

THE CHIASTIC STRUCTURE OF PSALM 151

J. BJØRNAR STORFJELL
Andrews University

The psalms scroll which later was to become known as 11QPs^a was discovered in a cave a short distance to the north of Khirbet Qumrân and ended up in the Palestine Archaeological Museum in Jerusalem in February of 1956. The scroll was not unrolled until November of 1961.¹ The early reports about this discovery also indicated the content of the scroll. Among the several psalms which were represented was the one numbered 151 in the LXX.

J. A. Sanders provides us with an insight into the prior knowledge of this psalm in Syriac, where it was one of five non-canonical psalms which were part of a Book of Discipline dated to the tenth century A.D. They were noted in a manuscript in the Vatican library in the middle of the eighteenth century and published by W. Wright in 1887.² The most interesting work relating to the text of these psalms appeared in 1930, when Martin Noth not only published a collated text of the psalms but also proceeded to translate three of the five back into Hebrew, which he considered to have been the original language. The first psalm—the 151st of the LXX and the topic of this brief study—was not one of the three translated.³

The 151st psalm of the LXX is essentially the same as the first of the five Syriac psalms, but there are significant differences between these and the 11QPs^a 151st psalm that seem to indicate a different textual tradition. Since Noth thought that the *Vorlagen* of the five Syriac psalms were Hebrew and since the Syriac and the LXX are in basic agreement, it is only appropriate to ask a question about

¹The complete story of the discovery and unrolling of the scroll can be found in R. de Vaux, "Fouilles de Khirbet Qumrân," *RB* 63 (1956): 573-574; and J. A. Sanders, "The Scroll of Psalms (11QPs) from Cave 11: A Preliminary Report," *BASOR*, no. 165 (1962), pp. 11-15.

²The earliest description by J. A. Sanders appears in "Ps. 151 in 11QPs," *ZAW* 75 (1963): 73-86. An almost identical account is found in J. A. Sanders, *The Psalms Scroll of Qumrân Cave 11 (11QPs^a)*, Discoveries in the Judean Desert, no. 4 (Oxford, 1965).

³M. Noth, "Die fünf syrisch überlieferten apokryphen Psalmen," *ZAW* 48 (1930): 1-23.

the relationship between the LXX and the 11QPs^a. Sanders has pointed out that in the cases where the Qumrân psalms differ from the MT they also differ from the LXX. It is therefore quite clear that the LXX cannot be considered a translation of the 11QPs^a 151st psalm.⁴

There are a number of possibilities for exploring the poetic structure of this poem. Sanders chose to use only bicola, fourteen in all, in his ordering of the psalm.⁵ He also saw possibilities of influences of Orphism in the poem. The introduction of the trees and the animals enjoying the music of David, but unable to express their appreciation, appear to have some similarities with the myth of Orpheus; and David's phrase, "I said in my soul," is seen to be especially intelligible to the Hellenistic ear.⁶

Isaac Rabinowitz early in the debate opposed this position, which was most strongly defended by André Dupont-Sommer. Rabinowitz does not see the phrase, "I said in my heart," to be a particularly Hellenistic construction. Instead, he draws a parallel with similar introductory formulas used in Eccl 2:1 and 3:17, where no Hellenistic influence is suggested. Frank Moore Cross has also dismissed any links to Orphism. He sees in the poem some fundamental biblical modes of expression and points out that in Ps 148 nature indeed praises the Lord and that this poem does not step outside the biblical tradition.⁷

Jean Magne has argued for influences of Orphism in the psalm but he cannot support the views of Dupont-Sommer regarding Pythagorean doctrines in, and an Essene origin of, the psalm.⁸ Magne also notes a chiastic structure of the psalm, 2 2 3 3 2 3-3 2 3 3 2 2, where 2 stands for a bicolon and 3 for a tricolon. Pierre Auffret has questioned this chiasmus because of a lack of correspondence in the thematic order of the psalm.⁹ It is in light of this

⁴Sanders, "Ps. 151," pp. 78-80.

