

# The message of a number Psalms as interpreted in Syriac Psalm headings<sup>1,2</sup>

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## ABSTRACT

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*Following the view of Theodore of Mopsuestia, the translator(s) of the Peshitta Psalter did not accept the historicity of the headings of the Psalms in the Hebrew Psalter. In some manuscripts the Peshitta Psalms do not have headings at all, while in other manuscripts headings are supplied. This paper makes a few remarks on the study of the headings of the Psalms in Syriac and discusses the headings of a number of Psalms in different Syriac traditions, with special attention to the headings in the Syriac manuscript 12t4. These headings can be regarded as a summary of the exegesis of the particular Psalm and they represent different schools of exegetes with widely different interpretations of most of the Psalms.*

## 1 INTRODUCTION

Following the view of Theodore of Mopsuestia, the translator(s) of the Peshitta Psalter did not accept the historicity of the headings of the Psalms in the Hebrew Psalter<sup>3</sup>. Thus these headings were probably left untranslated, or else omitted very early on in the transmission of the Peshitta. In some manuscripts the Peshitta Psalms do not have headings at all, while in other manuscripts headings are supplied. The same headings do not, however, appear in all manuscripts or editions. This article will commence with a few remarks on the study of the headings of the Psalms in Syriac, followed by a discussion of the headings of a number of Psalms in different Syriac traditions. The following Psalms will be studied: 3, 8, 86, 110, 143 (= 144MT) and 150.

Usually the manuscripts and editions with headings are divided in four groups, viz., the headings used in the East Syrian Church, the headings dependent on the *Codex Ambrosianus* (that is, the headings of the West Syrian Church), the headings in some early editions of the Peshitta, such as Sionita, the polyglots and the important edition of Samuel Lee and

manuscripts with a mixture of the preceding<sup>4</sup>. The headings in the Syro-Hexaplar are, as one would suspect, related to the headings of the Septuagint.

The headings of the East Syrian Church are related to the interpretation of the Psalms by Theodore of Mopsuestia (one of the Antiochian Fathers), while the headings of the West Syrian Church are often linked to the interpretation of Alexandrian Fathers, such as Eusebius of Caesarea. In this paper a number of Psalm headings in the first three groups mentioned above are studied. With regard to the East Syrian headings, special attention is given to the manuscript 12t4<sup>5</sup> because it contains at least four different headings for each Psalm. Three of these headings are connected to Church Fathers - Eusebius, Athanasius and Theodore of Mopsuestia. The fourth heading is called the Hebrew heading and is usually an independent translation of the headings of the Hebrew Psalter. In cases where the Hebrew and the Syro-Hexaplar disagree, a fifth heading is frequently added.

In addition to the heading ascribed to Theodore in 12t4 the text of 6t1 will be given in the discussion below, as this is the oldest manuscript with the East Syrian headings. As regards the other two traditions, the headings of the printed edition of the Peshitta by Lee and those of the *Codex Ambrosianus* (7a1) are presented. The headings will be given in an English translation to facilitate the discussion.

For the origin of the different headings the commentaries on the Psalms of Eusebius of Caesarea<sup>6</sup>, Athanasius<sup>7</sup> and Theodore of Mopsuestia<sup>8</sup> proved to be very important, as well as the letter of Athanasius to Marcellinus<sup>9</sup>. In a recent discussion of this letter Stead points out that the letter can be divided into six sections. In the third section (chapter 14) Athanasius classifies the Psalms and in the fourth he gives indications for the devotional use of the different Psalms (chapter 15-26)<sup>10</sup>. Both these sections are often reflected in the headings ascribed to Athanasius in 12t4. The commentary of Eusebius also contains a list of headings (or argumenta) to the Psalms<sup>11</sup> which proved to be important for the headings ascribed to Eusebius in 12t4.

