THE USE OF THE BIBLE AS A KEY TO MEANING IN PSALMS FROM QUMRAN

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In recent years we have seen an increasing sophistication in discussions of the use of the Bible in the psalms and prayers discovered at Qumran, which now number more than 200 previously unknown texts. We have advanced from early characterizations of the anthropological, mosaic style, to systematic studies beginning in the 1980's that distinguish between and define different types of biblical use. Two forthcoming articles, one by myself and the other by Adele Berlin, focus on the compositional techniques used to mold the biblical text into new poetical works, and illustrate how these techniques convey the new compositions' meaning and purpose.

1 I am honored to dedicate this article to my teacher, colleague and Scrolls Editor-in-Chief, Prof. Emanuel Tov, and to wish him many more fruitful years in good health, "120 ω." This article is based on the paper I delivered at the fourth meeting of the International Organization for Qumran Studies, August 2001, at which Prof. Tov participated. I thank Adele Berlin and Adele Reinhartz for their insightful comments on this paper.


3 For a succinct history of the early research see Eileen M. Schuller, Non-Canonical Psalms from Qumran: A Pseudepigraphic Collection (HSS 28; Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1986), 10–11 and the literature cited there, especially Svend Holm-Nielsen, Hodayot: Psalms from Qumran (ATDan 2; Aarhus, Universitetsforlaget, 1960).


The present study is offered as a further contribution to the theoretical and empirical treatment of this topic. The theoretical question that I wish to pursue emerges from Berlin’s aforementioned article. Berlin advocates an interpretive strategy that takes seriously the biblical contexts of the allusions. She grounds this approach in her observation that, “In poetry, as in Midrash, allusive words do not lose their contexts or their connotations... These allusions act somewhat like a vehicle and a tenor... pulling meaning from one context and inserting it into another.”6 I adopt a similar interpretive strategy in this study while aiming to further assess the transference of biblical context by allusion. I will pose the specific question: How much of the biblical context does a biblical allusion pull into the new work and under what conditions? This question is crucial for evaluating the use of the Bible in the creation of new compositions, and it will be a focal point of my case studies. I will examine the use of the Bible as a key to the meaning and purpose of two psalms, and then explore what light the results shed on the nature of the two collections in which they are found. The two examples are the Tehillah of the Man of God in Non-Canonical Psalms B (4Q381) and the Hymn to the Creator in the large Psalms Scroll from Cave 11 (11QPs).

Our first example is the psalm entitled Tehillah of the Man of God (4Q381 24 4–12). In this example, we shall see how paying close attention to the psalm’s use of the Bible, and in particular to its transference of biblical context, provides valuable clues for resolving outstanding interpretive issues. I provide here the transcription and translation prepared by Eileen Schuller for Discoveries in the Judaean Desert XI; however, as Schuller acknowledges, the tenses of the verbs are open to interpretation.7

6 Berlin, “Laments.”

7 Eileen Schuller, “381. 4QNon-Canonical Psalms B,” in Qumran Cave 4.VI: Poetical and Liturgical Texts, Part 1 (DJD XI; ed. Esther Eshel et al.; Oxford: Clarendon, 1998), 109–12. The term “non-canonical” is used here merely as a convention for indicating that these psalms are not included in the Masoretic or Greek psalters.