

Thirtle's Theory – The Headings & Conclusions of the Psalms

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BACKGROUND

In 1904, JW Thirtle wrote a book titled *The Titles of the Psalms* where he proposes that both the superscriptions and the subscriptions were included in the original text. And as the text was copied from one translation to another, he proposes that the distinction between the superscription (introduction) of a given psalm and the subscription (conclusion) of the one immediately preceding it was lost.

THE THEORY EXPLAINED

The prayer of Habakkuk (in chapter 3) is a model of what Thirtle's theory builds upon. The superscription to the prayer in Habakkuk 3 is literary. "A prayer of Habakkuk the prophet, upon Shigionoth" (3:1). The subscription is musical, "For the Chief Musician, on my stringed instruments" (3:19). Hezekiah's poem in Isaiah 38 seems to support this hypothesis as well. Isaiah 38:9 seems to give the introduction (superscription) while the ending of the psalm may hint at the musical instruments used (38:20).

If Thirtle's theory is correct, then the subscription of Psalm 55: "the dove of the distant terebinths," becomes a pictorial title of 55:6-8 of the psalm. Also, the *International Standard Bible Encyclopedia* provides another helpful example from the superscription and subscription to Psalms 87-88. If Thirtle's theory is correct, then the new way to format the titles/endings of the psalms makes much more sense than the way our English translations currently display them:

The application of the rule that the expression "for the Chief Musician" is always a subscript removes the difficulty in the title of Psalm 88. The superscription of Psalm 88, on Thirtle's hypothesis, becomes "Maschil of Heman the Ezrahite." Psalm 87 thus has a subscript that repeats the statement of its superscription, but with an addition which harmonizes with the content of the poem. "Mahalath Leannoth," with a slight correction in vocalization, probably means "Dancings with Shoutings," and 87:7 speaks of both singing and dancing. The tone of Psalm 87 is exceedingly cheerful; but Psalm 88 is the saddest in the entire Psalter. The application of Thirtle's hypothesis also leaves Psalm 88 with a consistent literary title, whereas the usual title ascribes the psalm first to the sons of Korah and then to Heman the Ezrahite.

THE THEORY ILLUSTRATED

Psalm 3

Superscription (title)

A psalm of David, when he fled from Absalom his son.

Text of Psalm

Subscription (ending)

For the choir director; on stringed instruments (title of Ps 4 in our English translations)

Psalm 87

Superscription (title)

A psalm of the sons of Korah. A song.

Text of Psalm

Superscription (ending)

A song. A psalm of the sons of Korah. For the choir director; according to Mahalath Leannoth.

Bibliography:

"Psalms" in *International Bible Encyclopedia* (<http://bibleencyclopedia.com/psalms.htm>)

Thirtle, *The Titles of the Psalms* (google books for free)