⁵Sanders, *The Psalms Scroll*, pp. 55-56.

⁶Sanders, "Ps. 151," p. 82.

⁷See André Dupont-Sommer, "Le Psaume CLI dans 11QPs^a et le problème de son origine essénienne," *Sem* 14 (1964): 25-62; Isaac Rabinowitz, "The Alleged Orphism of 11Q Pss 28:3-12," *ZAW* 76 (1964): 193-200; and Frank Moore Cross, "David, Orpheus, and Psalm 151:3-4," *BASOR*, no. 231 (1978), pp. 69-71.

⁸Jean Magne, "Orphisme, pythagorisme, essénisme dans le texte hébreu du Psaume 151?" *RevQ* 32 (1975): 545.

⁹*Ibid.*, p. 520; and Pierre Auffret, "Structure littéraire et interprétation du Psaume 151 de la grotte 11 de Qumrân," *RevQ* 34 (1977): 172.

disagreement concerning the chiasmic structure of the psalm that I have completed the present brief study.

1. *The Text and Its Translation*

The Hebrew text of 11QPs^a consists of ten lines, with no attempt to divide the lines according to any kind of poetic or other structure. In the translation that follows (on the next page), the numbers on the left indicate my division of the psalm into cola, a division which is in basic agreement with the work of Magne. The three columns on the right indicate organization of content, number of syllables, and number of stress accents. The introductory line of the psalm, "A Hallelujah of David, the Son of Jesse," is only a lengthened form of the introductions found in Pss 146-150. As an introductory phrase, it is omitted from the poetic reconstruction of the psalm.

2. *Poetic Analysis*

The first two bicola, verse 1, make a clear conceptual unit. In both cola repetitive parallelism is used, yet the second bicolon is a progression of thought from the first. The relationship between the two bicola can best be described as synthetic parallelism.

The next unit, verse 2, is a tricolon. Sanders used only bicola in his arrangement. Rabinowitz, J. Carmignac, Magne, and P. W. Skehan all have a tricolon in this place.¹⁰ The verb *w²symh*, an imperfect with a *wāw* consecutive, seems to tie the sentence to the preceding text rather than to begin a new bicolon. When given a past-tense translation, it also agrees with the verbs in the two first cola in this tricolon. On the other hand, if the last line of tricolon 2 together with the first line of tricolon 3 were to make up a bicolon, a future-tense translation would make the most sense. As a tricolon a thematic whole is allowed to exist: with flute and lyre the psalmist gave glory.

Tricolon 3 starts with the phrase, "I said in my soul." This line introduces what follows, rather than concluding what has

¹⁰A number of poetic reconstructions of Ps 151 have appeared. For comparative purposes the following can be consulted: Sanders, "Ps. 151," p. 77; Rabinowitz, p. 196; Jean Carmignac, "Précisions sur la forme poétique du Psaume 151," *RevQ* 18 (1965): 250; Magne, p. 544; and Patrick Wm. Skehan, "The Apocryphal Psalm 151," *Bib* 25 (1963): 408-409.

PSALM 151 11QPs^a*First Strophe*

Cont Syll Acc

1. Smaller was I than my brothers	abc	8	3
And younger than the sons of my father	ac	8	2
Yet he appointed me shepherd for his sheep	abc	10	3
And ruler over his kids.	bc	8	2
2. My hands have made a flute	abc	6	3
And my fingers a lyre,	ac	7	2
And I have given glory to Yahweh.	xyz	8	3
3. I said in my soul,	xyz	8	3
O that the mountains would bear witness for me	abc	8	3
And O that the hills would tell.	ab	8	3
4. The trees have taken away my words	abc	8	3
And the sheep my works.	bc	7	2
5. For who can tell,	ab	4	3
And who can speak,	ab	5	2
And who can recount my works?	abc	9	3

