

HOW TO FIND PSALM 151

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Perhaps a better title would be where to find Psalm 151, since it is a short psalm found in most copies of the Septuagint (LXX),¹ but not found in the Masoretic Text² of the Hebrew Bible. It is contained in Orthodox Christian Bibles, but not in Roman Catholic or Protestant Bibles. This psalm is included in some manuscripts of the Peshitta.³ In Syriac,⁴ Psalm 151 is the first of a series of psalms (Psalms 151–155) about the heroic exploits of David in 1 Samuel 16–17. The discovery of the first Dead Sea Scrolls near Qumran in 1947, and the subsequent discovery of many more scrolls near Qumran⁵ and at other sites in the Judean desert, revolutionized modern biblical studies. Among excavations between 1947 and 1956, nearly 900 scrolls were found.

In the traditional Hebrew Bible, known as the Tanakh,⁶ the Book of Psalms contains 150 psalms. However, some early Bibles—such as the Septuagint and Syriac Bibles—include Psalm 151 as well as Psalms 152–155. In the Greek Septuagint Psalter, Psalm 151 is the last psalm and it is accepted as canonical by all Orthodox churches.

Before the discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls, Psalm 151 was known only as a single composition in the Septuagint and in the Latin and Syriac translations made from the Greek Septuagint. Among the Dead Sea Scrolls discovered at Qumran, a Hebrew copy of Psalm 151 is found in the Great Psalms Scroll, but it is found as two separate compositions—Psalms 151A and 151B.

The discovery of Psalms 151A and 151B among the Qumran scrolls is important for several reasons. As in the Septuagint, the Great Psalms Scroll Psalter ends with Psalm 151. Although the Hebrew text differs from the Greek in several ways, this “Qumran Psalter” shows that by the Common Era some Jews were using a collection of Psalms that also ended with Psalm 151. Having both the Hebrew original and the Greek translation provides important insights on the technique used by the translator (Flint, 2024, para. 5). Reworking the Hebrew source material, the translator condensed Psalms 151A and 151B into one Greek psalm of seven verses, changing the order of several verses and omitting some material. Psalms 151A and 151B (Hebrew) and 151 (Greek) are the only psalms considered to be autobiographical in terms of clearly relating to actual events in the life of David. While some superscriptions to Psalms 1–150 include similar references to David, the actual texts of those Psalms never mention him (Flint, 2024, para. 5).

In the Septuagint, the title given to Psalm 151 indicates that it is *supernumerary* (“exceeding the usual number”) because no specific number is affixed to it. The psalm is ascribed to David and recounts some of the highlights of his life (e.g., 1 Samuel 17). For many years, scholars believed Psalm 151 was originally composed in Greek, based on the traditional view that “there is no evidence that Psalm 151 ever existed in Hebrew” (Swete, 1914, p. 253). However, a lack of evidence does not prove an absence of evidence. With the discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls, Psalm 151 appears, along with several canonical and non-canonical psalms, in the scroll known as “The Great Psalms Scroll” or “11Q5,” a scroll dating from the 1st century that was discovered in 1956. Dead Sea Scroll 11QPs(a) is also known as 11Q5. The *editio princeps* (i.e., the first printed edition of the work)⁷ of this manuscript was published in 1963 by James A. Sanders. This scroll contains two short Hebrew psalms, which scholars now agree served as the basis for Psalm 151.

Although Psalm 151 is “outside the number” of 150 Psalms, it is one of the six additional parts of the First Testament recognized as canonical by the Byzantine Church, “additional” to the Alexandrian Canon, and acknowledged by the Latin Church. Orthodox Christians maintain that the psalm has always been part of the Psalter of the Alexandrian Canon, but it is unclear why the Western (Latin) Church has never acknowledged it as such. It is clearly separate from the 150 Psalms and it is always placed separately at the end of the Byzantine Psalter. It is sung along with the other Psalms and just before the list of Canticles begins.⁸

In its form and style, Psalm 151 is not a hymn or a petition, but rather it is a narrative (cf. Psalm 78).⁹ Psalm 151 is an autobiographical poem in which David—the youngest of his brothers—speaks of his shepherding care for his father’s flocks, his psalms praising God, his defeat of the Philistine warrior, and his anointment as Israel’s king. The title of the psalm states that it was written by David after his battle with the Philistine giant (Goliath). In this sense, the psalm is a kind of special tribute to King David and a prayer commemorating his victory over Goliath. As the Fathers of the Church taught, the Psalter is our new spiritual “sling” or weapon by which we slay the spiritual “Goliath.”