## 2 A SURVEY OF RESEARCH ON THE HEADINGS OF THE PSALMS IN SYRIAC

The headings of the Psalms in the Masoretic text are not very important for the study of the Syriac headings. They were rejected in the Peshitta, in agreement with the view of Theodore of Mopsuestia. His views were

followed by the Eastern and Western Syrian tradition. The Western churches regarded Theodore as heterodox, but still followed his rejection of the headings of the Psalms in the Masoretic text and in the Septuagint.

Only the Syro-Hexaplar has headings related to the Hebrew, via the Septuagint. In the study of the Hebrew headings a consensus has been reached that the titles are secondary additions. They can not be regarded as containing valuable historical information<sup>12</sup>.

The study of the Syriac Psalm headings received a lot of attention during the previous century and up to the publication of a critical edition of the East Syrian headings by Bloemendaal in 1960. The contributions of Baethgen, Vosté and Devreesse were especially important<sup>13</sup>. Most of the research focused on the East Syrian headings. This can be attributed to three important editions of the Psalms in Syriac with East Syrian headings in the previous century, viz., the Urmia edition of the Peshitta of 1852, the Urmia Psalter of 1891 and the Mosul edition of 1887-1891, as well as to the influence of Theodore of Mopsuestia on these headings. Although the headings of the West Syrian church are available in the *Codex Ambrosianus*, no edition of these headings comparable to Bloemendaal's edition, with variants from other manuscripts than the Ambrosian, has yet been published. Bloemendaal gives a survey of the research on the Syriac headings up to his time. Since his edition no important studies on this subject have appeared. This is a pity because the older studies used the headings as in the printed editions, and mostly those in the Mosul Bible, a Catholic edition appealing to Catholics like Vosté and Devreesse<sup>14</sup>. In his edition Bloemendaal did not really utilise the manuscripts used by him for a re-evaluation of the development of the East Syrian headings. He was also unable to use the important manuscript 12t4. This article will give some examples of the headings in three of the traditions distinguished by Bloemendaal. The aim is to compare these headings and to explore some possible origins for the headings contained in the *Codex Ambrosianus*, the edition of Lee and the important manuscript 12t4. The influence of Theodore of Mopsuestia on the East Syrian headings is well attested to and will not be discussed in detail<sup>15</sup>. The one very important recent contribution to the study of Theodore's influence on the East Syriac headings is the publication of Syriac fragments of his commentary by Van Rompay<sup>16</sup>. The headings of the East Syrian church are much shorter than Theodore's argumenta, but they agree in content.

### 3 A DISCUSSION OF A SELECTION OF SYRIAC PSALM HEADINGS

#### Psalm 3

- 6t1 Spoken by David when he was pursued by Absalom.
- 12t4 Hebrew Spoken by David when he was pursued by Absalom.  
Eusebius A prophecy of the blessings that were about to be for David.  
Theodore Spoken by David when he was pursued by his son Absalom.  
Athanasius As a petition alone. And when you are pursued by those who belong to you and there are many for you from those who stand up against you.
- 7a1 Spoken by David when he was fleeing from his son Absalom.
- Lee Spoken by David regarding the future benefits.

The heading of the Masoretic text is: "A Psalm of David when he fled before Absalom his son". This is retained by the Septuagint, followed by the Syro-Hexaplar. A comparison of the heading in the Syro-Hexaplar and the Hebrew of 12t4 is very interesting. The Syro-Hexaplar has: "A Psalm of David when he fled before his son Absalom". This agrees very closely with the Septuagint, which is a good translation of the Hebrew. The Hebrew of 12t4 is not that close to the Hebrew, but is exactly the same as the heading of 6t1, to which the heading ascribed to Theodore in 12t4 adds "his son".

The heading of Athanasius contains first of all an indication of the type of psalm - a petition alone- agreeing with the classification of this Psalm in his letter to Marcellinus<sup>17</sup>.

