PSALM 60: A PSALM OF DAVID

BENJAMIN SCOLNIC

Did David write any of the psalms? The traditional stance is yes, the consensus critical stance is no; in fact, the current tendency is to say that that they were written later and later. My goal here is modest; I want to locate one psalm at a specific point in David's life and claim that he wrote it (or it was written for him). Before I focus on this one psalm, I will present both viewpoints about David's authorship of psalms.

The view that King David was the author of some psalms finds support in the historical books, where David is pictured as a man with great poetic and musical ability. His career starts when he is chosen to play his harp before King Saul because of his expertise in music (I Sam. 16:16-23). At the end of his life, in what are labeled the last words of David, II Samuel 23:1-7, a poem that seems so ancient that NJPS[1] says that "much of this poem is uncertain," he says he is "the sweet singer of Israel." He has not only been anointed to be the king who has been given an eternal pact for his dynasty. He claims that he also has been given a special role from God to sing and proclaim God's Words in song: *The spirit of the LORD has spoken through me His message is on my tongue; The God of Israel has spoken, The Rock of Israel said concerning me* (II Sam. 23:2-3). David is not just calling on God to help him compose this song, like Homer asking the Muses for their inspiration. He has a continuing role as God's poet.

We find some of his compositions recorded in the historical narratives of II Samuel and I Chronicles (II Sam. 22:1-51; 23:1-7; I Chr. 16:7- 36; 29:10-13). The immortal elegy for Saul and Jonathan is found in 2 Sam. 1:17-27. He sings a dirge over Abner, who had been assassinated by David's commanders and cousins (2 Sam. 3:33-34): *Should Abner have died the death of a churl? Your hands were not bound; Your feet were not put in fetters; But you fell as one falls, Before treacherous men.*

The psalm attributed to David in I Samuel 22 is the same one attributed to him in Psalm 18: *The God, my mighty stronghold, Who kept my path secure; Who made my legs like a deer's, And set me firm on the heights; Who raised*

Benjamin Edidin Scolnic is the spiritual leader at Temple Beth Sholom in Hamden, Connecticut and teaches at Southern Connecticut State University. He is the author of eleven books.

my hands for battle, So that my arms can bend a bow of bronze . . .For this I sing your praise among the donations, And hymn your name.

The earliest extra-Biblical references to David as an author are found in the Apocryphal books of Ben Sira and 2 Maccabees (second century BCE). In Ben Sira 47:7-11, David is described as a man of song and praise who organized the musicians for temple worship. Second Maccabees refers to "the works of David" among the writings collected by Nehemiah when he founded a library (2 Macc. 2:13). A remarkable reference is found in the prose insert in column XXVII of the Psalms Scroll from Qumran Cave 4. The pertinent lines of this insert are translated by Sanders as follows:

And David, the Son of Jesse, was wise, and a light like the light of the sun, and literate, and discerning and perfect in all his ways before God and men. And the Lord gave him a discerning and enlightened spirit. And he wrote 3,600 psalms; and songs to sing before the altar over the whole-burnt perpetual offering every day, for all the days of the year, 364; and for the offering of the Sabbaths, 52 songs; and for the offering of the New Moons and for all the Solemn Assemblies and for the day of Atonement, 30 songs. And all the songs that he composed were 446, and songs for making music over the stricken, 4. And prophecy which was given him from before the Most High.[2]

Josephus considered David the author of the entire Psalter.[3] The Rabbinic writers for the most part assigned the work of the Psalter to David though not necessarily the authorship of every psalm. The second century CE Talmud tractate *Baba Batra* (14b) states, "David wrote the Book of Psalms with the aid of the ten ancients, with the aid of Adam the first, Melchizedek, Abraham, Moses, Heman, Jeduthun, Asaph, and the three sons of Korah," *Midrash Tehillim* on Psalm 1:2 states that "as Moses gave five books of laws to Israel, so David gave five books of Psalms to Israel." This statement is striking in equating David with Moses, the traditional author of the Torah. In these passages, David was considered not just the author of some psalms, but the editor of the entire Psalter.

Quite to the contrary, most modern Bible scholars do not accept David's authorship of any psalms, and instead attribute their composition to unknown authors writing between the 9th and 5th centuries BCE and probably compiled and edited into its present form during the post-exilic period not earlier than the 5th century BCE.[4] They think that most of the psalms were written

in the Kingdom of Judah and were associated with the Jerusalem Temple, functioning as libretto during the sacrifices.

