

INTRODUCTION

CHAPTER ONE

THE PSALMS AS LITERATURE

The Psalms, whether as a section of our Bible or as an independent book (conveniently named the Psalter), are related to all literature by certain leading characteristics; such as authorship, transmission, multiplication, subject and object; and, like all other books, they have a peculiar history of their own.

The Psalter is obviously a book of Devotion, consisting of prayers and praises addressed to Jehovah the God of Israel, interspersed with personal and national reminiscences intended to promote the spirit of worship.

The Psalter is an ancient book, traceable backwards, through Latin, Greek and Syriac translations to the Hebrew in which it was first written.

The evidence of its antiquity is manifold and conclusive. Hebrew Bibles, containing The Psalms, began to be printed

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towards the close of the fifteenth century. These were printed from manuscripts, technically called *codices*, some of which were written centuries before the invention of printing and are still preserved in the great libraries of the world. The exemplars from which existing codices were made, or the exemplars of those exemplars, were the standards from which the Ancient Versions were executed, as is known from the practical identity of the Text in those versions with the Text preserved in existing Hebrew copies. The New Testament itself, which had an independent existence and has come down to us through channels of its own, quotes from the Psalter as an already existing book, partly in its Hebrew form and partly in the Greek translation of it and the rest of the Old Testament known as the Septuagint. The Septuagint was executed, in successive installments, during the interval between about B.C. 200 and the Christian Era.

The measure and kind of agreement between the Greek and the Hebrew clearly attest the priority of the latter; seeing that terms and idioms appear in the Greek which could only have been derived from the Hebrew, such as musical terms not understood by the Greek translators, and idioms native in Hebrew but foreign in Greek, which no Greek originators would have employed. We thus *know* that the Hebrew Bible is older than the Greek; and can affirm with confidence that the Psalms in particular were in existence at least two or three hundred years before Christ. At this point a new and very peculiar species of evidence comes in, carrying the witness to the antiquity of Hebrew Scriptures some centuries further back. The Hebrew Bible was gradually *transliterated* out of an old script, allied to the Samaritan, into the present square Hebrew letters. This process of transliteration, beginning about the time of Ezra the Scribe, took centuries to bring to completion. Traces of it can be detected by experts in transcription errors which could only arise by confounding with each other letters which were nearly alike in the old script but not in the new. This peculiar form of transcriptional evidence, accordingly, carries us back to a time considerably antedating that in which the Septuagint Version was brought into existence. The Hebrew Bible must have been extant before it could be transliterated into its present square Hebrew characters: which is as far back as we need at present go, inasmuch as we thus obtain a solid foundation on which further observations, specifically relating to the Psalms, can securely rest.

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Some of the observations now to follow apply equally to the Hebrew Bible as a whole as to the Psalter. Others have special or sole reference to the Psalms; hence it is left to the reader to widen out the application as he sees fit, and we can concentrate our attention on the book immediately before us.

Observation 1.—*The antiquity of the Psalter has given rise to an interesting and instructive History of Transmission.* We have the Psalms in our possession: how did we get them? by what steps have they come down to us? Let us work out the answer in both directions, backwards and forwards: first beginning with the present, and stepping backwards to the point of origin; and then starting with the origin of the Psalms, and coming down to the present time.

a. The Psalms have been translated into English: no matter now by whom.

b. Most English versions of the Psalter have been made from the *printed* Hebrew Text.

c. This Text is a transcript of previously existing *manuscript* copies.

d. The copying of ancient Hebrew manuscripts naturally became, in the course of centuries, a *fine art*, on which various classes of literary artists were engaged. They included the following,—still, for the present, working our way backwards:—

α. Manuscript correctors, named *nakdanim*.

β. Manuscript producers, or professional copyists.

γ. Massorites; or “hedgers,” custodians, guardians of the sacred text.

δ. Editors: as Ezra, the *sopher* or “scribe,” and his successors, the Sopherim.