The rest of this heading agrees with Athanasius' prescription for the use of this psalm in this letter<sup>18</sup>, in a time of persecution and when people rise against one. In the Syriac version of the Psalms commentary of Athanasius the shorter version has a marginal note: "A petition alone"<sup>19</sup>. This agrees with the letter to Marcellinus and the first part of the heading ascribed to Athanasius in 12t4. The remainder of the heading in the Syriac version of the commentary is close to that of the Syro-Hexaplar.

The heading of the Psalm in the commentary of Eusebius is that of the Septuagint<sup>20</sup>, but the argumentum is different<sup>21</sup>: "A prophecy about the blessings that were to be for David". This agrees with the heading ascribed to Eusebius in 12t4.

## Psalm 8

- 6t1 He prophesies regarding the Messiah, our Lord, and he also makes known to us the division of the natures.
- 12t4 Hebrew Exhortation, on the wine-presses. A Psalm of David.  
Eusebius A prophecy regarding the calling of the nations.  
Theodore He prophesies regarding the Messiah, our Lord, and he also makes known to us the division of the natures.  
Athanasius From those who are a thanksgiving. When you see in every place the goodness of the Lord which is extended and the kind of people who are saved and you want to call to the Lord.
- 7a1 Spoken by David when the people and the priests lifted up the ark of the Lord to carry it to the house David built for it.
- Lee Of David. A prophecy that the unrighteous, children and youths will glorify the Lord with hosannas.

Athanasius called this psalm a Psalm of thanksgiving in his letter to Marcellinus<sup>22</sup>. The remainder of the heading ascribed to Athanasius does also agree with the remarks in the letter to Marcellinus<sup>23</sup>. In the letter to Marcellinus Athanasius has two remarks on the use of this psalm, one on its own and one in conjunction with Psalm 83. The heading in 12t4 combines these two remarks, but omits the reference to the wine-presses in the second remark.

The argumentum for this Psalm in the commentary of Eusebius<sup>24</sup> agrees with the heading ascribed to Eusebius in 12t4.

The Messianic interpretation in the heading of Theodore is noteworthy and is not in agreement with the interpretations of Eusebius and Athanasius. In his commentary he links this psalm to the incarnation<sup>25</sup>. His interpretation of the incarnation was one of the factors that influenced the church to declare him a heretic after his death<sup>26</sup>.

## Psalm 86

- 6t1 Prayer of Hezekiah when the Assyrians surrounded him and he asked God for deliverance from them.
- 12t4 Hebrew A prayer of David.  
Eusebius A prayer... of the calling of the nations.  
Theodore Prayer of Hezekiah when the enemies, the Assyrians, surrounded him and he asked God for deliverance from them.

Athanasius From those who are a thanksgiving and petition. And when you have need of a prayer on account of those who are standing up against you and seizing your soul, sing:

7a1 Spoken by David when he was building a sanctuary for the Lord.

Lee Of David, when he built a house for the Lord. And a prophecy about the calling of the nations. And again, a prayer peculiar to the righteous.

The argumentum of Eusebius is: A message of David and a prophecy of the calling of the nations<sup>27</sup>. This is probably reflected in the damaged heading ascribed to Eusebius in 12t4.

In his letter to Marcellinus Athanasius classified this psalm as a prayer and a supplication<sup>28</sup>, agreeing with the beginning of 12t4. In this letter he also prescribes this psalm for a time when he needs a prayer on account of his adversaries, when they surround his soul<sup>29</sup>. The agreement between this and the heading in 12t4 is very clear.

The heading of Theodore in 12t4 is very important. It inserts "the enemies" before "the Assyrians". This is the only version of this heading with this addition. In the Syriac Psalms 154 and 155 the headings of this psalm and Psalm 87 are used. In 12t4 the headings are combined in the case of Psalm 154, while the other manuscripts all have a shortened form of the heading of Psalm 86, with "enemies" in the place of "the Assyrians". While the exact origin of that reading is uncertain, the addition of "the enemies" in the heading ascribed to Theodore in Psalm 86 in 12t4 may reflect a tradition with that reading in this heading. Unfortunately we do not have Theodore's commentary on this Psalm.