Robert Alter writes: "One cannot categorically exclude the possibility that a couple of these psalms were actually written by David, though it is difficult to gauge the likelihood (and some scholars altogether doubt David's historicity)."[5] This statement is somewhat more positive than all those who rule out David as a psalm-author, but is quite equivocal, almost apologetic. Most moderns see the example I will study here, Psalm 60, as late, as I will illustrate below. I hope to show that David wrote Ps. 60 (or at least was its patron) because it was written at a particular point in his time, after his victories over northern Israel, two Aramean kingdoms, Philistines, Moab and before his conquest of Edom.

PSALM 60

1 *For the leader, on shushan eduth. A michtam of David* (to be taught), *when he fought with Aram-Naharaim and Aram-Zobah,*
2 *and Joab returned and defeated Edom* – [an army] *of twelve thousand men – in the Valley of Salt.*
3 *O God, You have rejected us,*
You have made a breach in us;
You have been angry;
restore us!
4 *You have made the land quake;*
You have torn it open.
Mend its fissures,
For it is collapsing.
5 *You have made your people suffer hardship;*
You have given us wine that makes us reel.
6 *Give those who fear You because of Your truth*
a banner for rallying.
7 *That those whom You love might be rescued,*
Deliver with Your right hand and answer me.
8 *God promised in His sanctuary*
That I would exultingly divide up Shechem,
And measure the Valley of Sukkoth;

9 *Gilead and Manasseh would be mine,*
Ephraim my chief stronghold,
Judah my scepter;
10 *Moab would be my washbasin;*
on Edom I would cast my shoe;
acclaim me, O Philistia!
11 *Would that I were brought to the bastion!*
Would that I were led to Edom!
12 *But you have rejected us, O God;*
God, You do not march with our armies.
13 *Grant us your aid against the foe,*
for the help of man is worthless.
14 *With God we shall triumph;*
He will trample our foes.

The consensus of critical scholars begins by finding two different literary structures in Psalm 60. According to Kellermann, who most critical scholars follow, one stage is an oracle from the late eighth century after the destruction of northern Israel found in vv. 8-10 which uses chiasmus; the other is vv. 3-7, 11-14, an early sixth-century lament which uses meter and was built around the oracle in the early sixth century after the destruction of Judah. Since v. 11 is indicative of a time of military conflict between Judah and Edom. Kellerman states that the one time that Judah faced invasion from a northern enemy while simultaneously standing in conflict with Edom was during the Babylonian invasion at the beginning of the sixth century BCE. Historically, he says, it seems likely that Edom opportunistically capitalized on Judah's weakened state during the Babylonian invasion by launching incursions into Judean territory.[6] Anderson rejects this and posits a two-stage composition of the psalm in the Hasmonean and Herodian periods (2nd century BCE- 1st century CE).[7]

Before we look for a context at the end of the eighth century, the beginning of the sixth century, or the Hasmonean or Herodian eras, should we not look first to see if the situation can be found in the tenth century, the time of David? Before we cut the psalm apart based on superimposed notions of poetic genre, should we not see if the psalm is unified as is? We should not try to impress a context on the verses but let them speak for themselves. When we

read these verses, we are looking for a historical situation where the Israelite leader had accomplished the promised victories in northern Israel and Moab but apparently failed, at least for this moment, in conquering Edom. We will begin by viewing Psalm 60 as a unified poem/prayer, and asking the questions: Is there a point in history when this poem might have been written? Is there a historical situation that would fit an Israelite or Judean writer's very specific mentions to areas of northern Israel and the neighboring lands of Philistia, Moab and Edom?

THE HISTORICAL CONTEXT

The author of the psalm is living in a terrible moment, hoping that the next stage will be better. A psalm is a prayer, and often begins in a negative situation that calls for faith.[8] The accounts of the battles referred to here can be found in II Samuel. Geographically, the western borders of Judah and Ephraim had been susceptible to attack from the Philistines (I Sam. 17; II Sam. 5:17–25; 8:1). On the eastern and northern borders, the tribal allotment of Manasseh had been vulnerable to attack from Syria and the Ammonites (II Sam. 8:3, 10). Moab and Edom were also involved in aggression against Israel (II Sam. 8:2, 12, 14).