Summary

Psalms 151A and 151B (Hebrew) and 151 (Greek) are the only psalms considered to be autobiographical in terms of clearly relating to actual events in the life of David. Although some superscriptions to Psalms 1-150 include references to David, the actual texts of those Psalms never mention him. A comparison of the superscriptions in the Great Psalms Scroll (Qumran) and the Greek Septuagint (LXX) reveals the Dead Sea Scroll version to be more Davidic in style. The Septuagint—while ascribing the Psalm to David and mentioning his encounter with Goliath—declares it to be “outside the number” (of the book of Psalms). This designation may reflect later editors’ concerns about the place of Psalm 151 in the Greek Psalter, during the early centuries of the Common Era, when the form now represented by the Masoretic collection of 150 psalms was becoming increasingly influential for Judaism.

Notes

1. The Septuagint (LXX) is variously referred to as The Translation of the Seventy (LXX) or the Greek Old Testament. It is the earliest extant Greek translation of the Hebrew Bible from the original Hebrew. The full Greek title derives from a story recorded in the Letter of Aristeas to Philocrates that “the laws of the Jews” were translated into the Greek language at the request of Ptolemy II Philadelphus (285–247 BCE) by 72 Hebrew translators—six from each of the Twelve Tribes of Israel.

2. The Masoretic Text is the authoritative Hebrew and Aramaic text of the 24 books of the Hebrew Bible (Tanakh) in Rabbinic Judaism. The terms “Hebrew Bible” or “Hebrew Canon” are often confused with the Masoretic Text. However, the Masoretic Text is a medieval version and one of several texts considered authoritative by different types of Judaism throughout history (Tov, 2014). The current edition of the Masoretic Text is mostly written in Biblical Hebrew, although there are a few passages (Daniel, Ezra, and Jeremiah 10:11) written in Biblical Aramaic.

Psalm 151 is contained in the earliest Greek translations of the Hebrew Bible, which Christians often refer to as the Old Testament. However, when Jerome of Stridon (347 CE – 420 CE) translated the Psalter into Latin in the 4th Century CE, he used the Hebrew Masoretic text, which did not include Psalm 151.

3. The Peshitta (Classical Syriac: ܦܫܝܬܬܐ or ܦܫܝܬܬܐ pšīṭṭa) is the standard version of the Bible for churches in the Syriac tradition, including the Maronite Church, the Chaldean Catholic Church, the Syriac Catholic Church, the Syriac Orthodox Church, the Malankara Orthodox Syrian Church, the Malabar Independent Syrian Church (Thozhiyoor Church), the Syro-Malankara Catholic Church, the Assyrian Church of the East and the Syro-Malabar Church.

4. The language of ancient Syria, also known as Syriac Aramaic and Classical Syriac, is a western dialect of Aramaic that emerged during the first century CE from a local Aramaic dialect that was spoken. Syriac is the language in which many important early Christian texts are preserved, and the language is still used by Syrian Christians as a liturgical language.

5. Qumran is an archaeological site in the West Bank managed by Israel’s Qumran National Park Service. It is located on a dry marl plateau about 1.5 kilometers (0.93 mile) from the northwestern shore of the Dead Sea, about 10 kilometers (6.2 miles) south of the historic city of Jericho, and adjacent to the modern Israeli settlement and kibbutz of Kalya. Qumran was founded between 134 and 104 BCE or slightly later. Qumran was inhabited by a Jewish sect of the late Second Temple period. Most scholars identify this sect with the Essenes, although other Jewish groups have also been suggested to have lived there. Qumran was occupied most of the time until 68 CE. It was destroyed by the

Romans during the First Jewish–Roman War, possibly as late as 73 CE.