The first two parts of Lee's heading are a combination of 7a1 and Eusebius.

## Psalm 110

6t1 Regarding the rule of our Saviour the Messiah.

12t4 Hebrew Of David. A Psalm.

Eusebius The victory which is in the Messiah.

Theodore He prophesies regarding the rule of our Saviour the Messiah.

Athanasius Of those who are with narration. And again a message (or: evangelist) with a prophecy. When you do indeed wish to sing any one of the Psalms exclusively about our

Saviour, how will you find among these one that is better suited than this one?

- 7a1 Spoken by David regarding the dwelling of the Lord and his army.  
Lee Of David. Regarding the dwelling of the Lord and his glorious army and a prophecy regarding the Messiah and his victory over the adversary.

The argumentum of Eusebius is: The victory of Christ<sup>30</sup>. This agrees with 12t4. In his letter to Marcellinus Athanasius classifies this psalm as the only one containing an announcement with a prophecy<sup>31</sup>, agreeing with 12t4's second classification. In this instance the marginal note in the shorter version differs from the letter's classification by calling it a narration<sup>32</sup>. In his prescription for the use of this psalm he treats it and Psalm 45 together. The question asked in the heading in 12t4 is closely in agreement with the description in the letter to Marcellinus<sup>33</sup>: "When you want to sing about the things exclusively related to the Saviour, you will find these only in a few psalms; chiefly you have 44 and 109 (=45 and 110 MT) who indicate his extraordinary generation from the Father and his coming into the flesh".

The addition at the beginning of the heading of Theodore in 12t4 agrees with the majority of manuscripts and editions used by Bloemendaal<sup>34</sup>. This may reflect the textus receptus of this heading against the shorter earlier form of 6t1.

The heading of Lee can be regarded as a combination of the headings of 7a1 and Eusebius.

### Psalm 143

- 6t1 Thanksgiving of the Maccabees on account of their victory when they prevailed against their enemies and they asked complete deliverance from God.
- 12t4 Hebrew Of David. Another manuscript: Of David, against Goliath.
- Eusebius Thanksgiving of one who conquered.
- Theodore Thanksgiving of the Maccabees on account of their victory when they prevailed against their enemies and they asked complete deliverance from God.
- Athanasius Of those who are a thanksgiving. If a cruel enemy stands up against the church, the people of God and you, like Goliath against David, do not fear, but have trust like David and say:

7a1 Spoken by David when he killed Asaph the brother of the hero Goliath.

Lee Of David. When he killed Asaph the brother of Goliath. And thanksgiving for him who conquered.

The heading of the Hebrew in 12t4 agrees with the Masoretic text, while the other manuscript referred to has the reading of the Syro-Hexaplar, agreeing with the Septuagint. The argumentum of Eusebius is<sup>35</sup>: "A thanksgiving of the victor". This agrees with the heading of Eusebius in 12t4.

The letter to Marcellinus classifies this psalm as a thanksgiving<sup>36</sup>, agreeing with Athanasius in 12t4. In his prescription regarding this Psalm Athanasius says<sup>37</sup>: "When a tyrannical enemy rises up against the people and against you, like Goliath against David, do not fear. But trust, like David and sing the words of Psalm 143". This is very close to the heading of Athanasius in 12t4, that adds "the church" and qualifies the people as the people of God.

The fragmentary Syriac version of Theodore's commentary on the Psalms contains the commentary on Psalm 143, including his summary of the interpretation. The heading ascribed to Theodore is shorter than that summary, but gives the main points of that summary. This includes the reference to the victory of the Maccabees over their enemies and their prayer for deliverance. The majority of the Syriac words in the heading can also be found in Theodore's summary<sup>38</sup>.