In Psalm 60:8–11, God stands centered on Judah, and Ephraim and Moab serve as launching platforms for control over neighboring regions. From Ephraim (v. 9), God has established authority over other northern Israelite tribes – Manasseh and Gilead (vv. 8-9). Military nuances are found in the verbs *chalek* ("to divide"; see Genesis 49:27, Isaiah 53:12, Micha 2:4) and *madad* ("to measure"; see II Samuel 8:2, Habbakuk 3:6), used in reference to Shechem and the Valley of Succoth in v. 8, expressing domination. From Moab (v. 10), God has extended control over Edom and Philistia (vv. 10–11).[9]

This plan has been fulfilled through David's victories. David eventually rules northern Israel after a long civil war (see below). He defeats the Philistines, the Moabites, and Hadadezer son of Rehob, king of Zobah and his Aramean allies. David takes great spoils of silver, gold, and bronze and then more in tribute from kings who were afraid of him. In all this, he dedicates his spoils and plunder to God. The Bible sometimes gives summary statements about victories (Deut. 1:7; 11:24; Josh. 1:4). The intention of the au-

thor of II Samuel was not to emphasize defeats, but to validate God's faithfulness to His covenant with David.

We can see this intention in a broad chiastic structure for II Samuel 5–8:

A. David becomes king over Israel (summary of reign) (5:1–16)
B. Military victories over the Philistines (5:17–25)
C. David "danced before God" (6:1–23)
D. Climax: promise of David's everlasting dynasty (7:1–17)
C. David "sat before God" (7:18–29)
B. Military victories over the Philistines and others (8:1–14)
A. Summary of David's reign (8:15–18)

Psalm 60, while also celebrating a catalogue of victories, brings us into the middle of all these conflicts at a very difficult point where faith may have been shaken. The psalm says, in our words, 'God, I thought we had a deal! Can You march with our army again so that we can win?'

Moab would be my washbasin;
on Edom I would cast my shoe;
acclaim me, O Philistia!
Would that I were brought to the bastion!
Would that I were led to Edom!
But you have rejected me, O God;
God, you do not march with our armies.

In its introduction, which I believe is integrated with the poem (as we will see below), the psalm emphasizes a military defeat and makes a thematic detour from those chapters in II Samuel which emphasize the blessings of kingship in their accounts of confrontations with military powers and alliances.

THE CIVIL WAR

After the deaths of Saul and Jonathan, David went to Hebron and made it his capital over Judah; *the men of Judah came and there they anointed David king over the House of Judah* (II Sam. 2:4). *The length of time that David reigned in Hetron over the House of Judah was seven years and six months* (2:11). If David was in Hebron for seven and a half years, then Ishboshet, the son of Saul, must have reigned in the north for most if not all of that time, and a civil war between Judah and Israel must have lasted that long as well:

The war between the House of Saul and the House of David was long-drawn-out; but David kept growing stronger, while the House of Saul grew weaker (II Sam. 3:1).

The text of II Samuel describes how Abner props up Ishboshet, the surviving son of Saul (II Sam. 2:8-9); it describes at length the deadly battle between the men of Abner and Joab (II Sam.:12-32), the confrontation between Abner and Ishboshet and Abner's defection to David, Joab's assassination of Abner and David's protestations of innocence (all in II Samuel 3). This is what II Samuel emphasizes to the point that the reader may not focus on the fact that there was a long civil war that lasted five-six years, a very long war indeed. The chronology of II Samuel 2-3 (esp. 2:10) is difficult, but the sense seems to be that David and Ishboshet ruled concurrently until the bloody incident at the pool of Gibeon, which ignited a civil war for five and a half years until Ishboshet was assassinated and the northern kingdom of Israel acclaimed David as their king. For all the details about Abner, there are none about the battles between David and his men and the men of the north. I believe that Psalm 60, from David's point-of-view, thanks God for his victories in the north. We know that Ishboshet's capital was in Gilead, which is mentioned here. Before Abner and Ishboshet were assassinated, there were battles between Judah and Israel, and eventually David ruled over these areas.

This is what David thanks God for here:

8 *God promised in His sanctuary*
That I would exultingly divide up Shechem,
And measure the Valley of Sukkoth;
9 *Gilead and Manasseh would be mine,*
Ephraim my chief stronghold,

These verses are about victories, not seeking refuge from enemies after the destruction of the Temple as the critical scholars conjecture.

