

# The origin of the Syriac apocryphal Psalm 153<sup>1</sup>

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## Abstract

A survey is given of research on the Syriac apocryphal Psalm 153. As is the case with Psalm 152 a Hebrew *Vorlage* of this psalm does not form part of the Psalms Scroll from Qumran. That scroll does, however, contain Hebrew versions of Psalms 151, 154 and 155. The variants in the different Syriac manuscripts are discussed, demonstrating that all the variants can be regarded as the result of the inner Syriac transmission. The psalm is retroverted in Hebrew and the problems in this regard are discussed. This psalm is an individual lament. The possibility of the existence of a Hebrew *Vorlage* is discussed and it is concluded that such a *Vorlage* is a distinct possibility, with an origin for the psalm in the late Persian, early Hellenistic era.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Since the publication of 11QPs<sup>a</sup> (Sanders, 1965) and the critical edition of the five Syriac apocryphal psalms (Baars, 1972) these psalms have received new attention. Hebrew texts of Psalms 151, 154 and 155 are now available, but not of 152 and 153. In this paper the origin of Psalm 153 is investigated, in an attempt to answer the question as to whether a Hebrew *Vorlage* could be postulated.

In 1930 Martin Noth published his study on the five Syriac apocryphal psalms. It included a retroversion in Hebrew of Psalms 152, 154 and 155. He did, however, not attempt a retroversion of Psalm 153. The quality of his work is clear from a comparison of his retroversion with the two psalms whose Hebrew originals were found at Qumran. There are not, however, Hebrew originals available for Psalms 152 and 153. It is indeed a question whether Psalms 152 and 153 had Hebrew originals. In this paper the research on Psalm 153 will be surveyed. The different Syriac manuscripts will then be studied to determine whether different traditions

can be distinguished in these manuscripts. For this purpose the data that can be gathered from the Syriac manuscript 12t4 are very important. Noth did not have this manuscript at his disposal. This will be followed by a retroversion of the psalm in Hebrew, following the text of 12t4. For this attempt valuable information can be gleaned from Psalms 152, 154 and 155 regarding translation technique and vocabulary.

## 2. A SURVEY OF RESEARCH ON PSALM 153

A difference of opinion regarding the possibility of a Hebrew *Vorlage* exists among scholars. Noth (1930:11) was of the opinion that the five Syriac apocryphal psalms were not original Syriac compositions, because of the different character of Syriac Christian poetry. These psalms were, according to him, closely related to the Old Testament psalms with regard to form, structure and content. They are, however, not dependent on certain Old Testament psalms. He regarded the origin of Psalm 153 as the most difficult to determine (Noth, 1930:22). It has a regular parallelism, but the Syriac of his lines 7 and 8 (verse 4) can, to his mind, not be retroverted into Hebrew (Noth, 1930:23). This last fact makes the possibility of a Hebrew *Vorlage* problematic, although these lines could possibly be regarded as a later addition to the psalm (in Syriac) with the aim to connect this psalm more closely to David, in agreement with the heading to this Psalm. In the end he decided to reserve final judgement.

In 1966 Strugnell (1966) published an important paper containing a discussion of the Syriac psalms 151, 154 and 155 in relation to the texts from Qumran. He does not discuss the two Syriac psalms that are not contained in 11QPs<sup>a</sup>, but accepts without further discussion that 153 and 152 had Hebrew originals, just as is the case with 154 and 155 (cf. Strugnell, 1966:261 and 278-279).

Van der Woude (1974:33) is also certain that Psalms 152 and 153 had Hebrew *Vorlagen*, on account of the contents, form and vocabulary of these psalms. Psalms 152 and 153 are also closely related and this is in favour of a Hebrew *Vorlage* for Psalm 153 (Van der Woude, 1974:33n12). He accepts that Psalms 152-155 contain a direct translation from the Hebrew original and that the *Vorlage* was one of the Hebrew manuscripts found near Jericho circa 786 according to the Nestorian patriarch Timothy I (1974:34). Psalms 151-155 existed as a distinct group, according to him, and were translated as such into Syriac. He is also of the opinion that Psalm 153 links up with Psalm 152 to a certain extent. He regards Psalm 152 as an individual lament, while Psalm 153 must be regarded as a thanksgiving hymn (1974:36). He regards the fact that a close link exists between Psalms 152 and 153,