ε. Authors; as David, Hezekiah, and their associates and helpers in authorship, such as Asaph, Jeduthun and others.

Throwing these now into the reverse or historical order, they stand as follows:—

A. AUTHORS, or original psalm-composers.

B. EDITORS, or authoritative collectors and care-takers.

C. MASSORITES—of whom more anon.

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- D. COPYISTS, or professional transcribers and multipliers of copies.
- E. NAKDANIM, or professional inspectors and correctors of copies when made.

As it is important to have as clear notions as possible of these several functions, which to some extent overlap each other, it will not be superfluous to pass them again, and more deliberately, under review.

A. AUTHORS.—It should be remembered that the author of a psalm might employ an amanuensis to do the actual writing down of a composition at his master's dictation. Such an amanuensis, when serving a royal author, would naturally be, permanently or for the time, a "king's scribe": not an author, but the author's right-hand; not an editor, with an editor's right of control and modification, such as was afterwards conceded to the Sopherim as a class, but the mere scribal executor of the composer's wishes; although it would be too much to say that such king's scribe had *no* liberty as to small details, since it may very well have been that, as a confidential servant and a competent penman, he may have paid chief regard to his master's habits and known wishes, and may occasionally have saved his master from himself—in matters of inadvertence.

Still thinking primarily of the author of a psalm, it should be further remembered that he himself might, after composing a psalm, subsequently edit, modify and adapt his own composition to later circumstances. Indeed, it may be laid down as an axiom, which any good printing-office can verify: That if an author does not edit his own production, then someone else must do it for him. Doubtless, David thus edited some of his own early psalms, so as, for instance, to fit them for his ascension to the throne, or for his bringing up of the ark to Jerusalem; if not, indeed, also for subsequent use by his son Solomon on the anticipated occasion of the dedication of the Temple, for which we know that he otherwise made thoughtful and ample provision.

It is further worth bearing in mind that the author of some psalms may have suggested the composing of others. David, for example, had about him gifted and trusted men, competent and disposed to share the work of authorship along with their royal master. Such a helper in psalm-production would naturally come under classification as "king's seer," and such a coadjutor Asaph and other devout singers may well have been.

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Hezekiah clearly occupied a unique position as a Joint-Author of psalms: not only composing new psalms to suit new occasions; but overhauling, curtailing, changing and extending old psalms, to adapt them to altered circumstances. It would be foolish to blame him for this; since, as a practical man, he no doubt judged, of certain old psalms preserved in the Royal Library, that they must either be thus renovated, or else be left still in disuse so far as temple-worship was concerned. Besides, as a divinely taught man, he may have been conscious of no disability to render this important service to his own generation; while yet his reverence for his great ancestor may have moved him to retain David's name over a psalm wherever feasible. It may thus justifiably have come to pass that quite a number of Hezekiah's adaptations are still superscribed as "by David."

B. EDITORS.—Passing by the editorship of authors who were, and in so far as they were, their own editors, we come to Editors proper, such as Ezra and his successors. As to Ezra himself, perhaps we shall never know how much, under Divine goodness, we owe it to him that we have any preserved Old Testament at all. Moreover, his Divine commission is so generally accepted, that we are not likely to question the wisdom and authority of what he did, even though to him be largely remitted the question of the formation of the Old Testament canon. It is when we come to his successors, the Sopherim, as a class, that we shall probably be conscious of some serious questioning. Partly owing to our own dullness in grasping the necessities of the case, and partly due to our want of appreciation of our Heavenly Father's favour in watching over his own Written Word, we may quite possibly be rather surprised—not to say shocked—to learn how broadly and boldly the Sopherim interpreted their commission. However that may be, let us patiently hear what Dr. Ginsburg has to tell us respecting the work of the Sopherim, or line of professional Editors of the Sacred Text:—"In accepting their transliteration of the text into the present square characters, their division of it into separate words, verses and sections, their orally transmitted pronunciation of the consonants, which determines the sense of the Hebrew Scriptures, and their finally fixing the canon of the Old Testament, we already concede to these spiritual guides of the Jewish Church a divine authority which almost amounts to co-authorship."¹ It

1. G. Intro. 408.

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is clear, then, that we are not unduly exalting the office of the Sopherim, when we name them, distinctively, EDITORS. They were Editors with large editing functions. They were much more than mere copyists or revisers. They were almost co-authors—but not quite.

