

**A CRITICAL COMMENTARY ON THE
SONGS OF THE RETURN: WITH A
HISTORICAL INTRODUCTION AND
INDEXES, VOL. XI, PART I, OCTOBER-
JANUARY, 1894-1895, PP. 1-100, PART
III, APRIL-JULY, 1895, PP. 119-173**

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VOL. XI. OCTOBER, 1894—JANUARY, 1895. NOS. 1 AND 2.

A CRITICAL COMMENTARY ON THE SONGS OF THE RETURN
WITH A HISTORICAL INTRODUCTION
AND INDEXES.*

By DANIEL GURDIN STEVENS, Jr.

PART I.

INTRODUCTION AND DISCUSSION OF THE TITLE.

"The Hebrew Psalter, like the Torah, came together not as a book, but as a Pentateuch."† This resemblance extends beyond the present artificial and imitative division of the work, for a critical examination discovers certain indications of the actual structure and discerns the component elements which have been assembled to form the present whole. There are found evidences of the existence of earlier Psalters which have been embodied in their entirety, or are represented by excerpts. It appears that the Book of Psalms is built up of three great strata of Songs, each distinguished by peculiar characteristics: (a) Book I., consisting originally of Psalms ascribed to David;‡ (b) Pss. 42-89 marked (except in the case of the appended group of Korahite Pss. 84-89) by the use, and to some extent the substitution, of the name *Elohim* for *JHWH*; (c) Pss. 90-150, comprising especially Songs of a liturgical character. These great sections are themselves also more or less composite in structure, a fact not so readily noticed in the case of collection a, but easily recognized as true of collections b and c, which, since they were made at later periods, have not passed through so many changes as has

* A Thesis accepted by the Board of University Studies of Johns Hopkins University for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy.

† Cf. T. E. Cheyne, *The Book of Psalms*, N. Y. 1886, Introd. p. xiii; *Origin and Religious Contents of the Psalter*, London, 1891, p. 5.

‡ Four Pss. of this group (1, 2, 10, 89) are in the Hebrew text anonymous; but of these Ps. 89 is in the LXX. ascribed to David, and Ps. 10 is properly taken with Ps. 9 to form a single piece. Pss. 1 and 2 seem to have been added at a time when the Psalter as a whole was taking shape. Cf. W. E. Smith, *The Old Testament in the Jewish Church*, 1862, p. 127.

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the earlier work, so that the several groups of Songs incorporated in them have not been assimilated to the extent of losing even external individuality. The work of the third compiler, in particular, may be quickly resolved into the pre-existent shorter collections on which it is based. Thus Pss. 92-100 form a group of pieces which, though anonymous, are very similar in thought and expression; two groups (Pss. 108-110 and 138-145) both ascribed to David,—the *Hallel* Pss. (111-118 together with 135-136 which belong to the *Hallel* class)—the fifteen *Songs of "Degrees"* (120-134),—Pss. 146-150, a group of doxologies fittingly concluding the Psalter,—these form or represent collections marked by community of title or similarity in contents.

Among the minor Psalters that have contributed to the formation of the grand "hymn-book of the Jewish church" is the small group, Pss. 120-134, mentioned above as contained in the third stratum of compilation. This booklet is individualized, not only by the internal similarities that exist between its parts, but also by an obvious external feature, *viz.*, the title *שִׁיר הַמַּעֲלֹת** which is prefixed to each Psalm. It has been reasonably considered that in the correct explanation of this heading is to be found the key to a more complete understanding of the Songs. But concerning the meaning of the confessedly obscure phrase great difference of opinion has prevailed, and not one of the numerous theories and conjectures proposed has as yet received satisfactory confirmation. To be sure, that which appears to be the correct idea, has, in part at least, been set forth by both ancient and modern commentators; nevertheless, it has not yet received the needed support, in that no one has shown that the Psalms in question may be best interpreted on the lines marked out in it. To meet this want, and thus to demonstrate in practice as in theory the correctness of the explanation, is the purpose of the present work. Before proceeding to this, it is proper to examine the merits of the various other explanations offered, and to show in what respects they are faulty.

LITERATURE.

In the preparation of this work, the following works on the Psalms have been consulted:

Psalmi Quindecim Hammahidhâ philologicæ et criticæ illustrati a T. A. Clarisse, Lugdini Batavorum, 1819.

E. F. C. Rosenmüller *Scholia in Vetus Testamentum, Pars Quarta Psalmos continens*, Ed. Secunda, 3 vols. 1821, 1822, 1823.

E. Hengstenberg, *Commentar über die Psalmen*, Zweite Aufl., Berlin 1852.

Die Psalmen erklärt von J. Olshausen, Leipzig 1853.

