

A SURVEY OF VIEWS REGARDING THE ORIGINAL LANGUAGE AND STRUCTURE
OF PSALM 151

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A Survey of Views Regarding the Original Language and Structure of Psalm 151

Introduction and Background

While few evangelicals are even aware of the existence of a 151st psalm, it has been read and studied for many centuries in Greek and Syriac versions and is contained in the Apocrypha. The discovery of the 11QPs^a scroll at Qumran in 1956 has changed the way some have viewed this and has resulted in the view that this psalm, formerly known only in Greek, is actually from a Hebrew original, probably reflected in the version found in the Qumran Psalms scroll mentioned above. This paper will present a survey of views regarding the original language and structure of Psalm 151 in light of the 11QPs^a scroll. The 11QPs^a scroll was discovered at Qumran in 1956 but was not unrolled until 1961 at the Palestine Archeological Museum in Jerusalem. Paleography dates the scroll as late as the first century A.D.¹ While there is considerable debate regarding whether 11QPs^a is a Psalter or a psalmbook,² the conclusion to that research has little bearing on questions of the original language and structure of Psalm 151. Psalm 151 was one of the first portions of 11QPs^a to be published and was published with translation and commentary by J. A. Sanders in February, 1963. That translation is now part of the fourth volume of the *DJD* Series.³

¹ J. A. Sanders, *The Psalms Scroll of Qumran Cave 11: 11QPs^a, Discoveries in the Judean Desert of Jordan IV*, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1965), 9. Hereafter referred to as *DJD* IV. Also, J. Strugnell, "More Psalms of 'David,'" *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 27 (1965): 207.

² See Martin J. Homan, "A Comparative Study of the Psalter in Light of 11QPs^a," *Westminster Theological Journal* 40:1 (Fall, 1977): 116-129 for a succinct handling of this issue and for further literature.

³ J. A. Sanders, *DJD* IV.

Sander's view of the Original Language and Structure of Psalm 151

Sanders' view is spelled out in full in his 1967 volume *The Dead Sea Psalms Scroll*⁴ in which he indicates that the text of Psalm 151 in 11QPs^a is “radically different” from and “far fuller” than the Greek or Syriac versions while still containing every thought present in the Greek version.⁵ The parallels between the Greek and Hebrew versions and the fuller Hebrew text indicated to Sanders “that the Hebrew psalm is complete in itself.”⁶ Sanders acknowledges that many might think the Greek psalm could shed light on the Hebrew version but insists that a comparison between the Greek and the Hebrew makes the Greek version appear “so desiccated as to be very nearly meaningless in its first five verses” and cites as evidence the “truncated” Greek text of verse three compared to the “beautifully complete Hebrew couplet of bicolons” in the Hebrew of verse four.⁷ Later in this article Sanders declares that the parallelism of thought between verses one and seven demonstrate the “beauty and integrity of the Hebrew psalm.”⁸ In discussing further the structural development of the psalm, Sanders indicates that the Hebrew is actually two psalms, which he designates Psalm 151 A and Psalm 151B. Psalm 151B contains a rather full superscription but, unfortunately, most of the psalm is irretrievably lost due to the deterioration of the scroll. While Sanders acknowledges that scholars do not possess the precise Hebrew text from which the Greek came he still insists that the Greek version came from a “truncated amalgamation” the Hebrew psalms.⁹

⁴ J. A. Sanders, *The Dead Sea Psalms Scroll*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1967. Hereafter *DSPS*.

⁵ Sanders, *DSPS*, 94.

⁶ Sanders, *DSPS*, 94.

⁷ Sanders, *DSPS*, 94.

Acceptance of Sanders' View Among Scholars

Sanders' contention has been accepted by most everyone. Many scholarly works simply assume Sanders' view to be the correct one and offer it without further explanation.¹⁰ On a popular level, one need only consult works such as David A. deSilva's *Introducing the Apocrypha*, in which this divided view of the Hebrew version is put forth as fact without support,¹¹ or the introduction to the latest translation of the Apocrypha, *The New Annotated Apocrypha*,¹² as evidence of how widely accepted this view has become.