C. THE MASSORITES.—These “hedged about” the Sacred Text; and, in doing this, occupied a position peculiarly their own, in which they can have no modern successors. They stood between the Sopherim, whose oral decisions they received, and the ordinary professional copyists, on whom it devolved to carry those traditions into effect; as it then further devolved on the Nakdanim or “Massoretic annotators” to revise the codices which the copyists had made, and to see that the accepted traditions of the Sopherim had been scrupulously observed. It is of importance, as conducive to clearness, to bear in mind that the authoritative instructions of the Sopherim were *orally* handed down. It was the risks that attended this process that called into existence—first the Massorites and then the Nakdanim. The difference between these two classes was this: The Massorites “had to invent the graphic signs, to fix the pronunciation and the sense of the consonantal text, and formulate the Lists of correct readings in accordance with the authoritative traditions”; but “the functions of the Nakdanim were not to create, but strictly to conserve the Massoretic labours”: much as modern Press Correctors conserve modern Editorial labours! “They”—these Nakdanim—“revised the consonantal text produced by professional copyists (nearly resembling modern Compositors) and furnished it with the Massoretic vowel-signs and accents, as well as with the Massorahs, both Parva and Magna, as transmitted to them by the Massorites.”¹ By way of completeness it may here be added: That in the third century of our era, there were two recensions or *standards* of the Hebrew Text, known respectively as Eastern and Western, differing slightly from each other;² and, further, that in the early part of the tenth century, there were two rival Nakdanim or Massoretic Annotators, named Ben-Asher and Ben-Naphtali, whose recensions differed still less, inasmuch as these worthy men were merely rival *punctists*.³ If this last circumstance had been heeded, scholars today would not have loosely asserted that our present Massoretic

1. G. Intro. 462.

2. G. Intro. 197.

3. G. Intro. 241.

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Text goes no further back than the tenth century—a statement which, though technically correct, yet is practically misleading. All the truth there is in it is: That the *present pointing* of the Massoretic Text goes no further back than the tenth century. The Massoretic Text itself, in its larger and more substantial features, must have been fixed more than a thousand years earlier, before the Septuagint Version was made.

The present section of our Introduction may be usefully condensed and restfully dismissed by the following approximate dates and divisions of labour:—

The *authorship* of the Psalms—excepting a very few psalms from the days of Ezra and Nehemiah and one or two from the time of the Maccabees—covered a period of about 300 years; namely from B.C. 1000 to B.C. 700: from David to Hezekiah.

The *editing* of the Psalms reached through a period of about 350 years: namely from B.C. 450 (Ezra) to B.C. 100.¹

The *labours of the Massorites* covered a period of about 800 years; namely, from B.C. 100² to A.D. 700.³

Observation 2.—*The Psalter is not one Continuous Treatise, but a COLLECTION OF INDIVIDUAL PSALMS.* According to the division and enumeration current in the Hebrew, Greek, Latin, English and other Psalters, there are 150 individual psalms. If, however, we accept Dr. Thirtle's suggestion, that it is only by taking the ancient *incorporated* Hebrew head-lines, such as "Psalm by David," and catch-words such as "Bless thou," "Praise ye Yah," etc., that we obtain any real and ancient marks of division; and if, as a consequence we amalgamate those between which there are no such dividing signs we still get 139 distinct psalms. It is not *the precise number* that for the moment attracts our attention, but the broad and undeniable fact that the Psalter is a Collection of Individual Psalms; whose individuality is in many cases so clearly marked by changes of both topic and tone, that a mere listener to several psalms, read continuously without formal notice by the reader of the transitions from one to another, could perceive that several complete wholes were being read in his hearing. The deeper student, who has shut himself up to one psalm at a time for continuous meditation, can strongly confirm this individualisation; even though, in the final

