

## Psalms - Meaning of the Hebrew Titles.

Scholars have not been able to come to agreement as to the meaning and application of a goodly number of words and phrases found in the titles of the Psalms. We append a list, together with hints as to the probable meaning:

(1) On “*N<sup>e</sup>ghi<sup>-</sup>no<sup>-</sup>th*” occurs 6 times (Psa 4:1-8; Psa 6:1-10; Psa 54:1-7; 55; Psa 67:1-7; Psa 76:1-12), and means “with stringed instruments.” *N<sup>e</sup>ghi<sup>-</sup>na<sup>-</sup>th* (Psa 61:1-8) may be a slightly defective writing for *N<sup>e</sup>ghi<sup>-</sup>no<sup>-</sup>th*. Perhaps stringed instruments alone were used with psalms having this title. According to Thirtle's hypothesis, the title was originally a subscript to Psa 3:1-8; Psa 5:1-12; Psa 53:1-6; Psa 54:1-7; Psa 60:1-12; 66; Psa 75:1-10.

(2) *N<sup>e</sup>hi<sup>-</sup>lo<sup>-</sup>th* (Psa 5:1-12), possibly a subscript to Psa 4:1-8, is supposed by some to refer to “wind instruments,” possibly flutes.

(3) *Sh<sup>e</sup>mi<sup>-</sup>ni<sup>-</sup>th* (Psa 6:1-10; Psa 12:1-8), meaning “the eighth,” probably denotes the *male* choir, as distinguished from *’Āla<sup>-</sup>mo<sup>-</sup>th*, the maidens' choir. That both terms are musical notes is evident from 1Ch 15:19-21.

(4) *Shigga<sup>-</sup>yo<sup>-</sup>n* (Ps 7) is probably a musical note. Some think it denotes “a dithyrambic poem in wild ecstatic wandering rhythms, with corresponding music.”

(5) *Gitti<sup>-</sup>th* (Psa 8:1-9; 81; Psa 84:1-12) is commonly supposed to refer to an instrument invented in Gath or to a tune that was used in the Philistine city. Thirtle emends slightly to *gitto<sup>-</sup>th*, “wine presses,” and connects Psalms 7; 80 and 83 with the Feast of Tabernacles.

(6) *Mu<sup>-</sup>th labbe<sup>-</sup>n*: The title is generally supposed to refer to a composition entitled “Death of the Son.” Possibly the melody to which this composition was sung was the tune to which Ps 9 (or 8) was to be sung. Thirtle translates “The Death of the Champion,” and regards it as a subscription to Psa 8:1-9, in celebration of the victory over Goliath.

(7) *Higga<sup>-</sup>yo<sup>-</sup>n*: This word is not strictly a title, but occurs in connection with *Ṣelah* in Psa 9:16. the Revised Version (British and American) translates the word in Psa 92:3, “a solemn sound,” and in Psa 19:14, “meditation.” It is probably a musical note equivalent to largo.

(8) *Mikhta m* (Psa 16:1-11; 56 through 60): Following the rabbinical guess, some translate “a golden poem.” The exact meaning is unknown.

(9) *'Ayeleth ha-Shahar* (Ps 22) means “the hind of the morning,” or possibly “the help of the morning.” Many think that the words were the opening line of some familiar song.

(10) “Dedication of the House” (Psa 30:1-12): The title probably refers to the dedication of Yahweh's house; whether in the days of David, in connection with the removal of the ark to Jerusalem, or in the days of Zerubbabel, or in the time of Judas Maccabeus, it is impossible to say positively. If Psa 39:1-13 was used on any one of these widely separated occasions, that fact might account for the insertion of the caption, “a Song at the Dedication of the House.”

(11) *Maski l* (Psa 32:1-11; 42 through 45; 52 through 55; 74; 78; 88; 89; Psa 142:1-7): The exact meaning of this common term is not clear. Briggs suggests “a meditation,” Thirtle and others “a psalm of instruction,” Kirkpatrick “a cunning psalm.” Some of the 13 psalms bearing this title are plainly didactic, while others are scarcely to be classed as psalms of instruction.

