

THE MUSICAL TITLES OF THE PSALMS.

BY REV. LLEWELLYN L. HENSON, D. D.

A most remarkable book, "The Titles of the Psalms," by James William Thirtle, LL. D., of London, has recently reached its second edition. In this book, the author stoutly maintains that he has found the long-lost key to an understanding of these hitherto mysterious titles.

Some of the psalms have no titles at all, as 1 and 2. There are, to be sure, in connection with all the psalms in the American Revision, certain explanatory editorial notes, such as are placed elsewhere at the top of the page, and similar notes are found in the Authorized Version. But the English Revised Version prefixes nothing whatsoever to the thirty-four psalms which have no inscriptions in the Hebrew text.

Others, however, and by far the greater number, do have titles. Sometimes it is a mere note of authorship as "A Psalm of David," "A Psalm of Solomon," "A Psalm of Asaph," etc. Sometimes the historical setting is also given as "When Saul sent and they watched the house to kill him," Ps. 59; again a word may indicate the literary character of the psalm as the word "Song" at the beginning of 46, or "Prayer" prefixed to 86, or "Michtam" which precedes 56 and which means a private prayer; and yet again there often appear, either with or without such note of authorship or historical background or literary character, certain other titles which go by the name of "Musical Titles" as "For the chief musician, set to Al-tashheth," Ps. 57, or "For the chief musician, set to Aijeleth hash-Shabar," Ps. 22, or "Shoshannim Eduth," Ps. 80, or "Gittith," 81.

The titles which refer to authorship, to literary character and to historical connection are, of course, more or less understood by biblical scholars at large, but the

musical titles have been a puzzle for two millenniums or more. Many attempts to interpret them have been made, it is true, and many different meanings have been suggested as possible solutions, but the fact remains that they have defied the scholarship of the ages, being for thousands of years a veritable "sphinx to interpreters." Kirkpatrick says, "Many of them are extremely obscure and their meanings can only be conjectured," and Driver adds, "The terms are frequently obscure." Wellhausen tells us that, "In most cases these musical directions are unintelligible to us," and Franz Delitsch goes so far as to say, "The Septuagint found them already in existence and did not understand them. The key to their comprehension must have been lost very early."

As is well known, the original manuscripts were written without division or paragraph or punctuation. If there was no title there would be no break between any two consecutive psalms, but all the titles or words of benediction that follow any psalm and all the titles that precede the following psalm would thus be thrown together between the two. In separating the psalms from each other, therefore, that each might stand alone, one can easily see how all the titles between any two psalms might have been set apart together as belonging either to the psalm that immediately precedes or to the psalm that immediately follows. And it now seems that at some remote period the possible did actually happen and all the titles occurring between any two given psalms were put together as belonging to the second, thus placing every title at the beginning of some psalm and not one at the end, even as they appear in the Psalter to-day. In other words, all *subscriptions* were removed and were made parts of the *superscription* of the following psalm so that we have in the headings of various psalms words that being misplaced have been for ages "a stumbling-block for lexicographers, critics and commentators."

Thus great violence has been done these titles. Words

which in other connections are easily understood become in their new surroundings veritable enigmas "enshrouded in mystery." The fact is, they don't fit. Frequently there is nothing in the following psalm to which these words can refer. Their usual and well understood meanings are absolutely foreign to the thought of the psalms to which they have been attached. This led naturally enough to the most fanciful interpretations of these harmless and ill-used titles. They have been interpreted as being the names of old and long-forgotten musical instruments as "a harp of eight strings" or "a trumpet in the shape of a lily," although such instruments are not known to Semitic literature or oriental antiquity; or they were called catch-words of popular ditties—rag-time music forsooth—which had been caught up from one of the surrounding heathen nations and introduced into the worship of Jehovah, or they were said to have a mystical meaning, which was safe, of course, for no one pretended to say what that meaning might be.

Dr. Thirtle, in his study of the psalms, was led to believe that the psalm found in the 3rd chapter of Habakkuk, standing alone as it does, might be a normal psalm, for no other precedes it from which it could steal a title and no other follows which might rob it of that which is its own. It has at the beginning the usual notes as to class authorship and character, viz.: "A prayer of Habakkuk the prophet set to Shigionoth," but the musical description, "For the chief musician on my stringed instruments," appears at the end.* So, using this psalm in Hab. 3, as his model, our author went to work upon the Psalter and, picking out all the musical titles he proceeded to move them back in each instance from the position which they occupy at the head of various psalms to the end of the psalm that immediately precedes, and in the latter part of his work he has given

* Something similar to this may also be seen in connection with the Psalm in Isa. 38, and Col. Conder, the noted English archaeologist and Palestine Explorer, now testifies by way of confirmation that the titles on Assyrian tablets often occur at the end.

us a new edition of the book of the Psalms in accordance with his new, and as he believes, proper arrangement.

