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Psalm 151

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Psalm 151

Dr Jack Alvarez

Abstract

The Hebrew Bible contains 150 Psalms, but several more are found in other ancient writings. This paper is a review of published material on the 151st Psalm found in one of the Dead Sea Scrolls and compared with the version presented in the Septuagint, examining the similarities and differences, with personal interpretation and an explanation of the theology.

The Psalter found in the Hebrew Bible is in five books (1-41, 42-72, 73-89, 90-106 and 107-150), each book closing with a doxology: a Psalm in praise of God.¹ The first four doxologies (between them containing all the occurrences of the word "Amen" in Psalms) conclude the first four books of Psalms and so divide the Psalter into its five books. The fifth book also concludes with a doxology (although without the word "Amen"), a Psalm that ends with the imperative: "*Let all that has breath praise the Eternal. Halleluyah*".²

However, the Septuagint (abbreviated "LXX"), the translation of the Hebrew Bible into Greek for the Jews of Alexandria, has one more. Until relatively recently, there was no known Hebrew text for Psalm 151, but versions of it were found amongst what are known as the "Dead Sea Scrolls" (DSS). Much of what is now labelled Ps.151A (where "Ps" is the abbreviation for "Psalm") and a heavily damaged fragment of another Psalm (151B, corresponding to the final two verses), were found in Qumran cave

¹ Rabbi Paul Freedman, Private communication.

² Psalm 150, verse 6. (Ps.150:6)

11,³ i in February 1956 by Bedouin Arab(s). The Scroll has been paleographically⁴ dated to the first century CE⁵. It is possible that the buildings at Qumran were constructed by King Uzziah of Judah (781 – 740 BCE).⁶

The Scroll was unrolled in six working days starting on 10 November 1956.⁷ The Hebrew text consists of ten lines, with no divisions or punctuation of any kind, as is common – nearly universal – in Hebrew scrolls. The scribe’s handwriting is precise (with one exception) and the letters are drawn in the formal book-hand style of the Herodian period, dating the Scroll to 30 – 50 CE. However, the scribe who copied the Scroll did not consistently distinguish between the Hebrew letters *vav* (ו) and *yod* (י).⁸

The Psalm does not reflect the poetic style of Qumran but that of about the sixth century BCE. However, there are also expressions drawn from earlier Biblical Books and from Rabbinic Hebrew, so suggesting the poem achieved its final form in the post-Biblical era. Scholars disagree on the date of composition, depending on whether they regard style, language or idiom as the most important factor in fixing the date. The Psalm is a poetic Midrash⁹ on 1 Sam.16:7: *“But the LORD said unto Samuel: ‘Look not on his countenance, or on the height of his stature; because I have rejected him; for it is not as man seeth: for man looketh on the outward appearance, but the LORD looketh on the heart.’”* The Bible does not tell us what God saw in David’s heart; the Psalm fills in that information.

The Psalm in the LXX is similar to one found in the “Book of Discipline”, a work in Syriac¹⁰ dated to the tenth century CE.¹¹ It

³ 11QPs^a. The system by which the Dead Sea Scrolls have been catalogued is given in the endnote.

⁴ The study of ancient writing systems and the deciphering and dating of historical manuscripts. (Oxford University Press, online edition, <https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/palaeographically>).

⁵ Frank-Lothar Hossfeld and Erich Zenger, *A Commentary on Psalms 101 – 150*, English translation by Linda M Maloney (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2011) p. 666.

⁶ “And he built towers in the wilderness, and hewed out many cisterns, for he had much cattle; in the Lowland also, and in the table-land; and he had husbandmen and vinedressers in the mountains and in the fruitful fields; for he loved husbandry.” (2 Chron.26:10)

⁷ J.A. Sanders, *The Dead Sea Psalms Scroll* (Cornell University Press: Ithaca, 1967), p. 5.

⁸ Sanders, p. 100.

⁹ I.e. A legend, story or fairy-tale.