Commentar über die Psalmen nebst beigefügter Uebersetzung, von W. M. L. de Wette, Fünfte Aufl., herausgegeben von G. Baur, Heidelberg 1856.

* In Ps. 121 *לְמַעַן*.

Die Psalmen nach dem überlieferten Grundtexte übersetzt und mit erklärenden Anmerkungen versehen von A. Kamphausen, Leipzig 1868.

Die Psalmen übersetzt und ausgelegt von F. Hitzig, 2 vols., Leipzig und Heidelberg 1863, 1865.

Die Dichter des Alten Bundes erklärt von H. Ewald, Zweite Ausg., 3 vols., Göttingen 1866, 1867.

Die Psalter theologisch-homiletisch bearbeitet von C. B. Moll, Bielefeld und Leipzig 1869-1871.

Abfassungszeit und Abschluss des Psalters zur Prüfung der Frage nach Makabäerpsalmen, historisch-kritisch untersucht von C. Ehrst, Leipzig 1869.

Luther's Psalmen-Auslegung. Ein Commentar zu den poetischen oder Lehrbüchern des Alten Testaments, aus seinen Werken gesammelt und bearbeitet von C. G. Eberle, 3 vols., Stuttgart 1878-1874.

צַל הַמַּעֲלוֹת אִן מִכְרַב לְחֻקֵּיהֶן מִאֲתֵי נ' וְיִאֲלֹמֶסֶן, Warsaw 1882.

Dichtungen der Hebräer zum erstenmale nach dem Vermass des Urtextes übersetzt von G. Bleckell, Innsbruck 1882.

Kritischer Commentar zu den Psalmen von H. Graetz, 2 vols., Breslau 1882, 1888.

Biblischer Commentar über die Psalmen von Franz Delitzsch. Vierte überarbeitete Aufl., Leipzig 1883; the latest edition (by Prof. Friedrich Delitzsch) is not accessible.

The Book of Psalms Translated by T. K. Cheyne, London 1884.

Die Psalmen übersetzt und ausgelegt von H. Hupfeld; für die dritte Aufl. bearbeitet von W. Nowack, Gotha 1888.

Die Psalmen ausgelegt von F. W. Schultz, in the *Kurzgefasster Commentar zu den heiligen Schriften Alten und Neuen Testaments*, herausgegeben von H. Strack und O. Zöckler, 6 Abtheilung, Nördlingen 1888.

Das Buch der Psalmen in neuer und treuer Uebersetzung nach der Vulgata mit fortwährender Berücksichtigung des Urtextes von J. Langer, Dritte Aufl., Freiburg in Breisgau 1889.

The Origin and Religious Contents of the Psalter (Bampton Lectures of 1889), by T. K. Cheyne, London 1891.

Die Psalmen übersetzt und erklärt von F. Baethgen, Göttingen 1892.

THE TITLE.

Scholars have agreed as to the meaning of the first of the two words that compose the title. The *Shir*, as distinguished from the שִׁירָה *Mizmôr*, is a poetical composition which, if sung at all, is to be rendered without the accompaniment of music; though the word, as the broader term, may be employed where the specific designation *Mizmôr* would be more appropriate. But the import of the second word, מִאֲתֵי *Mâ'îlôth*, is a matter of doubt and uncertainty;

for while it is easy to give a literal translation of the phrase, it is difficult to determine in what special sense it is used here.

Ma'·lôth is the plural of מַעְלֵה מַ'·lâh, from the stem עָלָה (properly עָלָה) which means *go up, to ascend*; hence the noun signifies *a going up, an ascent*, and is used in this literal sense of a journey from the lowlands of a country to high mountainous districts (Ezr. 7:9); then it is figuratively applied to the thoughts that arise in the mind (Ezek. 11:5). Secondly, it designates that by which one ascends, a *stair or step* (1 K. 10:19), as also a degree on a step-clock (2 K. 20:9). Then it is employed with reference to what is elevated, an *upper room* (Am. 9:6), and figuratively *high rank in society* (1 Ch. 17:17).

Upon one or other of these meanings vouched for by Old Testament usage not a few exegetes have based their interpretations of the title, while others have inferred or invented new definitions of the word which they think is used here in an unique special sense. There is thus no lack of explanations, some more or less plausible, others simply the offspring of the imagination of commentators. These explanations will now be reviewed, in order that the validity of their respective claims for acceptance may be decided.