<sup>1</sup> The original version of this paper was read at the Annual Meeting of the Society for Biblical Literature during November 1994 in Chicago, U.S.A. Financial assistance to attend this meeting was received from the Centre for Science Development of the Human Sciences Research Council. Opinions expressed in this paper and conclusions arrived at are those of the author and are not necessarily to be attributed to the Centre for Science Development.

in spite of the difference in genre, as a strong argument in favour of a Hebrew *Vorlage*.

Skehan (1976) is convinced that Psalms 152 and 153 did not have Hebrew *Vorlagen*, but that they are original compositions in Syriac. His argument is as follows (1976:147-155): Psalms 152 and 153 were combined with Psalm 151 in the Syriac. An important argument in favour of his view is related to the headings given to these psalms in manuscript 12t4. The headings connect Psalm 152 and 153 to Psalm 151 in 12t4. This is not the case in the other Syriac manuscripts, where 152 and 153 follow 154 and 155. The headings of Psalm 152 and 153 serve for Skehan to tie these two psalms to 1 Samuel 17:34-37 in the Peshitta. The link to 1 Samuel is stronger in the headings than in the texts of the psalms themselves. In the heading of Psalm 152 the verb *šql* is used for the taking of the sheep, just as in the Peshitta of 1 Samuel 17:34, while the Psalm has *kmnw* and *tbrw*. The end of the heading of Psalm 153 agrees with 1 Samuel 17:36 in the Peshitta. The reference to a wolf is for Skehan another argument in favour of a poet writing in Syriac using Syriac sources when he combined Psalm 152 and 153 with 151. 1 Samuel has a reference to a bear in the Hebrew. Skehan argues that the confusion between a bear and a wolf could only have occurred in the Syriac (1976:149-150).

Skehan (1976:151) also regards the Hebrew colouration of the two psalms as artificial. In 152:2 one finds *yl* and *'dwny* in 152:6. Skehan points out that the former is the rendering of the Hebrew *'ly 'ly* in the citation of Psalm 22:2 by the Peshitta gospels in Matthew 27:46 and Mark 15:34. It is also the reading of the East Syriac text of Psalm 22:19b, corresponding to the MT's verse 20b. He is also of the opinion that Psalm 152:1-2a is directly dependent on the Peshitta of Psalm 22:19b-21a. *'dwny* also does appear frequently in the Syriac, inter alia in eleven headings to Psalms in the West Syrian tradition. In addition to this he states (1976:153-154) that Psalm 152:4 is dependent on parts of the Peshitta Psalm 113.

Regarding Psalm 153 Skehan (1976:154) accepts that verse 1 is a conscious adaptation of Psalm 116:1 (meaning Psalm 117:1 in the MT). The use of *hllwy* in Psalm 153:1 proves, according to him, that the poet must have known Hebrew on account of the choice of *hll*, agreeing with the Hebrew of Psalm 117. The Peshitta used *šbh*. The poet did not follow the whole of Psalm 117:1, but concluded the passage with a section agreeing with Psalm 113:2. Verses 2 and 3 agree with Psalm 152. Verse 5a agrees with Daniel 6:22, while 5b agrees with Psalm 152. The verbs in verse 6 appear frequently in the Peshitta Psalter and the verse ends in prose. His conclusion is that the psalm was the work of a Syrian Christian who saw types of death in the lion and wolf and a type of Christ in David (1976:155). The time of the

composition of the psalm must have been close to the date of 12t4 because of the fact that 12t4 has no marginal notes to these two psalms.

Charlesworth (1985:615) thinks that Psalm 153 could have had a Hebrew background, but he states that there is less evidence to support this hypothesis than in the case of Psalm 152 (1985:616).

Wacholder (1988) regards the inclusion of Psalms 151, 154 and 155 in 11QPs<sup>a</sup> as prima facie evidence in favour of regarding Psalms 152 and 153 also as part of that scroll, and makes suggestions as to where they could have been situated in that scroll. He has no doubt at all that the Syriac Psalms had a Hebrew *Vorlage*.