¹⁰ A form of Aramaic used by various Eastern Churches.

¹¹ J Bjornar Storfjell, *The Chiastic Structure of Psalm 151*, Andrews University Seminary Studies, Vol.25 number 1 (Spring 1987), p. 97.

is thus probable that both the material at Qumran and the version in the LXX were copies of an original Hebrew text, possibly never written down and just transmitted orally, now lost.

Septuagint.¹²

Ps.151A - Dead Sea Scroll

13 14

- | | | |
|---|---|---|
| 1 | <p>1) This Psalm was written by David's own hand, although outside the enumeration, <i>composed when he fought in single combat with Goliath. (Attributed to the late Erich Zenger)</i>¹⁵</p> <p>I was smallest among my brothers and youngest in my father's house. I pastured my father's sheep.</p> | 1. A Hallelujah of David, Son of Jesse I was smaller than my brothers and younger than my father's sons. He put me as shepherd of his flock and master of his kid goats. |
| 2 | <p>2) My hands formed a musical instrument, and my fingers fashioned a harp.</p> | 2) My hands made a flute, and my fingers a lyre so I gave glory to YHVH. |
| 3 | | 3) So I said to myself: The mountains do not witness in his favour, nor do the hills proclaim on his behalf, nor the trees his words or the sheep his deeds. |
| 4 | | 4) Who then is going to announce and who can speak and who |

¹² Albert Pietersma, *A New English Translation of the Septuagint* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007).

¹³ Wilfred G.E. Watson, Translator, *The Dead Sea Scrolls Translated: The Qumran Texts in English* (Leiden: Brill, 1994) p. 310.

¹⁴ Verse numbering from: Martin Abegg et al, *The Dead Sea Scrolls Bible*, (San Francisco: Harper Collins, 1999) p. 585.

¹⁵ Hossfeld and Zenger p. 666. The (Hebrew, Greek or Latin) text used by Zenger to make this translation is not stated.

will narrate the deeds
of the Lord?

God saw everything – He
heard everything and
listened.

5 3) And who shall tell it to my
Lord? The Lord Himself, He
hears me/everything/Himself.

6 4) He sent forth His messenger, and
took me from my father's
sheep, and he anointed me
with the oil of His anointing.

5) He sent His prophet to
anoint me,
Samuel to make me great.
My brothers went out to
meet him, well-built,
very presentable.

7 5) My brothers were handsome and
tall; but the Lord did not take
pleasure in them.

6) They were quite tall and
had attractive hair,
but YHVH God did
not choose them.

8

7) Instead He sent to fetch
me from following
the flock
and anointed me with holy
oil,
and set me as leader of His
people
and chief of the sons of his
covenant.

9

B1) At the beginning of
David's exploit, after
God's prophet had
anointed him.

10 6) I went forth to meet the
Philistine; and he cursed me
by his idols.

B2) Then I saw a Philistine
uttering insults from
the ranks of the
enemy. I ...¹⁶

11) 7) But I drew his own sword, and
beheaded him, and removed

¹⁶ Verse B2 taken from Abegg.

reproach/disgrace from the
children of Israel.

The numbering in the left hand column is my own, as a convenience for referencing verses, when discussing the text below.

1

The introductory superscription starts with a biographical note in the style typical of the Septuagint. Unusually, the superscription carries two further pieces of information. The first 'outside the enumeration' interposes itself between the two statements relating to David. It is likely that this was once a marginal note, possibly in the Hebrew text, explaining that the composition was an appendix to the Book of Psalms; at some time in history, an unknown scribe erroneously copied it into the poem between the first and third cola.