It has seemed most convenient for the purpose of discussion to arrange the various explanations in classes upon the basis of the character which they assign to the title; all the attempts at the solution of the vexed problem may thus be disposed in four main groups around the following distinctive theories: *viz.*, it has been thought:

- A. That the title has a mystical significance;—
- B. That Ma'·lôth is a metrical or rhetorical term;—
- C. That the title is a liturgical note or direction, referring to the manner, place or occasion, in, or upon, which the Songs should be rendered;—
- D. That the title points to the historical events or period which furnished the themes of the Psalms.

In conformity with the plan of treating in the last place that which seems to be the most satisfactory interpretation of the title and the Psalms, there will be discussed first the minor members, then the principal representative of each group.

THEORY A.

THAT THE TITLE HAS A MYSTICAL SIGNIFICANCE.

Several of the Church Fathers, following a method of exegesis commonly received among them, attached a mystical or allegorical meaning to the word Ma'·lôth in this place. Origen (d. 254), for example, thought of the elevation of the mind to divine things; thus he declares [*Selecta in Psalms*,* ad Ps. cxix.

* In J. P. Migne's *Patrol. s. Gr.* vol. 12: μόνοι οἱ τῷ βίῳ καὶ τῷ λόγῳ ἀναβαίνοντες οἰκεῖται εἰς τῶν ἀναβαθμῶν, καὶ τῶν ἐν ταῖς ψαλμοῖς μυστηρίων.

(Hebr. 120)] : "Only those persons who are ascending in life and in thought are fitted for the steps and the mysteries contained in the Songs." Eusebius (d. 340) seems to explain M a'1ô th of ascent to the divine virtues which men have lost.* (Cf. his *Commentariorum in Psalmos reliquias superstites*, ad Ps. cxix. in Migne's *Patrol. s. Gr.* vol. 24). The same idea was more fully elaborated by Athanasius, bishop of Alexandria (d. 378), who in his treatise *de Trilicis Psalmorum* † seeks to adapt these Psalms to use as the prayers of those entering the Church, and gradually progressing upward in the path of virtue; he definitely explains the title as referring to the several stages‡ in this change of life.§ Later ecclesiastical writers echo this interpretation, arguing mainly from the idea that M a'1ô h, as well as its Greek equivalent ἀναβαθμοί, signifies only steps leading upwards; so S. Augustine (d. 430) remarks (*Enarrationes in Psalmos*, ad Ps. cxix., *Opera* in Migne's *Patrol. s. Lat.* vol. 36): "wherever (the word) 'steps' occurs in these psalms it signifies those ascending;" (*gradus quomodo in his psalmis positi sunt, ascendentes significant*). The ascents meant here are "from the valley of weeping" to "things unutterable and unthinkable." Similarly Cassiodorus (d. 575) avers (*Expositio in Psalterium*, ad Ps. cxix., in Migne's *Patrol. s. Lat.* vol. 70) that we are not to conceive of the steps as something "earthly or to be mounted by corporeal steps but let us understand an ascent of the mind" (*terrenum aut corporeis gradibus subeundum nobis sed mentis accipiamus ascensum*). Of the same opinion were B. Flaccus Albinus or Alcuin,|| the instructor of Charlemagne (d. 804), St. Bruno,¶ founder of the Carthusian order of monks (d. 1101), and finally Cardinal R. Bellarmino (d. 1621), who, after mentioning (*Explanatio in Psalmos*, ad Ps. cxix., *Opera* ed. Venetis 1728, vol. 8) the various explanations offered, concludes as follows: "This is certain, that those ascents, whether from Babylon to Jerusalem or up the steps of Solomon's temple, were

* Οἱ καταπεσόντες ἀπὸ τοῦ θεοῦ καλῶς ἀναβαίνουσιν ἐπὶ ταῦτα κατασκευάσαντες εἰς τὴν ἀνάβασιν ταυτοῦ.

† *Opera*, ed. Paris 1887, in Migne's *Patrol. s. Gr.* vol. 27.

‡ Such a meaning, of a degree in the progress of initiation into, or attainment to, an office or dignity, in a'1ô h does have in post-biblical Hebrew; cf. the Mishnaic Tract *Pirye Aboth*, 6:5: וְיִרְדֵּת הַתּוֹרָה מִן-הַמַּלְכוּת שְׁוֹמֵלֵכּוֹת נִקְיִית בְּשִׁלְשִׁים טַעֲלוֹת וְהַכְתָּנָה בְּעֶשְׂרִים וָאַרְבַּע וְהַתּוֹרָה נִקְיִית בְּאַרְבָּעִים וְשׁוֹמֵנָה דְּבָרִים גַּרְי וְהַתּוֹרָה נִקְיִית בְּאַרְבָּעִים וְשׁוֹמֵנָה דְּבָרִים גַּרְי "The law is more excellent than the priesthood or royalty, because royalty is obtained by thirty steps, and the priesthood by twenty-four, while the Law is obtained through forty-eight things," ed.