In the following discussion the variants in the Syriac Psalm 152 will be discussed to determine whether different traditions of the psalm existed in the Syriac. This will be followed by a retroversion of the psalm in Hebrew with the aim of discussing the possibility of a Hebrew *Vorlage*. For the sake of this retroversion the Syriac heading will be left untranslated. It is quite clear that the headings of the Syriac Psalms must be regarded as secondary, as can be gathered from the missing heading to Psalm 155 in the Qumran Psalms scroll and the probability that the heading of Psalm 154 would not fit into the missing part between the remainder of the psalm and what preceded it in the scroll.

### 3. VARIANTS IN THE SYRIAC MANUSCRIPTS

In Baars' critical edition (1972:6) 12 variants are listed. The first one is the number ascribed to the Psalm in 12t4. Of the other eleven variants, five can be found in the heading, two in verse 2, one in each of verses 3 and 4 and two in verse 5. The variants can be classified as follows:

- \* In five instances all the other Syriac manuscripts agree against 12t4. These are the following (the reading of 12t4 is given first): Heading: *qbl - mqlb*; Heading: *kd pšyq - dpšh*; Heading: *b'ydwhy* - om; verse 3: *w'pq - w'p*; verse 5: *wsbr* (peal) - pael.
- \* There are three instances where 18E1 has a reading differing from all the other manuscripts (18E1's reading is given second) Verse 2: *npš' - pr l*; verse 2: *'ydy - pwm*; verse 5: *mny* - om.
- \* There are two instances in the heading where the majority of the manuscripts have a different reading from 12t4, with one or two of the other manuscripts agreeing with 12t4. In the first instance 12t4 has 13t4 *šybwh* and the majority of the other manuscripts *šybw'*. 18E1 agrees with 12t4. In this instance the reading of 14E1 is uncertain, as it has abbreviated the word

in question, with the result that it is uncertain whether the word had a suffix or the definite article. In the second instance all the manuscripts except 14E1 and 18E1 have pointed *qtl* as a Pael against the Peal of 12t4 and the named two manuscripts.

\* In verse 4 19E1\* omitted *cdl'*.

As is the case with the other Syriac psalms it must be accepted that if this psalm had a Hebrew original, the heading would not have been part of that original. It is also clear that there are important differences between the heading in 12t4 and the majority of the other Syriac manuscripts. In the case of three of the five variants in the heading all the other manuscripts disagree with 12t4. In the case of the other two variants, 18E1 agrees with 12t4 and 14E1 agrees once with 12t4 against the other Syriac manuscripts. The most important of these variants in the heading is the addition of *b'ydwhy* at the end of the heading in 12t4. Regarding the other six variants, three appear only in 18E1 and one only in 19E1\*. In the case of the other two variants, where all the other Syriac manuscripts disagree with 12t4, the one in verse 5 is connected with the pointing of the Syriac (*skr* in the Peal or Pael). The other variant, in verse 3, is quite remarkable. 12t4 has at the beginning of the second half of the verse *w'pq* against the *w'p* of all the other manuscripts. Both these readings make sense in the parallelism in this verse. 12t4 has a verb in the second half of the verse parallel to the verb in the first half, while in the other manuscripts *p* emphasizes the object while the verb of the first half is carried over to the second half. This difference is clearly the result of an inner Syriac transmission (addition or omission of *q* in one of the two traditions). It is difficult to ascribe priority to one of the two readings. Taking all the variants into consideration, it is clear that all of them could be the result of an inner Syriac transmission.

#### 4. PSALM 153 IN HEBREW

The following is an attempt at retroverting the psalm into Hebrew. The retroversion is followed by a discussion of the motivation for the translation.

1. הללו את-יהוה כל-גוים שבחוהו וברכו שמו
2. כי הוציא נפש בחירו מיד מות והציל חסידו משחת
3. ומן חבלי שאול פרני והוציאני מן המצולה אין חקר
4. כי כמעט במרם יצא ישע מלפניו לשתי מניות הייתי משתי חיות
5. אך שלח מלאכו וסגר ממני פיות פעורות

6. נפשי תברכה ותרוממהו על כל-מובתו כי סמך ויסמך לי

For verse 1 up to שבחוהו , compare Psalm 117:1.