The third statement ('composed ... Goliath') might also have been a redactional¹⁷ addition. Possibly it was almost an apology for introducing an afterword to the whole Psalter. However, many Orthodox Jews believe David composed all the Psalms, so those Psalms referring to events after David's death could be considered prophetic texts. The statement does not over-emphasise the role of David but places him in parallel with Moses and with the prophets Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel and Habakkuk who, in part, wrote down their divine messages. Incidentally, Moses is assigned the authorship of Psalm 90. Further, Moses, himself, wrote down his own Psalm in Deuteronomy chapter 32, as is related: *"So Moses wrote this song the same day, and taught it the children of Israel."* (Deut.31:22)

The version in the DSS is shorter, just giving two biographical details. However, there is the patronymic description: son of Jesse. Could there be doubts as to its authenticity? Perhaps the author or scribe needed to make this assertion to reassure his readers, as Psalm 151 was not included in the canonised Book of Psalms. (The formal canonization of the "Writings" (Hebrew: *Ketuvim*) occurred at the Synod of Jabneh, around 100 CE; decisions taken then came to be widely accepted and thus regarded as final in succeeding generations.)

¹⁷ In Biblical studies, the word "redacting" is effectively synonymous with "editing", as opposed to the more modern use of the word as indicating the removal of one or more words, sentences, paragraphs...

Further, there is the unique description: A *hallelujah*... We know of *hallelujah*-psalms, but nowhere else is *hallelujah* used to introduce an attribution. Further, this Psalm is most un-*hallelujah* like.

Imagine yourself up as a Scribe of 2000+ years ago. From where might you have got the idea of employing the word "hallelujah"? After all, this Psalm neither begins nor ends with that call to praise.

- Could it be this heading has migrated from Psalm 150?
- Was it meant to be a general description of the apocryphal David, the supposed author of all the Psalms?

This Psalm in the LXX is in two stanzas¹⁸ following this introductory superscription. The first stanza (segments 1 – 8 on my numbering) goes on to tell of the election of David and of his anointing. There is an inclusio: the theme of "brothers".

1b is a restatement of a verse from 1 Samuel: "*And Samuel said unto Jesse: 'Are there no more children?' And he said: 'The youngest still is left, and, behold, he is tending the flock.' And Samuel said to Jesse: 'Send and fetch him; for we shall not sit down till he come here.'*" (1 Sam. 16:11)

The terms in v1 do not simply refer to David's young age but also to his inferior status in his father's household. As we shall see later, size and age are not criteria in being appointed as the leader of Israel.

The phrase, "shepherd of his flock" (*ro'eh ba'tson*) has been borrowed from 1 Sam.16:7. This is one of a very large number of words and phrases lifted from 1 Samuel chapter 16 (and chapters 15, 17 & 18).

2 & 5 (Vv2 – 3 in LXX)

The next two verses in the LXX continue the narrative and are concerned with David as a musician, reflecting 1 Samuel 16:14-23. Even whilst working as a shepherd, he has made instruments with which to sing of the glory of YHVH.¹⁹ However, there is one

¹⁸ Storfjell divides Ps.151A into two stanzas (and thus needs three for the whole work). She detects a structural chiasmus.

However, Talmon divides 151A into three stanzas. Shemaryahu Talmon, *The World of Qumran from Within* (Jerusalem: The Magnes Press, The Hebrew University, 1989) p. 252.

¹⁹ The pronunciation of Hebrew name of God, four Hebrew consonants *yod hai vav hai*, is unknown. In English, those four letters are often translated as "The Lord" or sometimes as "Yahweh". Rather than using the gender specific term, I use "YHVH" or sometimes a description of one of God's attributes, such as "The Eternal".

major difference between the account in 1 Sam.14ff and the one in this Psalm.

In Samuel, it is Saul who seeks out David. When he hears of David's skills with the lyre and at arms,²⁰ it is the king who sends messengers to Jesse to summon David away from his sheep. Saul goes on to take delight in David²¹ and elevates him to a position of leadership as described later. The word pair *ki'nor* (harp / lyre) and *'o'gav* (pipe) can be found in Gen.4:21 and Job 30:31, further evidence that the poet had access to existing Biblical writings. (The Book of Job, partially written in Aramaic, is a late Biblical composition.)

In contrast, in the Psalm, the critical actor is the Eternal (YHVH). God appreciates David's musical skill and we'll read in verse 4 of the actions of God's messengers.