1. G. Intro. 408.
2. G. Intro. 421.
3. G. Intro. 462.

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result, he gains an ability to sit in judgment on formal blendings and partings, so as to wax bold to pronounce on their correctness, judging from internal evidence alone. Brushing aside such exceptions as are thus marked off for special criticism, it remains competent to him to say, that between this psalm and that there is sometimes a difference comparable to that between night and noon; and, even as between the various relieving brightnesses, some of them amount to no more than sudden gleams from openings in a railway tunnel, whereas others are like an emergence from among tunnels and rock into a spacious sunlit plain.

Observation 3.—*The Headlines of the Psalms have recently awakened fresh Interest, and their Due Discrimination is leading to Important Results.* Confining ourselves to the more obvious Headlines as (at present) grouped together at the commencement of the psalms that have them, we discover in them one, two, three or even four elements: *First*, a description of the following composition, as a "psalm," a "song," a "miktham" or a "maskil"; *secondly*, a personal name (apparently) of the author, as "by David," "Asaph," and others; *thirdly*, a statement of the occasion when a psalm was written, as "When he fled from Absalom his son"; and *fourthly*, what looks like a musical or liturgical instruction, as, "To the Chief Musician," "upon" such and such an instrument, or "for" such and such a choir, as the case may be. These headings had until quite recently been greatly neglected; some leading reproductions of the Psalms actually appearing entirely without them!

Of late, however, a fresh interest has been awakened in these Headings; so that they no longer are regarded as so much literary incumbrance, seldom trustworthy, and of little or no critical or practical value; but are being investigated with the keenest zest, and are already yielding results which bid fair to revolutionise critical psalm exegesis. This renewed interest is principally due to Dr. Thirtle, who has put forth two books of profound importance: the first on "*The Titles of the Psalms*," and the second on "*Old Testament Problems*." They concern us here chiefly by the distinction, which their author has seen his way to draw, between the strictly *literary* titles of the Psalms and the purely *musical* instructions. The former, he contends, should stand, where they do at present, as *superscribed* lines; and the latter should be moved into a new position as *subscribed* lines, generally, if not always, needing merely to be disentangled

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from the literary lines and placed in each case, by a very easy removal, to the *foot* of the immediately *foregoing* psalm. This may seem a very small matter; but on examination is found to lead to far-reaching results. Leaving those results to be (some of them) investigated a little further on, we can now return to our classification of the contents of the Headlines collectively viewed.

First, a description of the kind of composition which follows; as "psalm," "song," etc. The primary use of these, Dr. Thirtle submits, was to describe the kind of document thus distinguished from legal and historical manuscripts, ready for placing in the right department of the Royal Library. It was primarily a Librarian's mark, so attached for the purpose of orderly storage, and speedy reproduction when demanded. It does not especially concern us at present, except perhaps to observe that, when both "psalm" and "song" are inscribed over the same psalm, it becomes an interesting though nice question whether "psalm" was genus and "song" species, or *vice-versa*.

Secondly, the appearance of what seems to be an author's name. Dr. Thirtle suggests that the insertion of any of these things in a closely written scroll or tablet was not so easy and obvious an achievement as that it should now be lightly regarded as an afterthought and treated as a phenomenon of no value. Thus admonished, the present writer can only express his gratitude for the hint, and testify that, in paying due regard to it, he has been led to the results he little anticipated, the chief of which is that in no case does the name "David" appear without reason—every psalm thus distinguished is, he believes, either David's by original composition, or is an adaptation of a psalm, or fragment of a psalm of which David was the author. So confirmed did this impression little by little become as to impel to a narrow and jealous scrutiny in cases where sole Davidic authorship seemed very unlikely; with the result of arriving at the conclusion that David's co-author Hezekiah, *moved by fellowship in suffering*, has saved from oblivion some fragments from David's remorseful pen which no mere "king's scribe" would have presumed to drag forth to the light, and thus, in short, was originated the clear and confident impression that David's psalms, read partly *in* the lines and partly *between* the lines, contain a species of autobiography which it would have been an unspeakable loss to miss.