(12) *Y<sup>e</sup>dhu thu n*: In the title of Psa 39:1-13, Jeduthun might well be identical with the Chief Musician. In Psa 62:1-12 and 77 the Revised Version (British and American) renders “after the manner of Jeduthun.” We know from 1Ch 16:41; 1Ch 25:3 that JEDUTHUN (which see) was a choir leader in the days of David. He perhaps introduced a method of conducting the service of song which ever afterward was associated with his name.

(13) “Song of Loves” (Ps 45) is appropriate as a literary title to a marriage song.

(14) *Sho shanni m* (Psalms 45; 69) means “lilies.” *Sho shanni m e dhu th* (Ps 80) means “lilies, a testimony.” *Shu sha n e dhu th* (Psa 60:1-12) may be rendered “the lily of testimony.” Thirtle represents these titles as subscripts to Psalms 44; 59; 68; Psa 79:1-13, and associates them with the spring festival, Passover. Others regard them as indicating the melody to which the various psalms were to be sung.

(15) *'Ala mo th* (Psa 46:1-11) means “maidens.” The common view is that the psalm was to be sung by soprano voices. Some speak of a female choir and compare 1Ch 15:20; Psa 68:11, Psa 68:24 f. According to Thirtle, the title is a subscript to Ps

45, which describes the marriage of a princess, a function at which it would be quite appropriate to have a female choir.

(16) *Maḥālath* (Psa 53:1-6), *Maḥālath ḥ'annoṯh* (Ps 88): Perhaps Thirtle's vocalization of the Hebrew consonants as *m<sup>e</sup>ḥoṯoṯh*, “dancings,” is correct. As a subscript to Psa 87:1-7; *m<sup>e</sup>ḥoṯoṯh* may refer to David's joy at the bringing of the ark to Zion (2Sa 6:14, 2Sa 6:15).

(17) *Yoṯnath eṯlem ḥoḳim* (Psa 56:1-13): We have already called attention to the fact that as a subscript to Ps 55 “the dove of the distant terebinths,” or “the silent dove of them that are afar off,” would have a point of contact with Psa 55:6-8.

(18) *'Al-tashḥeth* (Psalms 57 through 59; Psa 75:1-10) means “destroy not;” and is quite suitable as a subscript to Psalms 56 through 58 and 74 (compare Deu 9:26). Many think this the first word of a vintage song (compare Isa 65:8).

(19) Ascents, Song of” or Song of Degrees (Psa 120:1-7 through 134): the Revised Version (British and American) translates the title to 15 psalms “A Song of Ascents,” where the King James Version has “A Song of Degrees.” The most probable explanation of the meaning of the expression is that these 15 psalms were sung by bands of pilgrims on their way to the yearly feasts in Jerusalem (Psa 122:4). Psalms 121 through 123; Psa 125:1-5; Psa 127:1-5; Psa 128:1-6 and 132 through 134 are well suited for use on such occasions (see, however, *Expository Times*, XII, 62).

(20) “For the Chief Musician”: 55 psalms are dedicated to the precentor or choir leader of the temple. “To the Chief Musician” might mean that the precentor was the author of certain psalms, or that there was a collection of hymns compiled by him for use in temple worship, or that certain psalms were placed in his hands, with suggestions as to the character of the poems and the music which was to accompany them. It is quite likely that there was an official collection of psalms for public worship in the custody of the choir master of the temple.

(21) *Ṣelah*, though not strictly a title, may well be discussed in connection with the superscriptions. It occurs 71 times in the Psalms and 3 times in Habakkuk. It is almost certainly technical term whose meaning was well known to the precentor and the choir in the temple. The Septuagint always, Symmachus and Theodotion generally, render *diapsalma*, which probably denotes an instrumental interlude. The Targum Aquila and some other ancient versions render “forever.” Jerome, following Aquila, translates it

“always.” Many moderns derive *Şelah* from a root meaning “to raise,” and suppose it to be a sign to the musicians to strike up with a louder accompaniment. Possibly the singing ceased for a moment. A few think it is a liturgical direction to the congregation to “lift up” their voices in benediction. It is unwise to dogmatize as to the meaning of this very common word.