The DSS adds a third colon, giving a justification of the earlier statements, a reason why David used his musical skills so effectively.

3 - 4

The DSS shows two verses not found in the LXX. Each has four cola, showing clear synonymous parallelism, with the second and fourth cola reinforcing the first and third. However, some reckon these ideas are more in the style of a non-Jewish culture. 'The introduction of trees and animals enjoying the music of David, but unable to express their appreciation, appear to have some similarities with the myth of Orpheus, especially intelligible to the Hellenistic ear.'²² As against that, Psalm 148 tells of nature praising God, so perhaps Ps. 151 does not depart from Biblical tradition.

*“^{v9}Mountains and all hills, Fruitful trees and all cedars;
^{v10}Beasts and all cattle, Creeping things and winged fowl”
(Ps.148:9 – 10)*

Ambiguities in the Hebrew are particularly troublesome in this verse (possible *vav* and *yod* confusion). Preserving the poetic structure has led to a bicolon with no verb.

²⁰ "Then answered one of the young men, and said: 'Behold, I have seen a son of Jesse the Beth-lehemite, that is skilful in playing, and a mighty man of valour, and a man of war, and prudent in affairs, and a comely person, and the LORD is with him.'" (1 Sam.16:18)

²¹ "And Saul sent to Jesse, saying: 'Let David, I pray thee, stand before me; for he hath found favour in my sight.'" (1 Sam.16:22)

²² Storfjell p. 98, quoting Sanders.

David, the shepherd working alone in the hills, develops his skills. No human is there to witness those virtues, so nature itself testifies on David's behalf.

4

This verse too is solely found in the DSS; the wilderness theme continues. Like the third verse in the LXX, it poses rhetorical questions.

However, it could be argued that the verses in the LXX are in the wrong order. Verses 3 and 4 could fit where? One answer: between v1 and v2. David, realising there is no power of speech in the material world, in flora and fauna, takes the task upon himself and fashioned musical instrument(s) so as to praise God. Perhaps the original order was v1, v3, v4 then v2.

In some ways, this verse is the central peak of the DSS 151A, as, in it, David calls upon God to be his witness. The question it poses could have been modelled on Is.40:12. *"Who hath measured the waters in the hollow of his hand, and meted out heaven with the span, and comprehended the dust of the earth in a measure, and weighed the mountains in scales, and the hills in a balance?"* However, the author or redactor has reworded the material to give expression to his own conception of David, as someone whose words show an intimate knowledge of God.

But not all scholars agree with the translation I am offering. The problem comes with three Hebrew words: *adon / h'kol / rosh*, translated individually as Lord / everything / head. To what does 'everything' refer? Smith, quoting A Hurvitz,²³ associates it with Lord (and later God) to write:

"...deeds of the Lord of All
The God of All has seen..."

5 V3 (LXX)

This is not straightforward to understand at first and translations differ. David is posing a rhetorical question, asking how God knows of those skills listed in 1 Sam.16:18. David of course answers his own question, although perhaps it is one that needs no answer if we remember that humanity was fashioned by God in His own image. Here, David states that God knows the whole shebang and hears everything, whether spoken out loud or in the innermost parts of one's heart.

6

²³Mark S. Smith, *How to Write a Poem: The case of Ps.151A 11QPs^a* in 'The Hebrew of the Dead Sea Scrolls and Ben Sira' Proceedings of a Symposium held at Leiden University 11 – 14 December 1995', p. 192.

This verse continues the story of David from 1 Samuel. I am pairing v4 of LXX with v5 in DSS, which, although they are not identical, do have overlapping ideas. However, 4c (LXX) is more or less the same as 7b (DSS).

I sometimes wonder if the first colon of verse 4 in the LXX belongs to verse 3 ("And who shall tell ... Himself"). It provides a reinforcement of the ideas of that verse, explicitly clarifying that the Eternal needs neither messengers nor informers.