Now one naturally asks, Is this simply a new theory, and a fanciful one at that? Or does the key really fit the lock and open to us the door to an understanding of these much-discussed titles? A brief examination of some of the titles themselves will perhaps be the best answer to these and other questions of like import.

Take *Shoshannim* for example. In the Revised Version it stands at the beginning of Psalms 69 and 45. In the margin at each place its meaning is given as "lilies." But why should a word meaning "lilies" be placed at the head of either of these psalms? No one has been able to point out any real connection between either of the psalms and the word we are discussing, and therefore we have been in the dark in the matter of its interpretation. Gesenius says the word in the singular means a lily, but he adds that according to most interpreters it also means an instrument of music so called perhaps as resembling the form of a lily. And referring to these particular passages he says it is here nothing more than lilies and indicates some well-known song or poem after the measure and numbers of which these psalms were to be sung. The German edition of that great work says there is no indication of its meaning. Haupt says it may mean with Susian instruments, and Kirkpatrick tells us that it was a melody to which the psalm was to be sung—some well-known song beginning with the word *Shoshannim*—and Fürst declares it is a proper name of one of the twenty-four music choirs left by David and so called from a Master Shushan. These quotations show us the difficulty which scholars have met in trying to interpret this one word. But Thirtle tells us that the word does not belong to Ps. 69 and 45 at all and that it ought to be pushed back in each instance to the preceding psalm. That would locate it with Ps. 68 and 44, and so he has placed it in his book. The question now is, can it be understood in this, its new location? The word means

“lily” as used elsewhere. Will that meaning fit here and can it be maintained in these new connections?

Dr. Thirtle in support of his theory, maintains that Shoshannim does mean here, as elsewhere, “lilies,” and as such it represents flowers in general and stands for the springtime and in that, as in Israelitish life, the springtime meant the Passover, the season recalling the feast; the reference here is to the first of the two great feasts, viz.: that of Unleavened Bread or the Passover. He quotes Dr. Post in the Hastings Dictionary, who says the word in Arabic is a general term for lily-like flowers being as general as the English term lily and that the Hebrew word must be taken in the same general sense. This word, therefore, has, according to Thirtle, been placed in connection with these two psalms because the chief musician or precentor had received them into his repertory for special use in the liturgical service at the time when Israel celebrated by the Passover Feast her deliverance as a nation from her bondage in Egypt. It was, so to speak, his mark of endorsement of these two psalms for use on that particular occasion from year to year.

Or take the word “Gittith.” That word in the Revised Version stands at the beginning of Ps. 8, 81 and 84, but we are told that it really belongs to Ps. 7, 80 and 83. Among the meanings suggested by various scholars for this word are Upon the Gittite lyre, an instrument with a joyous sound. A march of the Gittite guard, a musical body of Levites of the city of Gath, and belonging to the city of Gath, though it must be admitted that the true meaning, relating to winepresses, has been suggested by other scholars prior to Thirtle. As the former word referring to the flowers of the springtime stands for the Passover, so that word referring to winepresses suggests the autumn and stands for the great feast of that season, viz., the Feast of Tabernacles. This feast, the joyous “Harvest-Home in Israel’s land,” brought afresh each year to the minds of the people the keeping power of

Jehovah, and this word marks these three psalms as selected by the musical leader for use in connection therewith.

In support of his thesis our author calls attention to the fact that these two ideas of lilies and winepresses or flowers and fruit occur together oftentimes and in various ways. On the pillars of Solomon's Temple were lilies and pomegranates, 1 Kings 7: 20-22. On the table which Ptolemy Philadelphus gave to the Jews were lilies and clusters of grapes, Jos. Antiq., 12: 2, 9. On the veils that covered the doors of the Temple of Herod were flowers of purple and golden vines. Jos. Antiq., 15: 11, 3. And the high priest's robe had golden bells (in the shape of lillies) and pomegranates of blue. Ex. 28: 33. In the remains of ancient synagogues which have been excavated in Palestine are lintels and cornices decorated with lilies and wine-bowls or clusters of grapes, and the old coin, the half shekel, has on one side a triple lily and on the other a wine-bowl. These and other symbols that might be mentioned seem to sum up and bring vividly before the eye and mind of the people the two great thoughts which the two great feasts symbolize, viz.: That Jehovah is the Redeemer and the Keeper of Israel. It is not strange, therefore, that certain psalms should be selected for use in connection with these feasts, and exactly that it is claimed was done, the two words under discussion being but the marks that indicate those psalms.