Menahem Haran's Dissent

Although Sanders' contention that the Qumran form is probably original, or at least a *vorlage*, has been widely accepted, Menahem Haran has offered a cogent and insightful critique of Sanders' view in a 1988 article in *Journal of Jewish Studies*.¹³ Haran criticizes Sanders' view that the Hebrew form is original, calling it an assumption, and points out (probably correctly) that Sanders' "assumption has been accepted without opposition."¹⁴

Haran contends that the Qumran text form is "expansive and late" and that Sanders' position is merely an unhesitating assumption. Haran bases this criticism on various factors.¹⁵ Haran points to "forced and artificial language" he finds within the Hebrew psalm and also to parallelism that is "practically impossible in standard Biblical Hebrew."¹⁶ These examples, he

⁸ Sanders, *DSPS*, 95.

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¹⁰ For example, D. N. Wigitil, "The Sequence of the Translations of Apocryphal Psalm 151," *Revue de Qumran* 10 (1983): 401-407, which begins by stating Sanders' view without support.

¹¹ David A. deSilva, *Introducing the Apocrypha: Message, Context, and Significance* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2002), 302.

¹² *Cambridge Annotated Study Apocrypha*, Howard Clark Kee, ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994).

¹³ Menahem Haran, "The Two Text-Forms of Psalm 151," *Journal of Jewish Studies* 39 (1983): 171-182.

¹⁴ Haran, 172.

¹⁵ Haran, 172.

¹⁶ Haran, 174.

says, are found only in portions of the Hebrew psalm that have no corresponding part in the LXX and include controversial portions that some scholars believe show a Hellenistic influence. Haran contends that if these portions are removed, the only major difference is the inversion of verses 4 and 5.

Haran also contends that the LXX form is not a combination of two works,¹⁷ both of which are represented by Sanders as Psalm 151A and Psalm 151B, saying that this too is an assumption based on the earlier assumption that the Hebrew form predated the Greek form.¹⁸ Haran reminds the reader that a space or gap in the manuscript may not necessarily indicate a new unit but may stem from pragmatic or other considerations.¹⁹ Haran finds a continuity with regard to the subject in both A and B and surmises that Sanders may not have understood or caught the continuity because of the physical gap after line twelve of the manuscript.²⁰ Haran is also of the opinion that if the “two” psalms had one writer, there is no reason to believe that they are not one psalm²¹ and that the copyist, for whatever reason, spaced them apart on the scroll so that they look like two different psalms to someone far removed in time.²² Finally, the headings do not require that the LXX form be composed from two distinct psalms and may also be attributed to the same copyist who divided the psalm in two.²³

¹⁷ Haran, 172, 178.

¹⁸ Haran, 181.

¹⁹ Haran, 179.

²⁰ See Sanders, *DJD IV*, Plate XVII for a photograph of this portion (Col. XXVII) of 11QPs^a. Comparisons of the LXX and Qumran versions may be found in Haran, 173, Sanders, *DJD IV*, 55, 60 and Sanders, *DSPS*, 96. English translations of the LXX and Qumran versions are laid out-side-by-side in Sanders, *DSPS*, 97.

²¹ Haran, 180.

²² Haran, 180-181.

²³ Haran, 181-182.

Haran's Dissent in Light of Other Considerations

Scholars have brought to light other considerations, beyond Sander's own opinion, that make it seem likely that Psalm 151 existed in a Hebrew original. Sanders, at the first publication of Psalm 151, reminded the readers that Martin Noth had surmised as early as 1930 that several psalms, Psalm 151 included, probably had Hebrew originals from the Second Temple Period that were as-yet undiscovered.²⁴ Noth translated these Syriac psalms into Hebrew for publication. Presumably, this recounting is to lend credence to the idea that the Hebrew versions reflect either the original reading or at least a *vorlage*. This is also the conclusion Patrick Skehan draws in an article relating to Sanders' publication of the Psalms scroll in the *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* of 1963.²⁵

H. B. Swete, in his *An Introduction to the Old Testament in Greek*,²⁶ from 1914, a generation before the discoveries at Qumran and almost fifty years before the publication of 11QPs^a, also indicated that there was likely a Hebrew original. Swete pointed to a comparison of the foundational texts for Psalm 151²⁷ and concluded that such a comparison does not point to a Greek original though no evidence existed at that time for a version in Hebrew.