The bc cola in the LXX then return to the story of God's choosing David over his brothers²⁴ and his anointment as in 1 Sam.16:13.²⁵

7

The next verse – 7 on my numbering – relates more of the historical action. The version in the LXX is effectively an antithesis of the earlier verse 2.

The comment on the beauty of the brothers' hair is an unusual remark, although legend has it that Sarah had beautiful hair. The actual Hebrew phrase "g'vo'ah ko'ma'to", tall in height, comes from 1 Sam.16:7.

The statement that the brothers were not chosen implies they expected to be. All are sons of Jesse but David is concerned for others whilst his brothers come across as self-centred.

8

In the DSS, the Psalmist returns to the confession of what God had done for him (i.e. for David). In this verse, we meet three examples where the poet has borrowed ideas from other royal Biblical passages.

- from following the flock *mai'akhar ha'tson*
2 Sam.7:8
- Anointed with holy oil *bi'shemen kad'shi*
m'shakh'teev Ps.89:21
- Leader for his people *l'nageed-al-amah*
1 Sam.13:14

Please now compare vv1 and 7 in the DSS. Both have similar themes: "He put me as shepherd of his flock" and "leader of his

²⁴ 1 Sam.16:11; see text above.

²⁵ "Then Samuel took the horn of oil, and anointed him in the midst of his brethren; and the spirit of the LORD came mightily upon David from that day forward..." (1 Sam.16:13 part)

people". The concept of responsibility / leadership forms an inclusio for DSS Psalm 151A.

In both versions, the Psalm picks out the essential ideas of 1 Samuel, chapter 16 – and I've given a handful of examples above – after YHVH had rejected Saul as king of Israel and told Samuel that the next king would be one of the sons of Jesse.

The message of this stanza is thus clear: YHVH chooses the little shepherd boy David because of his exceptional ability in making a musical instrument: probably a lyre or flute, although we cannot be sure; JPS²⁶: lyre (1985); harp (1917). We learn a few verses further on "*Whenever the [evil] spirit of God came upon Saul, David would take the lyre, and play it; Saul would find relief, and feel better, and the evil spirit would leave him.*" (1 Sam.16:23) Thus David had been gifted by God with the ability to mitigate Saul's depression.

The seven verses of DSS Ps.151A have a neat chiasmic²⁷ structure:

1. David – the shepherd (of his father's flock)
2. David's honouring of God
3. David as God's witness
4. God as David's witness
- 6-7. (DSS 5-6) God's honouring of David
8. (DSS 7) David as shepherd of God's people

The second stanza, of which only two verses remain, describes another episode in David's life: his victory over Goliath, recorded in 1 Sam.17 (Chapter 17 repeats some parts of chapter 16). The meter is broken; the verses are no longer arranged in the classical bicola structure.

9

This heading is remarkable and seems to presuppose some introductory material, now lost. Remember the material in the Qumran Scroll was continuous with no verse or chapter breaks. It is a modern interpretation to split Psalm 151 into two. Perhaps that is an error.

Whether this verse refers back to 1 Sam.16 or to the start of David's military career in 1 Sam.17²⁸ is unknowable. Having been

²⁶ Jewish Publication Society of America.

²⁷ Although some would describe this structure as "centripetal".

²⁸ "And when the words were heard which David spoke, they rehearsed them before Saul; and he was taken to him." (1 Sam.17:31)

anointed by Samuel, and having received the spirit of the Eternal, David became infused with superhuman (or do I mean supernatural?) strength, despite his young age.

10

I have paired v6 from the LXX with DSS verse B2, although both seem to be fragments from a longer version. 1 Samuel 17:43 records that “the Philistine”, identified earlier in that chapter as Goliath of Gath, taunts and curses David.²⁹ However, fortified by his anointment (by the Prophet Samuel on behalf of YHVH), David felt able to go out to fight the Philistine – and of course to win.

