QUMRANIC PSALM 91: A STRUCTURAL ANALYSIS

MIKA S. PAJUNEN

The manuscript 11QPsApª (11Q11) is a collection of apocryphal psalms. The full contents of the manuscript are hard to define due to large pieces missing from the upper and lower parts of the scroll. The extant compositions are psalms previously unknown to us, with one exception. The last psalm on the scroll is a slightly different version of Psalm 91. Considering the relative shortness of Psalm 91, it is rather surprising that there are a number of small variations between the existing versions.¹

Many scholars have dealt with the variant readings of the Qumranic² version, starting with the original editor of the manuscript, Johannes P. M. van der Ploeg.³ While many sound arguments have been made

¹ I will mainly compare the 11QPsApª version and the Masoretic Psalm 91. The Septuagint would have a couple of variants worthy of mention, if the purpose of this contribution was to search for the original text form of Psalm 91 (Psalm 90 in the Septuagint). However, the aim is to discuss the variants on 11QPsApª and their meaning for the understanding of the Psalm. Apart from a couple of variants that will be mentioned, there does not seem to be a connection between the Septuagint variants and those found on 11QPsApª, so they will not be discussed here. There is also another version of Psalm 91 found in Qumran (in 4Q84) but it follows the Masoretic text where extant so it does not need a classification of its own. For 4Q84, see Patrick W. Skehan, “A Psalm Manuscript from Qumran (4QPsb),” CBQ 26 (1964): 313–22.

² The word “Qumranic” in this contribution is meant to designate the place of discovery—not the composer or even user—of this Psalm. It is used as a means of differentiating it from the Masoretic and Septuagint versions.

regarding which readings are the more original, no one has suggested that there could be a common reason for most of the variations. It would be peculiar if these variants would have accumulated in the 11QPsAp tradition of the text one after the other over a lengthy time period, and there is no trace of them in any of the other versions. There is a need to find more plausible explanations for the variant readings of Psalm 91 and to look at this issue from new perspectives.

This contribution takes as its starting point the text of the Qumranic version of Psalm 91, and by analyzing the structure and meaning of this version it aims to give a more comprehensive assessment of why most of the variants came about. Most of the variants between the Masoretic and Qumranic versions are minor in the sense that they do not change the actual meaning of the text. There are many types of variations (transpositions of colons and word order, different words used to convey the same thought, etc.). In many cases, the Qumranic version is clearly later than the Masoretic and the reason for most of these variants is to be found in the structure of the Qumranic version. I will suggest in this contribution that someone has edited the Qumranic version so that it is structurally made up of three distinct parts, i.e., stanzas. The first two stanzas have been modified to conform to a concentric pattern. This kind of pattern is very often used to close

---

4 As far as I know, this is the first study taking the Qumranic version as a starting point and trying to distinguish its structure.

5 I will use Wilfred G. E. Watson's definitions when speaking of the poetic units, i.e., stanzas, strophes and colons. He divides poems into stanzas that are in turn made of strophes. The number of stanzas within a poem naturally varies according to subject matter as does the number of strophes within a stanza. The terms indicate scale, to use Watson's own example: if a poem is a house, the stanzas are the rooms and the strophes the furniture. Wilfred G. E. Watson, Classical Hebrew Poetry: A Guide to its Techniques (2d ed.; JSOTSup 26; Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1986), 161–62.

6 The pattern where a central part is framed on both sides (e.g., ABC X CBA) by matching elements (i.e., words, poetic structures, etc.) is usually called concentric, see Luis Alonso Schökel, A Manual of Hebrew Poetics (trans. A. Graffy; SubBi 11; Rome: Editrice Pontificio Istituto Biblico, 1988), 192, but sometimes it has also been called a chiasm/chiastic pattern, see for example Nils W. Lund, “Chiasmus in the Psalms,” AJSL Vol. 49, No. 4 (1933): 281–312. Watson, Classical Hebrew Poetry, 51, 164, 187, uses both terms. I think the term concentric better describes this pattern as the central element does not have a counterpart as the different parts of a chiasmus do. The existence of concentric patterns has been firmly established. For studies distinguishing concentric patterns, see, for example, Lund, “Chiasmus,” 281–312; Robert H. O’Connell, “Isaiah XIV 4B–23: Ironic Reversal through Concentric Structure and Mythic Allusion,” VT 38/4 (1988): 407–18; Joanna Dewey, Markan Public Debate: Literary Technique, Concentric Structure, and Theology in Mark 2:1–3:6 (SBLDS 48; Chico, CA: Scholars Press, 1980); Marjo C. A. Korpel and Johannes C. Moor, “Fundamentals of Ugaritic and Hebrew