§ A similar explanation has been given of the entire book of Psalms; Gregory of Nyssa has attempted to show (*Tractatus Prior in Psalmorum Inscriptiones*, cap. IX., in Migne's *Patrol. s. Gr.* vol. 44.) that the Psalter in its five books leads up to moral perfection; the five sections are like steps rising one above the other according to a certain series, some particular virtue being considered in each part, the course of the discussion having the effect of constantly elevating the soul toward the more sublime until it reaches the highest of virtues; ἀεὶ πρὸς τὸ ἐψηλότερον τὴν ψυχὴν ἠερωθίεις, ὡς ἀνὰ ἐπὶ τὸ ἀκρότατον ἔφικται τῶν ἀγαθῶν.

¶ *Expositio in Psalmos Graduales*, in Migne's *Patrol. s. Lat.* vol. 190

‡ *Commentarius in Psalmos*.

figures of the ascent of the elect, who, by the steps of the virtues and especially of charity, go up from the valley of tears to the heavenly Jerusalem."²

The idea of connecting *Mā'ālēth* with the notion of degrees in the attainment to moral and spiritual perfection is one that might readily suggest itself to those whose minds are alert to perceive anything that may be interpreted in a spiritual way; the comparison of the path of virtue with a series of steps reaching its culmination in heaven, is very old. But an application of the language of the Songs in accord with the idea is often forced and artificial, and involves an arbitrary disregard of the main thoughts in the pieces. A careful distinction should in any case be made between the anagogic explanation and the natural meaning. This was recognized by St. John Chrysostom (347-407) who remarks (*Expositio in Psalmos*, in Migne's *Patrol. s. Gr.* vol. 51), that viewed "from the historical point of view the Psalms speak of the return from Babylon and make mention of the captivity there, but if they be taken in a spiritual sense, they lead to the path of virtue."³ Moreover, the question to be decided is not what views have been read into the Psalms by those who employed them for homiletic purposes,⁴ but what meaning the poems conveyed to those for whom they were originally written and what peculiarity common to them is referred to in the title.

The number of these Psalms (i. e. 15) has also given rise to some mystical speculation. Rabbi Abraham Remokh of Barcelona calls attention to the fact that it corresponds with the numerical value of the divine name *Yah*, which is true enough, but the title is not thereby accounted for. St. Jerome (340-420), commenting on Gal. 1:18, connects with it the idea of perfection. "It may seem to some," says he (*Opera*, Tomus VII., p. 895, Edit. alt. Venetis 1769), "an idle thing to observe even the numbers in the Scriptures. Nevertheless not without reason do I think that the fifteen days in which Paul stayed with Peter, signify full knowledge and perfected learning, if indeed there are 15 Songs in the Psalter and 15 steps by which they ascend to sing praise to God,"⁵ etc. There is, however, no evidence in the Old Testament to show that the number 15 had a connotation

² Illud certum est, ascensiones istas sive de Babylone in Jerusalem, sive per gradus templi Salomonis, figuram fuisse ascensionis electorum qui per gradus virtutum ac præceptis charitatis, ascendant de valle lachrymarum ad coelestem Jerusalem.

³ Κατὰ μὲν τὴν ἱστορίαν, οὗτις δὲ περὶ τῆς ἀνάβηθρος διαλέγουται τῆς ἐκ Βαβυλῶνος καὶ τῆς αἰχμαλωσίας μνημονεύουσι τῆς ἐκείσε· κατὰ δὲ τὴν ἀναγωγὴν, οὗτις εἰς τὴν κατ' ἀρετὴν ὁδὸν χειραγωγῶσι.

⁴ It is interesting to note here that, at the meeting of the Society of Biblical Literature and Exegesis in Philadelphia, Dec. 27-30, 1894, Theo. F. Wright, of the New Church School, Cambridge, Mass., advanced the somewhat remarkable theory that the *Songs of Degrees* are a prophetic anticipation of the career of our Lord through all the events from the valley of the Jordan to the Ascension. Such an interpretation might be very edifying for homiletic purposes; but the homiletic application, in this case far-fetched, must not be confused with the actual historical background of the pieces; cf. the abstract of the writer's paper on *Messianic Psalms* in the *Johns Hopkins University Circulars*, June, 1898, p. 108.

⁵ Et licet quibusdam superfluum videatur, numerus quoque qui in Scripturis sunt observare: tamen non ab re arbitror quindecim dies, quibus Petrus Paulus habitavit, plenam significare scientiam consummatamque doctrinam: siquidem XV. sunt carmina in Psalterio, et XV. gradus, per quos ad canendum ascendunt Deo.