11

The Psalm ends with David beheading Goliath, thereby restoring honour to the Israelites and presumably saving Saul’s kingdom.³⁰ Clearly, the rest of the Hebrew text of Psalm 151B has been lost.

The two sections of the Psalm are related. At the end of the first stanza, David has been chosen and anointed. To end the story here would be somewhat unsatisfactory. Why this election of David? The answer comes in the second stanza. The victory over Goliath provides implicit evidence for the effectiveness of the choice of David.

The office of shepherd is often taken as a metaphor for kingship. So in the background, the motif of kingship provides a further connection between the two stanzas, where in the last two verses, the victory over Goliath leads to the full defeat of the Philistines by the Israelites.³¹

Theology

²⁹ “And the Philistine said unto David: ‘Am I a dog, that thou comest to me with staves?’ And the Philistine cursed David by his god.” (1 Sam.17:43)

³⁰ “And David ran, and stood over the Philistine, and took his sword, and drew it out of the sheath thereof, and slew him, and cut off his head therewith. And when the Philistines saw that their mighty man was dead, they fled.” (I Sam.17:51)

³¹ “And the men of Israel and of Judah arose, and shouted, and pursued the Philistines, until thou comest to Gai, and to the gates of Ekron. And the wounded of the Philistines fell down by the way to Shaaraim, even unto Gath, and unto Ekron.” (1 Sam.17:52)

Wacholder³² has raised the question of whether the David of this Psalm refers to the historical David. He believes that the patronymic "Jesse", also found in 2 Sam.23:1³³ and Is.11.1,³⁴ means that we are considering the eschatological David, expected in the messianic age at the end of days. Thus, statements like "and David was" should be read as "and David will be".

The Hebrew Bible presents two Davids. The first David emerges from accounts found in the Books of Samuel, where he rises from his humble origins to become the greatest King of Israel and the founder of the dynasty that ruled Judah. The account of David provided by the later Books of Chronicles replicates in part the David of the Deuteronomic History, building on 2 Sam.7, but presents a "second" or idealised David. This individual was not overly bothered by statecraft. His concern was for ethics and his principal interest was in the Temple which would be built by his son Solomon; this David also set out the rituals³⁵ that would pertain to its proper functioning.

Links between the "first" and "second" David crop up in the Book of Psalms in the historicised superscriptions to several Psalms and in the postscript to Psalm 72 (which ends the second Book).³⁶

On one level, the Psalm is an autobiographical appendix³⁷ to the (Canonised) Book of Psalms, where it teaches that the *little* shepherd boy David overcomes the superior might of the foreign tribes thanks to the power of YHVH. On a wholly different level, it opens our eyes to the various facets of the person – or people – named "David".

I acknowledge the help of five individuals who have deepened my faith and steered me in my studies. In alphabetical order, they are Mrs Gillian Burn, Rabbi Paul Freedman, Rabbi Professor Dr Jonathan Magonet, Rabbi Dr Charles Middleburgh and Rabbi Alexandra Wright.

³² Ben Zion Wacholder, *David's Eschatological Psalter 11Q Psalms*, Hebrew Union College Annual, Vol.59 (1988) p. 32.

³³ "Now these are the last words of David: The saying of David the son of Jesse, And the saying of the man raised on high, The anointed of the God of Jacob" (2 Sam.23:1)

³⁴ "And there shall come forth a shoot out of the stock of Jesse, And a twig shall grow forth out of his roots." (Is.11:1)

³⁵ 1 Chron.22 – 29.

³⁶ "The prayers of David the son of Jesse are ended." (Ps.72:20)

³⁷ Rabbi Paul Freedman, private communication.

Jack Alvarez

ⁱ The Scrolls found in the Judean Desert have been catalogued as follows:

- The first number represents the cave number for that location
- The first letter represents the location, where Q = Qumran, M = Masada, etc.
- The next letter(s) designate the Book of the Bible, where Ps = Psalm, I = Isaiah, etc.
- The final superscript gives information on the quality of the copy, where ^a represents the manuscript in the best condition found, ^b the next best, etc.