# The Songs of Degrees as a Whole

This little Psalter within the Psalter consists of fifteen brief songs. Why they are grouped together and what is meant by their generic name it would be hard to tell. The conjectures are very many, but they are mere suppositions. Out of them all the conjecture of Dr. Jebb best commends itself to my own mind, though it would be quite consistent with this suggestion to believe that the series of songs arranged by David became the Pilgrim Psalms of after ages, and were chanted by the Lord's people as they went up to the temple. They are "Songs of the Goings Up;" so some read the word. Those who delight to spiritualize everything find here Ascents of the Soul, or language fitted to describe the rising of the heart from the deepest grief to the highest delight. I have thought it well to indicate the methods by which learned men have tried to explain the term "Songs of Degrees," but the reader must select his own interpretation. --C. H. S.

In the thirteenth chapter of the First Book of Chronicles, it is related, that David brought up the Ark from Kirjath-jearim to the house of Obed-edom. The word (####) used in the seventh verse, for "bringing up" the Ark, is of the same etymology with, and cognate to that which is translated "degrees." And upon this occasion the great event was celebrated by the accompaniment of sacred music. "And David and all Israel played before God with all their might, and with singing, and with harps, and with psalteries, and with timbrels, and with cymbals, and with trumpets." Again, in the fifteenth chapter of the same book, in the fourteenth verse, the same term is employed for bringing up the Ark to Jerusalem; and the choral services of the Levites are mentioned in immediate connection. And in the fifth chapter of the Second Book of Chronicles (fifth verse), we are told that Solomon assembled the people at the dedication of the Temple, to bring up the Ark from Sion to the Temple of the Lord. --John Jebb.

I abide in the simple and plain sense as much as I may, and judge that these Psalms are called The Psalms of Degrees because the Levites or priests were wont to sing them upon the stairs or some high place; even as with us he that beginneth the Psalms or preacheth, standeth in a place above the rest, that he may be the better seen and heard. For it seemeth not that these Psalms were sung of the multitude which were in the Temple, or of the rest of the choir, but of certain which were appointed to sing them, or at least to begin them on the stairs to the rest, and so have their name; like as some other of the Psalms have their name and title from the singer. But how should a man know all their rites and ceremonies, especially after so long a time, whereby they are now clean worn out of the memory of all men? Seeing therefore among such a multitude of Psalms, when the law was yet in his full force and power, some were wont to be sung with one manner of ceremony, and some with another, according to the time and place, as the use and custom then was, let this suffice us to think that this title pertaineth to no point of doctrine, but only to the ceremony of the singers, what manner of ceremony soever it was. --Martin Luther, in "A Commentarie upon the Psalmes of Degrees," 1577.

There were fifteen steps by which the priests ascended into the Temple, on each of which they sang one of these fifteen Psalms. --David Kimchi.

Whatever view of the Songs of Degrees you may take besides, you cannot leave out some association of them with the steps, without ignoring the unanimous belief about them handed down from time immemorial amongst the people who gave them to us; without, in fact, implying that at some epoch or other this strange association of the steps with the Psalms was gratuitously invented, and, being invented, secured general acceptance in the sacred literature of the Hebrew nation. It is quite impossible to believe such a thing, when we are dealing with a people so jealous of precedent and authority in religion as the Hebrews have always been. I see, in fact, no sufficient reason why we should not follow the leading of the Mischna and feel that Songs of Degrees, Songs of the Steps, is as much as to say Songs in the sacred Orchestra. --H. T. Armfield, in "The Gradual Psalms," 1874.

The great Carmelite expositor, Michael Ayguan, alleges that the fifteen Psalms were divided by the Jews into three portions of five, with prayers intercalated, much as the Gregorian division of matins into three nocturns; and that each of the three grades of advance in the spiritual life is betokened by each quinary; the beginners, the progressors, and the perfect; or, in other terms, those who are severally in the purgative, the illuminative, and the unitive way. And thus it will be noticed that in Psalms cxx - cxxiv there is constant reference to trouble and danger; in cxxv - cxxix to confidence in God; in cxxx - cxxxiv to direct communion with him in his house. And Genebrardus, a later commentator, defines the fifteen degrees of going up out of the valley of weeping to the presence of God to be (1) affliction, (2) looking to God, (3) joy in communion, (4) invocation, (5) thanksgiving, (6) confidence, (7) patient waiting for deliverance, (8) God's grace and favour, (9) fear of the Lord, (10) martyrdom, (11) hatred of sins, (12) humility, (13) desire for the coming of Christ, (14) concord and charity, (15) constant blessing of God. --Neale and Littledale.

No trace in history, or authentic tradition, can be found of these steps, which owe their construction solely to the accommodating fancy of the Rabbins, who, as usual, imagined facts, in order to support their preconceived theories. --John Jebb.

It is an additional objection to this Rabbinical conceit, that David, whose name several of these Psalms bear and others of which have evident reference to his time and circumstances--lived in the time of the tabernacle which had no steps. --James Anderson's Note to Calvin in loc.