Second Strophe

6. The Lord of all saw,	abc	6	2
God of all, He heard,	abc	8	3
And He has heeded.	ac	5	2
7. He sent His prophet to anoint me;	abc	6	2
Samuel to make me great.	bc	8	2
8. My brothers went out to meet him;	xyz	8	3
Handsome of form,	ab	4	1
And handsome of appearance.	ab	6	1
9. Tall in their height;	ab	8	2
Handsome with their hair.	ab	7	2
Them did Yahweh God not choose.	xyz	9	4
10. But He sent and took me from behind the sheep,	abc	13	4
And anointed me with holy oil.	def	10	3
And He appointed me leader for His people,	abc	10	3
And ruler over the sons of His covenant.	bc	8	2

preceded. In the reading of *lw*³ I have followed Cross and taken this as an exclamatory particle rather than as a negative.¹¹ The alternative reading—"The mountains do not bear witness for me, And the hills do not tell"—does not, however, change the overall intent of this portion of the psalm. An argument could be made for retaining that reading since it leads naturally into bicolon 4. There I have taken the disputed word *lw* and read it as the verb "to take away."¹² Bicolon 4 is then parallel in thought to tricolon 3. The first strophe ends with tricolon 5, which forms a conceptual unit.

The second half of the psalm is by structure a mirror image of the first half, the whole being a structural chiasmus. As I have already mentioned, Magne has seen this chiasmus, but his main concern was an investigation of the Hellenistic influences in the psalm. The whole second half of the psalm is a continuous narrative in poetic style with an internal chiasmus.

Tricolon 6 is a conceptual unit which flows into bicolon 7, constructed in synonymous parallelism. My reading of verse 6 differs considerably from the reading of Sanders, who combines verses 5 and 6 as follows:

For who can proclaim and who can bespeak
and who can recount the deed of the Lord?
Everything has God seen,
everything has he heard and he has heeded.¹³

Rabinowitz has a syntax which seems easier to support. He reads, "The Master of the universe was; the God of the universe. . . ."¹⁴ In Sanders's sentence the direct object is definite, *hkwl*. The word occupies the same place in the bicolon and both times without the sign of the definite direct object. The particle *ʔ* occurs four times in this psalm and one would expect it preceding a definite direct object.

It is true that in verse 7 the word *nby²w* seems to be the direct object of the verb *šlh*, and since it is definite it should have the sign of the definite direct object preceding it. If the second half of

¹¹Cross, p. 70.

¹²Ludwig Koehler and Walter Baumgartner, eds., *Lexicon in Veteris Testamenti Libros* (Leiden, 1958), p. 705.

¹³Sanders, *The Psalms Scroll*, p. 56.

¹⁴Rabinowitz, p. 196.

bicolon 7 were not there, one could easily make the word “prophet” the subject in the sentence and read: “His prophet stretched out to anoint me.” But the next half of the bicolon will not allow this because here Samuel is seen as the direct object of some previous verb, and the context most easily makes that verb *šlh*. The structure of this verse is different from the structure of verse 6. The difference is that in the second colon of verse 7 the sign of the definite direct object is present. There is no main verb in this colon, but this second colon is strongly connected with the first half of the verse. The definite direct object of the whole sentence consisting of the bicolon is the second colon, and it is accompanied by the sign of the definite direct object.

Tricola 8 and 9 form an internal chiasmus. By emphasizing the chiasmic structure, I can avoid calling the first line of tricolon 8 and the last line of tricolon 9 a split bicolon.

The last two bicola of the psalm show no technical difficulties. They are quite regular in their synthetic and repetitive parallelism, respectively.

The tabulation of the syllable count and the stress accents does not add significantly to a poetic analysis of the psalm. At least in this case, such means were not considered important in terms of the poetic outcome. It appears to have been more important to follow the classical poetic style of Hebrew literature, where parallelism in its varied applications predominates.

