

The Songs of Ascents: Psalms 120 to 134 in the Worship of Jerusalem's Temples. David C Mitchell (Campbell Publications, 2015), £14.75 pp xiv-292, ISBN 978-1-50-874535-8.

DRAMATIC EXEGESIS OF THE PSALMS OF ASCENT

At first glance David Mitchell's book does not appear mainstream. Yet its pages contain a broad range of explorations of these fifteen psalms, which betrays engagement with many pertinent questions about the Psalms, worship in the Jerusalem Temples, and ancient music. Mitchell's reading is thorough and eclectic, his thinking is imaginative and novel, and his writing engaging and thought-provoking.

After Mitchell's Preface sets out his aims for this relatively specialist commentary, his intriguing Proem sets the tone of his Christian theology of Pss 120-134. Beginning with an overview of the collection within the Psalter, he then considers numerology. Aware that it lacks popularity amongst Biblical scholars, nevertheless he takes care to argue his case; the central positioning of Solomon within the collection is certainly attractive. He outlines his theory of the "Psalms of Ascents" as a ritual pilgrimage upon the steps of the Solomonic Temple. He propounds the thesis that the Ascents were sung at the Temple's Dedication, with Ps 132 as the liturgy for bringing the Ark of the Covenant into the Temple for the first time, at Sukkot. The Ascents collection then reached its present form some time between the last years of David's reign, and the dedication of the Temple in 959 BCE. Regarding the performance of songs in worship, Mitchell considers ancient instruments and Temple musicians, their sounds and disciplines. He examines the Masoretic Text of the Aleppo Codex and its cantillation marks. The work of ancient Hebrew musicologist Haïk-Ventoura is followed closely before Mitchell proceeds to hypothesize the music to which the Psalms of Ascent would be sung. This then informs a study and transcription of each of Pss 120-134.

Mitchell's closing chapters ponder the life of these psalms after destruction of the Solomonic Temple, reading the Psalms now as prophecy. A conclusion on the power of music is followed by four appendices, on the Sacred Name, the Solomonic Temple, the Hebrew calendar, and one detail of the Haïk-Ventoura reconstruction. A brief glossary of Hebrew and musical terminology precedes a full and up-to-date bibliography, before the sole index, "Extra-Biblical Names".

Mitchell's intended audience is unclear, oscillating between assumed knowledge and spelt-out explanations, referencing widely, in idiosyncratic and entertaining style (Walt Disney and Plutarch feature in a single paragraph). Diagrams are helpful, and the use of music to illuminate Psalm interpretation offers some fascinating reflections. This is an enjoyable book for a musician and Psalms scholar.