For ברכו שמו in verse 1, compare Psalm 96:2 and 100:4. In Psalm 96 the Hebrew has שירו ליהוה ברכו שמו and the Peshitta translate with *sbhw lmy'wbrkw lsmh*. Skehan (1976:154) regards Psalm 153:1 as a conscious adaptation of Psalm 117:1. In the second part of the verse he sees dependence on Psalm 113:2 in the Peshitta, that begins with *nhwh smh dmy' mbrk*. It is, however, also possible to discern, in the second part of the verse, an allusion to Psalm 96:2, where the Hebrew has an imperative of ברך . The verb *brk* is also used after *sbh* in Psalm 153:1.

For חבלי מות in verse 3, compare Psalm 18:5. It is noteworthy that in Psalm 18:5 and 6 the Peshitta translates חבלי with the same word in Syriac, while a different word is used here in Psalm 153.

Verse 4 was regarded by Noth, as indicated above, as untranslatable in Hebrew. The translation suggested here results in a verse longer than any of the others and the accumulation of particles at the beginning of the verse is strange.

For אך as a translation of *brm* in verse 5, compare Psalm 68:22 and 140:14 in the Peshitta.

For the beginning of verse 6, compare Psalm 145:1. *scr* is the only meaningful translation for the Hebrew שמך . In the Peshitta Psalter the Hebrew שמך is usually translated by the same verb in Syriac. This translation, as well as the use of *nšb'* as a rendering for חבלי in verse 3, proves that the author/translator did not work mechanically and that his rendering points to an independent approach.

#### 5. THE NATURE AND CONTENTS OF THE PSALM

Different scholars have attempted to classify this psalm. Noth (1930:22) finds a hymnic introduction at the beginning of the psalm (hymnische Einführung), with a call to praise God in verse 1 and the motivation for this call in verse 2. From verse 3 it changes into a thanksgiving hymn and the psalm ends with an exhortation to glorify God. He regards the psalm as a whole as a thanksgiving hymn (1930:23). Van der Woude (1974:36) agrees with this view and regards Psalm 152 as an individual lament. The two psalms are closely related, in spite of the difference in genre.

Skehan (1976:147) is of the opinion that the combination of Psalm 152 and 153 with Psalm 151 occurred in the Syriac version. The headings and the order of the psalms

in 12t4 are important for his view. He points out (1976:148) that the two headings link the two psalms closely. The headings in the Syriac are as follows:

152. *'myr ldwd kd mtkš' m 'ryh wd'b' dšqlw 'rb' mn 'nš*

153. *'myr ldwd kd qbl tybwth d'lh' kd psyh mn 'ryh wd'b' wqtl lryhwn b'ydwhy*

It is quite clear that the two headings connect these two psalms through the reference to the lion and wolf. Skehan is also of the opinion that these two headings connect these two psalms to Psalm 151 (1976:147). This link is strengthened by the addition of a line in Psalm 151:1, also referring to the lion and the wolf (1976:148): *w'skht 'ry' 'pd'b' wqtl 'nwn wpšht 'nwn*. The headings of Psalms 152 and 153 link these psalms closer to 1 Samuel 17 in the Peshitta than is the case with the bodies of the two psalms (1976:148-149). Skehan discusses the confusion regarding the wolf and the bear extensively. In the Hebrew of 1 Samuel 17 a bear is mentioned. The Hebrew **ב** is not confusable with **ב**, while the confusion between *db'* and *d'b'* in the Syriac is quite understandable. It does happen, however, that *db'* gets an ' , making confusion even more possible. Skehan uses the possible confusion in the Syriac as an argument in favour of a Syriac origin of these psalms, but in the light of the spelling of *db'* with an ' this is questionable. Skehan regards the Hebrew colouration of the psalm as artificial (1976:151). The use of *hllwhy* is, however, an indication that the writer knew Hebrew.

