

Thirtle's Theory & the Proper Understanding of Superscriptions & Subscriptions in the Psalms

Geoffrey R. Kirkland
Christ Fellowship Bible Church

In 1904, James Thirtle published a book: *The Titles of the Psalms: Their Nature & Meaning* where he suggested that the way our *english translations* present the headings of the psalms might be a bit mistaken. In seminary, I read Thirtle's work and his conclusions have come to be known as "Thirtle's Theory." I have come to believe that Thirtle was accurate in his conclusions.

Psalms 87 and 88 provide some of the clearest reasons why the English translators have mistakenly put part of the superscriptions (psalm headings) in the wrong location.

Key Terms:

Superscription: the opening/heading of the psalm

Subscription: the conclusion/postscript of the psalm

None of the English translations have a *subscription* (at the end of the psalm). After the final verse, according to our English translations, the psalm ends. But in the original Hebrew, the psalms would have had subscriptions (postscripts to the psalm) which would have signified a few things: (1) for the choir director; and (2) the tune/melody for the psalm. Not all psalms had to have a subscription. Many don't, but some do. The most common is: "for the choir director". This is usually the 1st part of the superscription (heading) in our English translations. It should, however, be the subscription (concluding postscript) of the preceding psalm. Archaeology has uncovered some ancient manuscripts and versions of the Psalms where the psalms are divided this way — with the superscriptions and subscriptions in their proper placement.

Again, the **superscription** (heading) would include the author, type of psalm (prayer, song, maskil), and if it is a psalm. Then, at the end, the **subscription** (postscript) would include the musical notations (for the choir director) and the melody of the song (according to Mahalath Leannoth [subscript to Ps 87] or according to Al Tashheth [subscript to Ps 56]).

For a helpful example, look at Habakkuk 3.

Habakkuk 3 is a prayer, a psalm that patterns itself like the book of Psalms.

Superscription in Habakkuk 3

A prayer of Habakkuk the prophet, according to Shigionoth.

Text of Habakkuk 3

Subscription in Habakkuk 3

For the choir director, on my stringed instruments.

[Compare with Psalms 4 and 5]

Current NASB Text:

Psalm 87

A Psalm of the sons of Korah. A Song.

¹ His foundation is in the holy mountains.

² The LORD loves the gates of Zion More than all the *other* dwelling places of Jacob.

³ Glorious things are spoken of you, O city of God. Selah.

⁴ "I shall mention Rahab and Babylon among those who know Me; Behold, Philistia and Tyre with Ethiopia: 'This one was born there.'"

⁵ But of Zion it shall be said, "This one and that one were born in her"; And the Most High Himself will establish her.

⁶ The LORD will count when He registers the peoples, "This one was born there." Selah.

⁷ Then those who sing as well as those who play the flutes *shall say*, "All my springs of joy are in you."

Psalm 88:1-2

A Song. A Psalm of the sons of Korah. For the choir director; according to Mahalath Leannoth. A Maskil of Heman the Ezrahite.

¹ O LORD, the God of my salvation, I have cried out by day and in the night before You.

² Let my prayer come before You; Incline Your ear to my cry!

The Correct Rendering Should Be:

Psalm 87

Superscription A Psalm of the sons of Korah. A Song.

¹ His foundation is in the holy mountains.

² The LORD loves the gates of Zion More than all the *other* dwelling places of Jacob.

³ Glorious things are spoken of you, O city of God. Selah.

⁴ "I shall mention Rahab and Babylon among those who know Me; Behold, Philistia and Tyre with Ethiopia: 'This one was born there.'"

⁵ But of Zion it shall be said, "This one and that one were born in her"; And the Most High Himself will establish her.

⁶ The LORD will count when He registers the peoples, "This one was born there." Selah.

⁷ Then those who sing as well as those who play the flutes *shall say*, "All my springs of joy are in you."

Subscription A Song. A Psalm of the sons of Korah. For the choir director; according to Mahalath Leannoth.

Psalm 88

Superscription A Maskil of Heman the Ezrahite.

O LORD, the God of my salvation, I have cried out by day and in the night before You.

Concluding Thoughts

None of this should suggest to the reader that God's Word has mistakes in it. One should not read this little write-up and conclude that I believe there are errors in Scripture! Away with such a thought! Rather, we want to be as precise as possible in our understanding of Scripture and as archaeology uncovers more manuscripts and as scholars understand more of how ancient poetry functioned and appeared, it seems most probable that Thirtle's theory is in fact the proper way to read the psalm headings and conclusions.

This is not a salvation issue. It has no bearings on inspiration or inerrancy. The original Hebrew text has not been altered. Rather, we are looking at how *we in our English translations* should properly render the original Hebrew text. That is the precise issue we are currently grappling with.