The heading of Lee is very important in this case. In the Septuagint this psalm is linked to David's victory over Goliath. This is reflected in the heading ascribed to Athanasius and in the letter to Marcellinus and goes back to the Septuagint. Lee, however, combines the heading of 7a1, with its reference to the brother of Goliath, and the heading of Eusebius.

## Psalm 150

6t1 Exhortation of the people in Babylon to glorify God their helper with every kind of music.

12t4 Hebrew Alleluia. Another manuscript: Alleluia Alleluia.

Eusebius General exhortation of praise.

Theodore Exhortation of the people to glorify with all kinds of music.

Athanasius From those that indicate praise. If you want to praise the Lord and you want to know how and on account of

what, but you do not know how to praise and what words are fitting, say for the one who praises that you have this one.

- 7a1 Spoken by David about the conclusion of the praises of the Lord through the spirit of David.
- Lee Spoken by David about the conclusion of the praises of the Lord through the spirit of David. Everyone who is at rest will praise the Lord.

The other manuscript referred to in the Hebrew heading of 12t4 is the Syro-Hexaplar. The first heading ascribed to the Hebrew agrees with the Masoretic text and the Septuagint.

The argumentum of Eusebius has<sup>39</sup>: "A general exhortation for a hymn". This is close to 12t4.

Athanasius classifies this psalm as one of those that indicate praise<sup>40</sup>, as in 12t4. In his prescription regarding the use of this Psalm he groups it with Psalms 104, 106, 134, 145, 146, 147 and 148. In his prescription he asks the same kind of question as in 12t4<sup>41</sup>: "Do you want to praise God but do not know how and for what reason he must be praised and what is fitting to bring while praising? You have 104 and 106 and 134 and 145 and 146 and 147 and 148 and 150". This agrees very closely with 12t4.

Lee has the heading of 7a1 and an addition that agrees with Eusebius.

#### 4 CONCLUSIONS

These headings can be regarded as a summary of the exegesis of the particular psalm. The different headings represent different schools of exegetes with widely different interpretations of most of the psalms. The headings ascribed to Athanasius in 12t4 agree frequently with the classification of the psalm and the prescription for devotional use in his letter to Marcellinus. The classifications of the psalms regularly also agree with the marginal notes to the headings of the shorter Syriac version of his commentary. He finds a messianic meaning much more frequently than Theodore, who is more inclined to historical interpretations. The headings of Eusebius are in accord with his exegesis as a representative of the Alexandrian school. The headings of 7a1 are also more in agreement with that school, but a direct dependence on Eusebius or Athanasius is not proven. Lee combines headings from different origin, but frequently combines the headings of 7a1 and Eusebius.