Charlesworth (1985:609) is also of the opinion that Psalm 151, 152 and 153 were influenced by the tradition of 1 Samuel 16 and 17, according to which David conquered lions, bears and the Philistine Goliath and thinks it possible that the older psalms could have inspired the later ones.

As indicated above, Noth did not recognize a literary dependency of this psalm on canonical psalms. Verse 4 could have been expanded to link this psalm closer to David, as is the case with the headings. The headings are indeed important for defining the origin of possible reworkings of these psalms. There are also matters not related to the headings that must also be taken into consideration. Skehan also stated that the headings of Psalm 152 and 153 linked these psalms more closely to 1 Samuel 17 as is the case with the contents of the psalms. From the discussion of the variants it became clear that the variants were the result of the inner Syriac transmission. The variants have, however, information important for understanding the history of Psalm 153 in Syriac in its relationship to Psalms 151 and 152. At the end of Psalm 151:1 12t4<sup>m</sup> has an addition that appears also in the other Syriac manuscripts containing the five apocryphal psalms, namely *w'skht 'ry' 'p d'b' wqtl 'nwn wpšht 'nwn*. Skehan adds (1976:145) that this addition does not appear in any of the Syriac psalm texts that include Psalm 151 (excluding the manuscripts with the

apocryphal psalms). Skehan regards this addition as an attempt to strengthen the link between Psalm 152 and 153 on the one side and 151 on the other. When one looks closely at the original text of Psalm 152 and 153 in 12t4 over against the readings of 12t4<sup>m</sup> and the other Syriac manuscripts, one finds more evidence of the inner Syriac revision with the aim to strengthen the link between these psalms and 1 Samuel 17:34-37. In the text of Psalm 152 in 12t4 there is no reference to a wolf. In verse 2 12t4 has 'ry' twice. There is also no marginal note to this reading. All the other Syriac manuscripts have replaced the second 'ry' with *d'b'*. Skehan (1976:150 n28) refers to this reading of 152:2, but thinks that the fact that the verb is in the plural points to two different animals. He therefore prefers the reading *d'b'*. It is, however, so that the Syriac 'ry' could have been used to translate more than one Hebrew word. In the Peshitta Psalter 'ry' is used to translate the Hebrew **אריה** (Psalm 7:3, 17:12, 22:14 and 22), but it is also used as a translation for **נפיר** Psalm 25:17, 58:7, 91:13 and 104:21). In 1 Samuel 17:37 it is used to translate **ארי**. In the manuscripts other than 12t4 Psalm 152:5 does also have a reference to a lion and wolf/bear. 12t4 reads in 152:5 *mwt' mhbln'*. The other manuscripts have 'ry' *mhbln'* and adds *wd'b' srwh'*. If it is accepted that a possible Hebrew text of Psalm 152 did not have a reference to a wolf in verse 2 and keeping the addition of the lion and wolf in verse 5 in mind, it is clear that the original Psalms 152 and 153 had no reference to a wolf, but that the reference to the wolf must be regarded only as part of the headings and as secondary additions to the texts.

It is thus necessary to distinguish between the original psalms and their revised editions. The headings and revision connect these psalms firmly to 1 Samuel 17. 1 Samuel 17 also uses the word *d'b'*, with the internal ' , as in the apocryphal psalms. It is quite possible that it is merely a plene form for *db'* (cf. Payne-Smith, 1981:801 and 806).

It is quite clear that with regard to the Hebrew colouring and vocabulary this psalm is closely related to Psalm 152. The fact that the text of the psalm does not refer to a lion or wolf/bear, makes it imperative that the reference to the two animals can only be understood with reference to the two animals in 152:2 (two lions according to 12t4 and a lion and wolf/bear according to the other manuscripts). Although the Hebrew retroversion given above does not read smoothly in all instances, it can be taken as support for the view that the original of this psalm was written in Hebrew. The possibility of Syriac revision, as can be deduced from a comparison of the different manuscripts, must be kept in mind. The extent of the revision is not clear and this could be the reason for the problems encountered by an attempt at retroversion. If the psalm had a Hebrew *Vorlage*, as is possible, it must be dated in

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the late Persian, early Hellenistic era, as is probably the case with Psalms 151, 154 and 155.

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