THE DIFFICULT CONQUEST OF EDOM

A michtam of David (to be taught)*, when he fought with Aram-Naharaim and Aram-Zobah, and Joab returned and defeated Edom* – [an army] *of twelve thousand men—in the Valley of Salt.*

After his victories against the other foes, David confronts the Edomites, a people to the southeast of Judah in what we call Jordan today.[10] This war is mentioned in two other passages: *And David became famous after he returned from striking down eighteen thousand Edomites in the Valley of Salt. He put garrisons throughout Edom, and all the Edomites became subject to David. The Lord gave David victory wherever he went* (II Sam. 8:13-140). 1 Kings 11:14-16 indicates that this was a bloody war: *When David was in Edom, Joab the army commander went up to bury the slain, and he killed every male in Edom, for Joab and all Israel stayed here for six months until he killed every male in Edom.*

The word that I want to emphasize here *veyasshav,* that Joab "returned." Why should the text say "returned"? And if we combine this notice with the other passages, why does Joab need to bury the slain? Why does he stay in Edom for six months until he kills every male in Edom? Something has happened in the conflict of Edom which is very different from the other conflicts. Why set up garrisons, which do not seem to have been placed in the other regions, especially after all the Edomite males are dead? What made this campaign so different?

I speculate that there was an initial defeat, and that this is the context for Psalm 60. David did not win at first. Psalm 60 states that Joab returned and struck down the Edomites. I suggest that Joab returned, buried the many Israelite dead, and then dealt with unusual severity against the Edomites as a response to an Israelite defeat, or at least terrible losses. This might explain why, in retaliation, David and Joab took the unusual steps of killing ever male and building garrisons.

The narrative accounts emphasize David's victories with the help of God and do not give us details about the civil war or the other conflicts of this stage in David's life. The introduction to Psalm 60, and the subtle implications of the other texts, indicate that David suffered a defeat in his confrontation with the Edomites. The psalm was written at this point when David felt rejected by God but still prayed for victory. That victory did happen, and so the temporary moment of despair passed. A later psalm-writer, who only knew the narrative of II Samuel, would not have known about the anguish of this juncture, and probably would not have determined that there had been a defeat at all.

As David's historical reputation grew during the centuries of his descendants' rule, no one would have wanted to focus on this moment of defeat and desperation when the ever-faithful David's faith faltered. But the psalm, written by or for David, came from the heart in a specific moment in time.

THE HISTORICAL INTRODUCTIONS FROM DAVID'S LIFE

The significance of the historical superscriptions that refer to David's life has been a matter of interest over the past century of Psalm studies.[11] There are historical introductions in the Psalms which involve incidents from the life of David (Psalms 3, 7, 18, 34, 51, 52, 54, 56, 57, 59, 60, 63, 142).

3:1 *when he fled from his son Absalom* (cf. II Sam. 15:1-18:33).

7:1 *concerning Cush, a Benjaminite* (without parallel).

18.1 *after the LORD had saved him from the hands of all his enemies and from the clutches of Saul* (= II Samuel 22, with a few variations).

34:1 *when he feigned madness* (cf. I Sam. 21:10-15, but when he feigned madness before Achish not Abimelech).

51:1 *when Nathan the prophet came to him after he had come to Bathsheba* (II Sam. 11:1-12:14)

52:*1 when Doeg the Edomite came and informed Saul, telling him, "David came to Ahimelech's house"* (I Sam. 22:6-10).

54:1 *when the Ziphites came and told Saul, "David is hiding among us"* (I Sam. 23:14-24).

56:1 *when the Philistines seized him in Gath* (I Sam. 21:10-15; 27:1-4; in neither of these passages is David seized by the Philistines).

57:1 *when he fled from Saul in a cave* (cf. I Samuel 24).

59:1 *when Saul sent men to search his house in order to put him to death* (I Samuel 19:8-17 - cf. I Samuel 19:11).

Psalm 60:1 - II Samuel 8:3-8; 10:15-20; I Kings 11:15-16.

63:1 *when he was in the wilderness of Judah* (I Sam. 24:1-7; II Sam. 15:1-16:14)

Psalm 142 *when he was in the cave* (I Sam. 22:1; 24:1-7).