## NOTES:

- 1 For five years Professor W S Prinsloo was chairman of the Old Testament Society of South Africa. During these years I served as secretary. We did a lot of work and planning together and became very good friends. His death was a great loss, also to me personally. This paper is dedicated to the memory of my friend Riempiets.
- 2 This paper reflects a part of research done at the Peshitta Institute of the Rijks Universiteit Leiden, Netherlands, during 1996. The financial support of the Centre for Research Development of the Human Sciences Research Council of South Africa for the research in Leiden is hereby gratefully acknowledged. Views expressed and conclusions drawn are those of the author and should not be attributed to the Centre for Research Development.
- 3 Cf F Baethgen, "Siebzehn makkabaische Psalmen nach Theodor von Mopsuestia", *ZAW* 6 (1886), 269.
- 4 Cf W Bloemendaal, *The headings of the Psalms in the East Syrian Church*, Leiden 1960, 2-3.
- 5 For a description of this manuscript, cf A Scher, "Notice sur les manuscrits syriaques et arabes conservés à l'archevêché chaldéen de Diarbékir", *Journal Asiatique*, 2.10 (1907):346-349. The notation used in the edition of the Peshitta published by the Peshitta Institute in Leiden will be used to refer to the Syriac manuscripts used in that edition; cf W Baars, *List of Old Testament Peshitta manuscripts (preliminary Issue)*, Leiden 1961.
- 6 *Patrologiae Graecae* 23 (Henceforth *P G*).
- 7 *P G* 27. Two versions of the commentary of Athanasius are also available in Syriac. Cf R W Thomson, *Athanasiana Syriaca Part IV. Expositio in Psalmos. I. Abbreviated version. 2. Longer Version*. (CSCO 386. *Scriptores Syri* 167. Louvain 1977, =Thomson, *Text*). A translation of this text is found in R W Thomson, *Athanasiana Syriaca Part IV. Expositio in Psalmos. 1. Abbreviated version. 2. Longer Version*. (CSCO 387. *Scriptores Syri* 168. Louvain 1977).
- 8 Cf R Devreesse, *Le commentaire de Théodore de Mopsueste sur les Psaumes (I-LXXX)*. (Studie e Testi 93, Città del Vaticano 1939); L van Rompay, *Théodore de Mopsueste. Fragments syriaques du Commentaire des Psaumes (Psaume 118 et Psaumes 138-148)* (CSCO 435. *Scriptores Syri* 189, Leuven 1982) (=Text), and L van Rompay, *Théodore de Mopsueste. Fragments syriaques du Commentaire des Psaumes (Psaume 118 et Psaumes 138-148)* (CSCO 436. *Scriptores Syri* 190, Leuven 1982).
- 9 Cf *P G* 27, 11-46.
- 10 Cf G C Stead, "St. Athanasius on the Psalms", *Vigiliae Christianae* 39/1 (1985), 66-69.
- 11 Cf *P G* 23, 67-72.
- 12 Cf B S Childs, "Psalms and midrashic exegesis", *JSS* 16/2 (1971), 137.
- 13 For a survey of important contributions up to 1960, cf Bloemendaal, *op cit*, 3-12.
- 14 Cf J M Vosté, "La Peshita de Mossoul et la revision catholique des anciennes versions orientales de la Bible", in: *Miscellanea Giovanni Mercati. Volume I*, (Studie e Testi 121, Vatican City 1946, 59-94).

- 15 Cf J M Vosté, "De versione syriaca operum Theodori Mopsuesteni", *Orientalia Christianae Periodica* 8 (1942), 477-481, for a discussion of the translation of Theodore's work in Syriac.
- 16 Cf note 8.
- 17 *P G* 27, 26.
- 18 *P G* 27, 28.
- 19 Thomson, *Text*, 4.
- 20 *P G* 23, 92.
- 21 *P G* 23, 68.:
- 22 *P G* 27, 28. Cf the marginal reading to the shorter Syriac version of the commentary, Thomson, *Text*, 6.
- 23 Cf *P G* 27, 29.
- 24 *P G* 23, 68.
- 25 Devreesse, *op cit*, 42.
- 26 Cf G Koch, *Die Heilsverwirklung bei Theodor von Mopsuestia*, (Münchener theologische Studien II 31, München 1965, 19-22).
- 27 *P G* 23, 69.
- 28 *P G* 27, 25. Cf also the marginal reading in the shorter Syriac version of his commentary, Thomson, *Text*, 68.
- 29 *P G* 27, 29.
- 30 *P G* 23, 72.
- 31 *P G* 27, 28.
- 32 Cf Thomson, *Text*, 89.
- 33 *Ibid*, 37.
- 34 Bloemendaal, *op cit*, 77.
- 35 *P G* 23, 72.
- 36 *P G* 27, 27. Cf Thomson, *Text*, 109.
- 37 *P G* 27, 37.
- 38 Cf Van Rompay, *Text*, 68.
- 39 *P G* 23, 72.
- 40 *P G* 27, 27. The shorter Syriac version does not have the same word in the margin as the one appearing in the heading of 12t4, but a cognate term. Cf Thomson, *Text*, 115.
- 41 *P G* 27, 36.