

A Brief Review of David C. Mitchell, *The Songs of Ascents*

Having scrutinized the first part of the book, which is about biblical numerology, I was flabbergasted to read what Mitchell has made of it. To begin with, he claims that "*Biblical scholarship has avoided numerology.*" (page xi) This is simply not true, for he completely ignores as non-existent the work of scholars who did, and still do, pay attention to the numerical aspects of the biblical writings and to the use of number symbolism. The fact of the matter is that as far back as 1908 until the present day a considerable number of scholars have brought to light significant numerical features of the biblical texts and exerted themselves to draw attention to the use of number as a technical device in the art of writing in antiquity and to persuade their colleagues to take biblical numerology seriously. To mention only a few of the more than twenty names I can list: Oskar Goldberg, Claus Schedl, P.W. Skehan, F. Langlamet, D.N. Freedman, L.A. Snijders, Jacob Bazak, J. Smit Sibinga, Jan Fokkelman, Pieter van der Lugt, Israel Knohl, and myself.

The result of Mitchell's disregarding the work of other scholars is that readers get the impression that he is the person who has discovered biblical numerology and its importance for biblical study. More seriously for me personally is that I found to my astonishment in the first part of the book some of my own discoveries, ideas and insights which are passed off as his own.

At the same time I was amazed to read John Barton's evaluation in the preface that "David Mitchell's *Songs of Ascents* is a fresh direction in the study of the Psalms." That is to say, the study of the Psalms in their historical context and the Psalter as a book, "*a compilation showing signs of deliberate design.*" (the italics are mine). Despite the fact that I have published three articles on the structural design of the Psalter, Barton claims that "*Mitchell is the first scholar to combine these interests.*" See my articles, **1.** "Significant Sub-Groups in the Book of Psalms: A New Approach to the Compositional Structure of the Psalter" (Lezing Bijbelse Studiedagen te Leuven, 6-8-2008) in: *The Composition of the Book of Psalms* (BETL 238), Leuven 2010, p. 623-34, and **2.** "Significant Compositional Techniques in the Psalms: Evidence for the Use of Number as an Organizing Principle", *VT* 59/4 (2009), pp. 583-605 + Erratum in *VT* 60/1 (2010), 1-4. The correct text was republished on my [website](#) by permission of the Editors. And **3.** "The Compositional Structure of the Psalter. [A new Approach.](#)"

In her laudatory recommendation of the book on the back cover Susan Gillingham calls the book "*an absolute gem*". This may be so as regards the second, major, part of the book which deals with the temple/synagogal liturgy and musicology, but this does not exclude the fact that the book is marred by what I found in the first part. Although I think that Mitchell is wrong in dating the Songs of Ascents to Solomon's reign, and that he is rather naïve in considering the psalms *ascribed* to David and other authors as actually written by them, there is much that is worthwhile, especially when it comes to his decoding the Masoretic *te`amim*, ancient prosody and musicology. Strikingly, however, while he pays due attention to the work of Suzanne Haik-Vantoura, there is not a single reference to the musical-mathematical work of Ernest McClain, professor emeritus of music at Brooklyn College, and the prosodic analysis of biblical writings by Duane L. Christensen, former professor of Biblical Studies and near Eastern History at William Carey International University. I regard this omission as another flaw in the presumed gem.