The Bishops’ Bible)

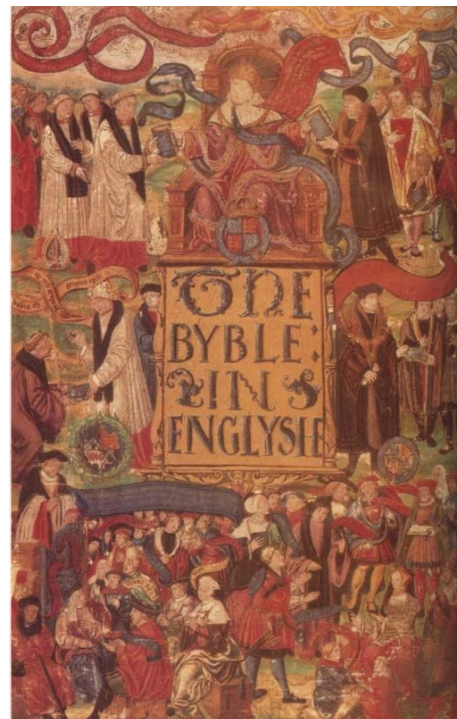
And his brother’s name was Jubal, who was the father of all that play on the harp and [a]organs. (Geneva Bible)

And his brother’s name was Jubal: he was the father of all such as handle the harp and organ. (King James Bible)

Job 21:12



The Bishops’ Bible 1568



The Great Bible 1539

They hold the tympan, and (the) harp; and they (dance with) joy at the sound of the organ. (John Wycliffe)
They beare with them tabrets and harpes, and rejoyce in the sounde of the organs. (The Bishops' Bible)
They take the tambourine and harp, and rejoyce in the sound of the organs. (The Geneva Bible)
They take the timbrel and harp, and rejoyce at the sound of the organ. (King James Bible)

[Job 30:31](#)

Mine harp is turned into mourning, and mine organ into the voice of weepers. (John Wycliffe)
My harp is tuned for mourning, and my organ to the voice of those who weep. (John Purvey)
My harpe is turned to mourning, and my organs into the voice of them that weepe. (The Bishops' Bible)
Therefore mine harp is turned to mourning, and mine organs into the voice of them that weep. (Geneva Bible)
My harp also is turned to mourning, and my organ into the voice of them that weep. (King James Bible)

[Psalm 150:4](#)

Praise ye him in a tympan and quire; praise ye him in strings and organ. (James Wycliffe)
Praise ye him with a tympan, or a drum, and a dance/Praise ye him with a tambourine, and dancing;
Praise ye him with strings and organ. (John Purvey)
Prayse ye hym with a tabret and a daunce: prayse ye him vpon the stringes and vpon the Organes.
(The Bishops' Bible)
Praise ye him with timbrel and flute: praise ye him with virginals and organs. (The Geneva Bible)
Praise him with the timbrel and dance: praise him with stringed instruments and organs. (King James Bible)

Here's the Problem

The earliest English translations of the Old Testament were translated from Latin and Greek translations of the Old Testament, NOT the original language of the old Testament — Hebrew. The earliest English translations were translations of a translation — not ideal.

In the Latin and Greek translations, one finds the Greek word *οργανον*, or in the Latin translations *organum*, neither term having anything to do with pipe organs.

As we mentioned earlier, exactly when the word *οργανον* came to take on a more specific connotation with the musical instrument we know as the organ, is difficult to know. However, scholars commonly agree this transition would have taken place by 10th-13th centuries. So, by the time 14th-17th century English translators were translating the Bible into English, they would have been familiar with the pipe organ—they were in churches all over Europe. It appears the earliest Old Testament translators were a little too quick to read something into the meaning of the word *οργανον* that was not there. It cannot be shown that the Hebrews nor any of the ancient nations in Old Testament times had an instrument that corresponded with the organ as we now use the term. Thus, a bit of European culture leaked into the thinking of the translators.

Subsequent English translations used the original Hebrew instead of translating from translations, and the results are more accurate. Following are the same passages from the New Revised Standard Version (1989):

Genesis 4:21

His brother's name was Jubal; he was the ancestor of all those who play the lyre and *pipe*.

Job 21:12

They sing to the tambourine and the lyre, and rejoice to the sound of the *pipe*.

Job 30:31

My lyre is turned to mourning, and my *pipe* to the voice of those who weep.

Psalms 150:4

Praise him with tambourine and dance; praise him with strings and *pipe*!

