THE SHIFTING FOCUS OF PSALM 101

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The history of the interpretation of Psalm 101, generally classified as a royal psalm, reveals a good deal of controversy as to its original focus.¹ I shall present here evidence as to what that focus was and show that this focus has shifted through a series of changes to the text, some possibly deliberate and some possibly due to scribal error. This process has not been carried through rigorously, with the result that the latest form of the text (the MT) is not altogether homogeneous. Essentially, I shall argue in favor of the frequently proposed view that the poem was composed for the occasion of the enthronement of a Judahite king.² Specifically, its original focus was the instruction of the king’s courtiers (especially his advisers) in conduct becoming to such personnel. Over time the theme of instruction has been downplayed to the point that it has all but disappeared, resulting in a text whose main concern is now the glorification of the Davidic king as the royal paragon of righteousness and virtue.

BASIC STRUCTURE

Ideally, every treatment of an ancient Hebrew poem should include a discussion of its structure. Therefore I shall begin with an overview of the structure of Psalm 101, especially since certain aspects of this bear significantly on matters of interpretation.³

One persistent question in the study of this psalm is where to mark off its second major division. It comes down to whether to include v. 2b⁴ as part of the first or the second stanza. Although a number of

² See, for example, Sigmund Mowinckel, The Psalms in Israel’s Worship (2 vols., Nashville: Abingdon, 1962) 1.65–66; Claus Westermann, The Living Psalms (Grand Rapids; Eerdmans, 1989) 57.
⁴ I.e. קְנָאֲשַׁל אֲבֹתָא לָכֶםָא קָנָאֲשַׁל בָּיִתָא.
modern translations and commentators opt for placing this bicolon at the beginning of the second division,\(^5\) rhetorical devices in vv. 3-7 show that these verses constitute a major unit of the poem and consequently that the second major unit must begin with v. 3, not v. 2b. John S. Kselman has pointed out a chiastic structure spanning these verses and composed of four elements.\(^6\) In their most basic form they are as follows:

| 3a | יָדַעְתִּי | a | 6a | עָנָיִית | d' |
| 3a | דָּבָר | b | 7a | עָשַׂה | c' |
| 3b | מָשָּׁה | c | 7b | דָּבָר | b' |
| 5b | לֹא נָעַם עִיָּן | d | 7b | תַּלֹּס | a' |

This four-part chiasmus gives the strongest possible indication that vv. 3-7 comprise one of the major units of the poem (Part II).\(^7\) Hence the view that v. 2b begins a major division of the poem is highly unlikely. The chiasmus and the two inclusions created by (ב) also point to a subdivision within vv. 3-7, namely, into vv. 3-5 (IIA) and 6-7 (IIB). Finally, these literary devices also indicate that the last major division of the psalm begins after v. 7 — that is, v. 8 (Part III).

THE ORIGINAL FOCUS OF PSALM 101

**Evidence from Part I**

Although a number of interpreters believe that Psalm 101 (in its original form) was a Judahite coronation hymn, others classify it as a lament. The two genres are mutually exclusive. It is hardly possible to imagine that an occasion of national celebration such as the coronation of a king could have allowed for lamentation.

Verse 2 is widely regarded as the most controversial line in the psalm, particularly the end of the first bicolon, נְפִלָּה בִּי, "When will you come to me?" As we shall see, it is this verse — in its original reading — that clearly indicates the original focus of Psalm 101. Now it is well known that the interrogative term נְפִלָּה, "when," like הָאָדָם, "why," is an element commonly found in lament psalms. This is no doubt why Psalm 101 is categorized by some as a lament. How-

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5 E.g. *RSV, NIV.*
6 Kselman, "Psalm 101," 47
7 Konrad Schaefer (*Psalms* [Berit Olam; Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2001] 248) has proposed an ABCDEF // ABDCFE pattern spanning vv. 2a-5a, 6b-8a. This structure is a matching pattern that *almost* works, but ignores v. 1 altogether, and hence is far from convincing.