3. *Commentary*

This psalm is a concrete narrative-type poem in classical Hebrew poetic style. It sings about the election of David to the monarchy of Israel. The parallel biblical passage is the brief account found in 1 Sam 16:1-13.

Date of the Psalm

The question of interpretation is complicated by the difficulty of arriving at a certain date for the writing of the psalm. Robert Polzin has pointed out that the lack of agreement regarding the reading of the psalm should make us cautious when “using linguistic arguments based on controverted interpretations to establish a date for this composition.”¹⁵

¹⁵Robert Polzin, “Notes on the Dating of the Non-Massoretic Psalms of 11QPs^a,” *HTR* 60 (1967): 475.

The questions of date and interpretation are closely connected in the case of this psalm. If one accepts the validity of Orphic influences in the psalm, it becomes difficult to accept the date suggested by W. F. Albright, the seventh-sixth century B.C.¹⁶ The Psalm does not truly reflect the typical poetic style of Qumrân. Since the classical poetic style probably went out of use in the post-exilic period, the poem could be dated to the sixth century B.C. or earlier on stylistic grounds.¹⁷ The argument of poetic style should be allowed its proper weight in the determination of a date for the psalm. Cross argues for a date in the Persian period, based on orthographic survivals,¹⁸ and strong reasons for a later date have been advanced by Sanders.¹⁹

Sanders has pointed out "that at Qumrân David was considered the author of the psalter."²⁰ But it must also be pointed out that in spite of Polzin's caution, there are some phrases which make an early date difficult. These are *ʔdwn hkwl* and *bny bryt*. The first phrase has been demonstrated to be post-biblical. It is found in Syriac, Palmyrene, the Babylonian Talmud, the LXX (Job 5:8), and Ben Sira (36:1). The second phrase is one of the best known from the Qumrân literature. It is found in Rabbinic literature, the Odes of Solomon (17:15), and the NT (Acts 3:25).²¹ The expressions would make it difficult to hold to an early date unless one sees such expressions as an attempt to establish legitimacy for the Qumrân community. If a late date is accepted, that does not have to mean that Hellenistic influences are operative. The language used is biblical, both in content and in expression, even though some idioms used are of post-biblical origin. I would allow poetic style to be the weightier argument in establishing a date for the psalm. A linguistic stratigraphy with a *terminus post quem* in the Hellenistic period would be very difficult to establish. The document in its present form dates to this period, but its date of authorship is probably sixth century.

¹⁶W. F. Albright in correspondence cited in Sanders, *The Psalms Scroll*, p. 54.

¹⁷For a thorough discussion of Hebrew poetic style, see Wilfred G. E. Watson, *Classical Hebrew Poetry: A Guide to Its Techniques*, JSOT Supplement Series, no. 26 (Sheffield, Eng., 1984).

¹⁸Cross, p. 70.

¹⁹Sanders, *The Psalms Scroll*, pp. 62-63.

²⁰Ibid., p. 64.

²¹See the discussion in Polzin, p. 475, n. 33.

Analysis of Thematic Chiasmus

In a psalm which has a chiastic structure one would expect also to find a thematic chiasmus. As has been mentioned above, Auffret argued against a structural chiasmus because of a lack of a thematic correspondence. On the other hand, when a structural chiasmus can be detected as in this psalm, that structure should be allowed to assist and shape the understanding of the thematic content of the poem. Thus, it is quite proper to look for the thematic correspondents which may not be evident at first. The chiastic structure becomes the mandate for understanding the corresponding components in the poem.