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Thirdly, as with the author's name, so with the avowed occasion of writing. Admonished by the respect felt to be due to these avowals of occasion, rather to *look for* the incidental element so rendered probable, than to *look askance*, the acknowledgement must again be made, that thereby an intenser interest in the compositions so introduced has uniformly been created. And probably the more frequent finding of David *when named*, has further conduced to a more frequent finding of Hezekiah when *not* named. The close scrutiny of internal evidence in the former case has probably led to much fuller and more fruitful finding of the anonymous author in the latter case. Of this, evidence must be sought in the Expositions that follow.

Fourthly, the disentangled musical instructions have been the incidental cause of other most attractive investigations; generally confirmatory of Dr. Thirtle's conclusions, but in a few instances stimulating fresh departures towards divergent yet sympathetic results. Chief among the confirmed results are (a) That, naturally, the words, "To the Chief Musician" should always go to the *foot* of the psalm to which they rightly belong; (b) That detailed musical directions, specifying any particular choir to which the rendering of a psalm is assigned, or the air in which a psalm should be rendered should *follow* and not *precede* the note of delivery to the care of "The Chief Musician." The observance of this rule has the remarkably happy effect of moving the Chief Musician's direction—"For the dove of the distant terebinths" to the foot of the psalm (55) containing the wish—"Would that I had pinions like a dove!" (c) Among fresh results, indirectly traceable to Dr. Thirtle's readjusting discovery, is the provision of *bass voices* to assist in the musical rendering of Ps. 45: respecting which Dr. Thirtle himself had expressed the opinion that maidens' *alone* could suitably render it,—an opinion which provoked instant dissent, as soon as the requirements of verses 16, 17 of that psalm were considered. Where then, were the needed male voices to come from? The modification of a line in the neighbourhood, whereby a company of *authors* was converted into a class of *singers*, ultimately settled this question to entire satisfaction. "The sons of korah" being—as was found on careful examination—a class of singers and not a company of psalm-writers, required to be transposed from the head of Ps. 46 to the foot of Ps. 45, and when so removed,—being, as was further discovered, a class of "patriarchs of song"—were both by voice

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(presumably) and especially by seniority and sex, admirably fitted to sustain in song the fatherly admonition contained in the specified verses—all the more completely seeing that the proposed moving up of this musical line would bring maidens along with the old men! The steps by which this conclusion was reached may be more suitably indicated in our Chapter III.—The Psalms as a Liturgy.

CHAPTER TWO

THE PSALMS AS LYRICS

Inasmuch as Lyrics are a species of poetry, we may perhaps usefully tarry on the genus before we advance to the species. It will be rendering a service to young and inexperienced readers of the Psalms to emphasise the elementary fact that first of all the Psalms are poetry. We can then all the better consider them as lyrical poetry, fitted for song and for instrumental accompaniment.

1. That the Psalms are poetry, will be a familiar thought to all who have observed how much fervour and passion there is in them; and how, as a consequence, they abound in figures of speech. It would be enough to leave this element in their composition to be felt, without being formally recognised, were it not that the untrained reader is apt either to make no allowance for poetical license, or else to give up sober interpretation as hopeless. To save him from such uncertainty and helplessness, it may be serviceable to remind him that a statement may be substantially true even when not literally exact; that figures of speech have a natural meaning of their own, and are current coin in literature; that a poet may be a prophet and teacher with a burden to deliver and solemnly lay on the hearts of those to whom he is sent; and that we cannot with impunity close our ears to his message merely because it is enlivened with metaphors or even clothed in allegory.

At this point we may strike in with a few detailed exemplifications of figurative language to be found in the Psalms: on which, however, we cannot tarry—the young student may safely be left to multiply examples and amplify them for himself.