But perhaps the best and most convincing proof will be found in an examination of the psalms themselves to which these words are now attached. Two or three instances must suffice. In psalm 68, one of the Shoshannim psalms, at verses 7 and 8, we have:

“O God, when thou wentest forth before thy people,
When thou didst march through the wilderness,
The earth trembled,
The heavens also dropped rain at the presence of God;

Yon Sinai trembled at the presence of God, the God of Israel."

And at verses 19 and 20 we have:

"Blessed be the Lord, who daily beareth our burden,
Even the God who is our Salvation.
God is unto us a God of deliverances;
And unto Jehovah the Lord belongeth escape from death."

In Psalm 44, the other Shoshannim psalm, we have verses 1-3:

"We have heard with our ears, O God,
Our fathers have told us,
What work thou didst in their days,
In the days of old,
Thou didst drive out the nations with thy hand;
But them thou didst plant;
Thou didst afflict the peoples;
But them thou didst spread abroad,
For they get not the land in possession by their own sword,
Neither did their own arm save them;
But thy right hand, and thine arm, and the sight of thy countenance,
Because thou wast favorable unto them."

Certainly Shoshannim, meaning lilies and representing the springtime and suggesting the great Feast of the Passover, is a note that fits these two psalms in a most remarkable way.

Or in Psalm 80, one of the Gittith psalms, take verses 8 to 11:

"Thou broughtest a vine out of Egypt;
Thou didst drive out the nations and plantedst it;
Thou preparedst room before it,

And it took deep root and filled the land.
The mountains were covered with the shadow of it,
And the boughs thereof were like cedars of God.
It sent out its branches unto the sea,
And its shoots unto the river."

This passage, it will be admitted, brings before us in a most beautiful way the fact that Jehovah is the Protector of Israel.

Once more take the phrase "Jonath Elem Rehokim" from Psalm 56 and give it to Psalm 55, where it really belongs, and you are impressed at once with the fitness of things. Indeed the correspondence of the title of Psalm 56 to the text of Psalm 55 has often been noted before, for these words meaning "the dove of the distant terebinths" are plainly a reference to the moan of David, verses 4 to 8 of Psalm 55. Hear him as he cries:

"My heart is sore pained within me;
And the terrors of death are fallen upon me.
Fearfulness and trembling are come upon me,
And horror hath overwhelmed me,
And I said, Oh, that I had wings like a dove!
Then would I fly away and be at rest.
Lo, then would I wander far off,
I would lodge in the wilderness."

Certainly "the dove of the distant terebinths" is a splendid name for the psalm that contains that passage.

Likewise many other examples of a similar and perhaps equally convincing kind are given, and there are enough of them it would seem to make good the claim with which the author approaches his task. Thus these words so little understood heretofore are now allowed to mean what they mean elsewhere and therefore are easily understood. In other words, the key does seem to fit the lock. Prof. Price says: "The main contention of the author is certainly true. He has the key that has been

lying within sight of scholars but unseen for long centuries." His claims are "certain in some cases, probable in most and doubtful in only two or three."

One other probable result of this discovery ought also to be mentioned. In an indirect, but nevertheless in a very forceful way, it gives us proof of the age of the psalms. If these titles were misunderstood when the Septuagint was made say 250 to 200 B. C., if the scholars of that day had so far forgotten the temple service that the precentor or chief musician was unknown to them, if the liturgical use of the psalms in this worship had been so long forgotten as to be lost sight of entirely, if the meaning of *Alamoth* and *Sheminith* was to them unknown, if these musical notes had been made and used and discontinued and forgotten two or three centuries before Christ, it does seem to show that the psalms themselves to which the titles had been attached must have been older than the titles could possibly be, and therefore must date from long before the Maccabean age. How much older they are let the critics proceed to show, but it may turn out that this *obiter dictum* is the most important result of the new discovery.