THE PSALMS OF DAVID: DAVID IN THE PSALMS

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PSALMS WITH HEADINGS THAT MENTION DAVID

Almost half the psalms bear a headline including the name of David: in the Hebrew canon 73 of the 150 psalms, and in the Septuagint an additional 14, including the 151st psalm which is “out of count.” The superscriptions vary remarkably, but what all have in common is the phrase לוֹדָּה. The exact meaning of this formulation is contested. It appears to be a rather formulary phrase that can be used by itself, as well as in different combinations with other words or phrases or even sentences. It appears thirty-five times in the formula לוֹדָּה מַחְתֶּר לוֹדָּה (or מַחְתֶּר לוֹדָּה), usually translated “a psalm of David.” This formula can be extended to a sentence, for example, “when he fled from his son Absalom” (Ps 3:1), or “when he was in the Wilderness of Judah” (63:1). In these cases is obviously understood as naming David to be the author of the psalm. This is even more evident in cases like Ps 18:1, where is followed by “who spoke to Yhwh the words of this song.”

In later tradition David is seen to be the author of the psalms in general. 2 Macc 2:13 mentions the “writings of David,” and according to the large Qumran scroll (11QPh col. 27) David “wrote” and “spoke” no less than 3,600 psalms (וֹדּוֹת) and 450 “songs” (שׁירים). In the New Testament several times psalms are quoted as spoken by David “by the Holy Spirit” (Mark 12:36, cf. Acts 1:16) or “in the book of Psalms” (Luke 20:42, cf. Act 2,25, 4:25, Rom 4:6, 11:9). In rabbinic literature David as author of the “five books of Psalms” is compared to Moses as the author of the “five books of the Torah” (Midr. Tehillim to 1:2, cf. b.Baba Batra 14b, 15a; b.Pesachim 117a).

But what David is it who could be seen as the author of psalms and even as “the sweet singer of the songs of Israel” (2 Sam 23:1)? Is it

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1 “An essay on a subject like ‘The David of the Psalms’ is a sign of what is going on in biblical studies in our time.” (J. L. Mays, “The David of the Psalms,” Interp 40 [1986] 143–155, here 143)

2 The NRSV understands this verse differently.
the great king who ruled Israel and half the surrounding world for decades? The one who did not hesitate to kill two thirds of the Moabitite warriors when he had already defeated them (2 Sam 8:2)? To whom did he sing his psalms? To his wives? To Bathsheba? Or earlier to Abigail? Nothing is said about this. There is only one element in the narrative David tradition that shows a certain relation to singing psalms: David had been brought to the court of Saul to play the lyre before the king in order to chase away the evil spirit that had come upon Saul (1 Sam 16:14-23; 18:10; 19:9). But this was in his youth before he became king, and nowhere is anything mentioned about David playing his instrument in later times. One might mention 2 Sam 1:17, which says that David “sang” or “intoned” a lamentation or dirge over Saul and his son Jonathan. But it does not say he was the author of the song (nor in the following verse, which is “uncertain” [JPS]). Other traditions are even less clear: In Amos 6:5 the MT speaks of people “singing to the sound of the harp, like David inventing musical instruments;” but here again, according to commentators and translators, the meaning of the Hebrew text is “uncertain.”

The “musical instruments of David” are also mentioned in Neh 12:36; 1 Chron 23:5; 2 Chron 29:26-27. This leads in another direction: according to the tradition of the Chroniclers (including Nehemiah, irrespective of the question of authorship) it was David who installed the institution of Temple singers and musicians (1 Chron 6:16; 16:4-7; etc.). The image of David in the chronistic literature is quite different from that in the Books of Samuel and Kings. According to our understanding of the historical setting of the Psalms, at least parts represent traditions more ancient than that of the Chronicler. Therefore this tradition cannot help us understand why David’s name appears in the superscriptions of so many psalms. Even later is the view of the Qumran scroll 11QPs⁸, which says that David wrote his songs to sing “before the altar” at the occasion of sacrifices and festivals.

EXPANDED SUPERSCRIPTIONS THAT MENTION DAVID

A number of expanded superscriptions mention specific situations in the life of David when he had spoken or sung the respective psalm. All of these circumstances are reported in the Books of Samuel. The references make it clear that the psalms in their given shape are to be read in the larger framework of the Hebrew Scriptures. It is thus possible to understand these psalm titles as a kind of inner-biblical exege-