An article by Joseph M. Baumgarten in the *Revue de Qumran*²⁸ provides an example of how Sander's thesis might answer questions posed by studies in other areas. Baumgarten mentions Strugnell's discussion of an Arabic "anti-psalm"²⁹ that seemed to answer lines 5-7 of the 11QPs^a version of Psalm 151. Baumgarten mentions Strugnell by way of introduction to

²⁴ Sanders, *DJD* IV, 53.

²⁵ Patrick Wm. Skehan, "The Apocryphal Psalm 151," *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 25 (1963): 407-409.

²⁶ H. B. Swete, *An Introduction to the Old Testament in Greek* ([Peabody]: Hendrickson, 1989; reprint, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1914), 252-253.

²⁷ According to Swete these foundational passages are as follows: 1 Kings 16:7, 11, 26, 43, 51; 2 Kings 6:5; 2 Chronicles 29:26; Psalm 78:70; 89:20.

²⁸ Joseph M. Baumgarten, "Perek Shirah, An Early Response to Psalm 151" *Revue de Qumran* 9 (1978): 575-578.

another Hebrew text, the *Perek Shirah*, which seems to express a reaction against “the unorthodox sentiments”³⁰ expressed in the Qumran version of Psalm 151. Baumgarten’s contention is that the views the *Perek Shirah* were written to answer are meaningful only with regard to the Qumran version of Psalm 151 and have little meaning when applied to the LXX version of Psalm 151. It is, therefore, likely that the writer of the *Perek Shirah* knew Psalm 151 in a more complete form than the Greek and Syriac versions, of which the version of 11QPs^a is an example.

Conclusion

This survey has demonstrated that while Haran has raised some significant objections to Sanders’ thesis that a Hebrew *vorlage* not extant formed the basis for the later Greek, and perhaps also the Syriac, version of Psalm 151, Sander’s view, while having some difficulties, has become the accepted view presumably because of its help in answering other questions faced by scholars. The difference in structure, form, and content between the two forms is so drastic and leaves so many questions unanswered, that one hopes there is indeed another version waiting to be found.

²⁹ John Strugnell, “Notes on the Text and Transmission of the Apocryphal Psalms 151, 154, and 155,” *Harvard Theological Review*, 59 (1966): 257-281.

³⁰ Baumgarten, 576.

APPENDIX: The Geek Text of Psalm 151

Psalm 151

οὗτος ὁ ψαλμὸς ἰδιόγραφος εἰς Δαυιδ καὶ ἔξωθεν τοῦ ἀριθμοῦ ὅτε ἐμονομάχησεν τῷ Γολιαδ

μικρὸς ἦμην ἐν τοῖς ἀδελφοῖς μου
καὶ νεώτερος ἐν τῷ οἴκῳ τοῦ πατρός μου
ἐποίμαινον τὰ πρόβατα τοῦ πατρός μου

² αἱ χεῖρές μου ἐποίησαν ὄργανον
οἱ δάκτυλοί μου ἤρμωσαν ψαλτήριον

³ καὶ τίς ἀναγγελεῖ τῷ κυρίῳ μου
αὐτὸς κύριος αὐτὸς εἰσακούει

⁴ αὐτὸς ἐξαπέστειλεν τὸν ἄγγελον αὐτοῦ
καὶ ἤρην με ἐκ τῶν προβάτων τοῦ πατρός μου
καὶ ἔχρισέν με ἐν τῷ ἐλαίῳ τῆς χρίσεως αὐτοῦ

⁵ οἱ ἀδελφοί μου καλοὶ καὶ μεγάλοι
καὶ οὐκ εὐδόκησεν ἐν αὐτοῖς κύριος

⁶ ἐξῆλθον εἰς συνάντησιν τῷ ἀλλοφύλῳ
καὶ ἐπικατηράσατό με ἐν τοῖς εἰδώλοις αὐτοῦ

⁷ ἐγὼ δὲ σπασάμενος τὴν παρ' αὐτοῦ
μάχαιραν ἀπεκεφάλισα αὐτὸν καὶ ἦρα ὄνειδος ἐξ υἰῶν Ἰσραηλ

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