In the version of Theodotian, executed in the early part of the second century, with the express view of correcting the errors of the Septuagint, as well as in the translations by Aquila and by Symmachus, these Psalms are rightly described as songs for the journeys up, and are thus at once referred to the stated pilgrimages to the Temple. The expressions, "Thou shalt go up to appear before the Lord thy God thrice in the year" (Exod. xxxiv 24), "If this people go up to do sacrifice" (1 Kings xii 27)--a form of expression constantly employed as often as these sacred journeys are mentioned is precisely that which the Psalms themselves exhibit: "I was glad when it was said unto me, Go up unto the house of the Lord"; and while we may well adopt this view, for the additional reason that it is in harmony with the whole spirit and sentiment which they breathe throughout, we shall find these Psalms to form at the same time one of the most admirable and instructive manuals of devotion with which the love of our heavenly Father, through the grace of the Holy Spirit, has been pleased to bless us. --Robert Nisbet, in "The Songs of the Temple Pilgrims," 1863.

If the traditionary interpretation of the title, Song of Degrees, be accepted, that they were sung by devout pilgrims on their way to Jerusalem to keep the great feasts of the Lord, we may suppose that companies toiling up this long ascent would relieve the tedium of the way by chanting some of them.

From the customs of Orientals still prevalent, I think it highly probable that such an explanation of the title may be substantially correct. Nothing is more common than to hear individuals and parties of natives, travelling together through the open country and along mountain-paths, especially during the night, break out into singing some of their favourite songs. Once, descending from the top of Sunnln, above Beirut, with a large company of natives, they spontaneously began to sing in concert. The moon was shining brightly in the clear sky, and they kept up their chanting for a long time. I shall not soon forget the impression made by that moonlight concert, as we wound our way down the eastern side of Lebanon to the Buka'a, on the way to Ba'albek. Through the still midnight air of that lofty region the rough edge of their stentorian voices, softened into melody, rang out full and strong, waking the sleeping echoes far and wide down the rocky defiles of the mountain. Something like this may have often rendered vocal this dreary ascent to Jerusalem. It is common in this country to travel in the night during the summer, and we know that the Hebrew pilgrims journeyed in large companies. On his ascent along this road from Jericho to the Holy City, Jesus was attended not only by the twelve apostles, but by others, both men and women; and it would be strange indeed if sometimes they did not seek relief from this oppressive solitude by singing the beautiful songs of Zion. --William M. Thomson, in "The Land and the Book," 1881.

When we consider the place in the Psalter which these "Songs of Degrees, or of the goings up" occupy, we see good reason to accept the statement (of the Syriac version, and of S. Chrysostom, Theodoret, Euthymius, and other Fathers, and also of Symmachus, Aquila, and of Hammond, Ewald, and many moderns), that these Psalms describe the feelings of those Israelites who went up with Zerubbabel and Jeshua, and afterwards with Ezra, and still later with Nehemiah, from the land of their captivity and dispersion at Babylon, Susa, and other regions of the East, to the home of their fathers, Jerusalem. Hence, in some of the foregoing Psalms, we have seen a reference to the dedication of the Second Temple (Ps. cxviii), and of the walls of Jerusalem (Ps. cii), and to the building up of the nation itself on the old foundation of the law of God, given to their fathers at Sinai (Ps. cxix) --Christopher Wordsworth.

Gesenius has the merit of having first discerned the true meaning of the questioned

inscription, inasmuch as first in 1812, and frequently since that time, he has taught that the fifteen songs have their name from the step-like progressive rhythm of their thoughts, and that consequently the name, like the triolet (roundelay) in Western poetry, does not refer to the liturgical usage, but to the technical structure. The correctness of this view has been duly appraised more particularly by De Wette, who adduces this rhythm of steps or degrees, too, among the more artificial rhythms. The songs are called Songs of Degrees or Gradual Psalms as being songs that move onward towards a climax, and that by means of ##### (########), i.e., a taking up again of the immediately preceding word by way of giving intensity to the expression; and they are placed together on account of this common characteristic, just like the Michtammim, which bear that name from a similar characteristic. --Franz Delitzsch.

"Go up, go up, my soul!" must be the motto of one who would enter in to the meaning of these Psalms. They are a Jacob's ladder whose foot is fixed on the earth, but the top reaches up to the "heavenly Jerusalem."

The rhythmical structure of these Psalms (in which one line is built up upon another stair-wise) is a suitable outward accompaniment of the interior character of the Psalms. Short, pointed lines fall in well with the flow of mystico-allegorical thought:--as in "Nearer, my God, to thee," or, "Jerusalem the golden." --William Kay

We may notice the following characteristics of nearly all these Psalms: sweetness and tenderness; a sad pathetic tone; brevity; an absence generally of the ordinary parallelism; and something of a quick, trochaic rhythm. --"The Speaker's Commentary."

Though it may be they are so called because of their excellency; a song of degrees is called a man of high degree (1 Chron. xvii 17); these being excellent ones for the matter of them, their manner of being an excellent song, as an excellent man composure, and the brevity of them. --John Gill

This being a matter of small moment, I am not disposed to make it the subject

of elaborate investigation; but the probable conjecture is, that this title was given to these Psalms because they were sung on a higher key than others. The Hebrew word for degrees being derived from the word, (###), tsalah, to ascend or go up, I agree with those who are of opinion that it denotes the different musical notes rising in succession. --John Calvin.

Hezekiah liveth, these fifteen years, in safety and prosperity, having humbled himself before the Lord for his pride to the ambassadors of Babel. The degrees of the sun's reversing, and the fifteen years of Hezekiah's life prolonging, may call to our minds the fifteen Psalms of Degrees; viz. from Psalm cxx and forward. There were Hezekiah's songs that were sung to the stringed instruments in the house of the Lord (Isa. xxxviii 20): whether these were picked out by him for that purpose may be left to conjecture. --John Lightfoot, 1602 - 1675.