First an overview of the psalm: The narrative of the first strophe poses all of the questions which are then answered or contrasted in the second strophe. Verse 1 speaks about the size and age of David in comparison to his brothers and about his appointment to the work of shepherd. The counterpart is found in verse 10, which contrasts the facts that size and age are not criteria for being appointed to the position of leader over Israel. Of the two bicola in verse 1, the first one corresponds with the last one in verse 10. One could therefore argue for separating these verses into two verses each, thus giving the psalm a total of twelve verses.²² But there is an inner cohesiveness in these two verses which ties them together into units. The second bicolon of verse 10 makes use of the same verb and nearly all the nouns of the second bicolon in verse 1.

Verse 2 continues the narrative of verse 1. It speaks about what David has done, and the continuation from the shepherd scene of verse 1 indicates that it is while doing the work of a shepherd that he has made the instruments which he used to give glory to Yahweh. It seems quite natural that one who works as a shepherd should find his joy in giving glory to someone other than himself. Contrasted with verse 2 is verse 9. The focus has changed to the brothers of David who, relying on their natural stature and handsome appearance, were not chosen by God. The fact that they were not chosen implies that they really expected to be. The other-centeredness of David is contrasted with the self-centeredness of his brothers.

The genius of the chiastic narrative poem is that it makes sense as a continuous account, while at the same time also making

²²Magne, p. 544, has divided the psalm in this way.

sense in its chiastic structure—unit with corresponding unit. Thus verse 3 continues the story of the first two verses. David is the shepherd whose virtues remain unknown, yet they have been observable; but in the mountains and the hills there was none who could testify in his behalf. The corresponding verse 8 continues the contrast of David with his brothers. While David longs for someone to testify on his account, his brothers rely on their physical appearance. Internal and external virtues are contrasted.

In verse 4 the wilderness isolation theme is continued and an element of despair is introduced. All of David's work has been in the presence of the trees or nature and the sheep that have taken away his words and his work. And at the same time that despair becomes evident in verse 4, the corresponding verse in the chiastic structure, verse 7, introduces hope. Again contrasting themes are used to intensify the answer to the problem posed in verse 4.

The climax of the psalm is reached in verses 5 and 6 and was already anticipated in the previous verse. The despair introduced in verse 4 is heightened in verse 5 with a series of three questions of "who." These three questions are answered in verse 6 with "The Lord, . . . God of all, . . . He. . . ." This is at the same time both the conclusion and the center of the poem.

Within the second strophe there is a smaller chiasmus in verses 8 and 9, where the first line in verse 8 corresponds to the last line in verse 9. It is not only a thematic chiasmus but also a structural one. Respectively, the two tricola have the first and the last lines as variants, as shown by the content indicators *xyz,ab,ab:ab,ab,xyz*.

The whole poem can be seen as a chiastic envelope which reads as five sets of corresponding verses. It can also be read as a continuous complete narrative.

4. Conclusion

Psalm 151 from 11QPs^a is basically the same as Ps 151 in the LXX, but there are distinct differences which preclude the latter's being a direct translation of 11QPs^a 151. Several possibilities have been explored in terms of structure and origin of the psalm. Orphic influences have been seen as possibilities by Sanders, and as direct influences by Dupont-Sommer, Magne, and others. Rabinowitz and Cross, to mention only two scholars with a different view, have argued against Orphic influences and for biblical modes of expression and thinking.

The question of date and authorship is not easily answered. Strong arguments can be found for a late date in the Hellenistic period, for a little earlier in the Persian period, or for as early a date as that of Albright in the seventh-sixth century B.C. I have chosen a date in the sixth century because of the poetic style used.

This essay has dealt with the chiastic structure of the psalm, a structure noted by Magne and disputed by Auffret. The chiasmus is not limited to the structural composition of the psalm, but includes the thematic elements also. The corresponding units in the psalm follow mostly a contrasting-of-ideas approach, but the climax of the poem is found in making God the answer to three desperate questions of "who." By using a chiastic structure which relies on stark contrasts, this narrative is in fact able to discuss and provide answers to some abstract philosophical questions. Those questions dealing with ideas and concepts are not removed from the concrete situation of personal experience, even the experience of herding sheep.