Most modern scholars are skeptical about the age and the value of what they call the psalm superscriptions. The New English Bible translation has completely cut out these psalm titles; they are not even found in the footnotes. One of the most serious charges leveled against the psalm titles is that

they lack credibility in attributing 73 of the 150 psalms to David. The Hebrew phrase *le-dawid* is found in 84 superscriptions – over half of the psalms. The most natural meaning of *le-dawid* is "of David," in the sense of "belonging to." This could mean belonging to a Davidic psalm collection or belonging to David, in the sense that he is the author. The use of the same *le* in Isaiah 38:9 and Habakkuk 3:1 shows that authorship is possible; these verses attribute authorship to Hezekiah and Habakkuk, respectively. The term *le-David* can been shown to refer to David as the author of the psalms and his clear involvement in the writing of the psalm as author, liturgist, or in honor of him as king.[12]

I believe that some of the Davidic superscriptions, such as Psalm 60:1, can be shown to be original, authentic, and clearly connected to the psalms they introduce.

Even calling them 'superscriptions' may imply their secondary status. I use the more neutral term 'introduction' and claim that they are intentionally placed and theologically coherent by linking specific chapters in David's life (e.g., his exile by Saul).

These introductions place David in dangerous or difficult situations: in a cave, in the wilderness, in defeat, in flight. He becomes the patron of the oppressed, the exile, the refugee. But we know that he will triumph. David is the model pray-er; later prayers are inspired by his words, his faith, and most of all by his ultimate salvation. In the case of Psalm 60, the introduction may provide the real-life context for a prayer of David.

I believe that Psalm 60 is a psalm of David, and an inspiration and model for many other psalms that would be written in later centuries.[13]

NOTES

1. TANAKH (Philadelphia: JPS, 1985). All translations are from this edition.
2. James A. Sanders, *The Dead Sea Psalms Scroll* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1967), p. 137.
3. Flavius Josephus, *The Works of Flavius Josephus,* trans. William Whiston, vol. 2: *Antiquities of the Jews I-VII* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1974), pp. 465-66.
4. Adele Berlin, Marc Zvi Brettler, "Psalms," in Adele Berlin, Marc Zvi Brettler, Michael A Fishbane (eds.). *The Jewish Study Bible* (Oxford: Oxford University Press. 2004), p. 1282.
5. Robert Alter, *The Book of Psalms* (NY: Norton, 2009), p. xv.

6. Ulrich Kellermann, “Erwägungen zum historischen Ort von Psalm LX,” *VT* 28 (1978), pp. 56–65; Hans-Joachim Kraus, *Psalms 60–150: A Commentary*, trans. Hilton C. Oswald (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1988), p. 3.

7. Craig Evan Anderson, “The Politics of Psalmody: Psalm 60 and the Rise and Fall of Judean Independence,” *JBL* 134 (2015), pp. 313–332.

8. While some think that verses 4-5 indicate an earthquake, I see them as metaphorical. While there does seem to be a mention of the earth quaking in I Samuel 14:15 at Michmash, I take the verses here as describing the way David or the poet feels about this difficult time.

9. Anderson (2015), p. 319.

10. For an overview of Edom’s history, see John R. Bartlett, *Edom and the Edomites*, JSOTSup 77 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 1989), pp. 147–61.

11. John H. Hayes, “The Songs of Israel,” in Steven L. McKenzie, Matt Patrick Graham, (eds.), *The Hebrew Bible Today: An Introduction to Critical Issues* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1998), pp. 154–55. Some scholars propose that the superscriptions are derived from the text of the psalm reflecting the work of an early Jewish exegete rather than an independent historical tradition (Brevard S. Childs, "Psalm Titles and Midrashic Exegesis," *JSS* 16 (1971), p. 137; F. F. Bruce, "'The Earliest Old Testament Interpretation," in *The Witness of Tradition*, *OTS* 17 (Leiden: Brill, 1962), p. 52. Slomovic thinks that the psalm titles represent early attempts to interpret the Biblical psalms (Elieser Slomovic, "Toward an Understanding of the Formation of Historical Titles in the Book of Psalms," *ZAW* 91 (1979), p. 380.

12. Alter (2009), p, xv. Hymns have superscriptions and subscriptions elsewhere in the ancient Near East. See James B. Pritchard, ed., *Ancient Near Eastern Texts Relating to the Old Testament*, 3rd ed. with supplement (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1969), pp. 365–81.

13. Indeed, Ps. 60:7-14 = will be found in Ps. 108:7-14 with a very different beginning.

Full text of articles from Volumes 1 – 52 is available for download on our website:
http://jbq.jewishbible.org/jbq-past-issues/