6. The word Tanakh is comprised of the Torah (Instruction), Nevi'im (Prophets), Ketuvim (writings). The Tanakh (Hebrew: תנ"ך Tanak), also known in Hebrew as Miqra (Hebrew: מִקְרָא Mīqrā'), is the canonical collection of Hebrew scriptures comprised of three parts from which the word Tanakh is derived: (1) the Torah (literally, "Instruction," "Teaching," or "Law," known to Christians as the Pentateuch or the Five Books of Moses), (2) the Nevi'im (the Former Prophets consisting of the books of Joshua, Judges, Samuel and Kings; and the Latter Prophets, including the books of Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and the Twelve Minor Prophets), and (3) the Ketuvim ("writings" or "hagiographa" comprised of 11 books that include one combined book of 1-2 Chronicles, Book of Ezra-Nehemiah, Psalms, Proverbs, Job, Song of Songs, Book of Ruth, Book of Lamentations, Ecclesiastes, Book of Esther, Book of Daniel). The Jewish textual tradition never finalized the order of the books in the Ketuvim, whereas the Babylonian Talmud gives their order as Ruth, Psalms, Job, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs, Lamentations, Daniel, Esther, Ezra, and Chronicles. Different branches of Judaism and Samaritanism have maintained different versions of the canon, including the 3rd-century BCE Septuagint text used in Second Temple Judaism, the Syriac Peshitta, the Samaritan Pentateuch, the Dead Sea Scrolls, and most recently the 10th-century medieval Masoretic Text compiled by the Masoretes, currently used in Rabbinic Judaism.

7. In textual and classical scholarship, the *editio princeps* (plural: *editiones principes*) of a work is the first printed edition of the work, that previously had existed only in manuscripts. For example, the *editio princeps* of Homer is that of Demetrius Chalcondyles (1423–1511), now thought to be from 1488. The most important texts of classical Greek and Roman authors were for the most part produced in *editiones principes* in the years from 1465 to 1525, following Johannes Gutenberg's (c. 1393–1468) invention of the printing press around 1440, which led to unprecedented mass-spread of literature throughout Europe. Gutenberg's major work, the Gutenberg Bible, was the first printed version of the Bible. The Gutenberg Bible was the first European book published on a printing press using moveable metal type. Many scholars agree that the Gutenberg Bible was first published in Mainz, Germany on February 23, 1455.

As a side note, Gutenberg's invention of the moveable face type and the press meant that books could be printed in larger numbers, sold cheaply, and distributed widely. Although the printing revolution did not cause the Protestant Reformation, the printing press allowed production of many more copies of religious writings critical of the Catholic Church than would have been possible before Gutenberg's invention. Martin Luther (1483–1546), the Catholic priest, later branded a heretic, and finally declared an outlaw of the Roman Catholic Church, recognized the value of the printing press and exploited it brilliantly in his challenge to the authority of the Church. As a devout Catholic priest and brilliant theologian, Luther

composed his theses not as an attack against the Church, but as an invitation to a disputation—a scholarly debate—on the sale and exploitation of papal indulgences and other issues that attracted his concern. On October 31, 1517, when Luther posted his 95 Theses against indulgences on the door of Castle Church at Wittenberg, Stuttgart, he was not attempting to incite any riot or uproar. Posting his notice for a disputation on the doors of the church, which was affiliated with the university, was a common practice at the time.

8. A canticle is a non-metrical song used in liturgical worship. Canticles are drawn from biblical texts other than the Psalter. The term is derived from the Latin *canticulum*, a “little song.” In practice, canticles are sung or said in worship.

9. In Psalm 78, Asaph charges Israel with transgressing God’s law and breaking His covenant. He points to the miracles of the Exodus as a show of God’s strength.

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- Peter W. Flint holds the Canada Research Chair in Dead Sea Scrolls Studies at Trinity Western University, Canada. His publications include *The Dead Sea Psalms Scrolls and the Book of Psalms* (Brill, 1997), *The Dead Sea Scrolls Bible* (HarperOne, 1999), and *The Meaning of the Dead Sea Scrolls* (HarperOne, 2002). He is also the coeditor of the *Cave 4 Psalms Scrolls* and is preparing the *Book of Psalms for The Oxford Hebrew Bible* and a new edition of the *Cave 11 Psalms Scroll* for the series *Dead Sea Scrolls Editions*.
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- James A. Sanders (1927–2020) was an American scholar of the Hebrew Bible/Old Testament and one of the editors of the *Dead Sea Scrolls*. He was the first to translate and edit the *Psalm Scroll*, which contained a previously unknown psalm. Sanders grew up in Memphis, TN, where he attended a Methodist church. He attended Vanderbilt University, where he associated with Baptist and Methodist fellowships. He taught at Union Theological Seminary in New York, NY and at the Claremont School of Theology, Claremont, CA. Sanders retired in the late 1990s, although he published and lectured regularly into his 90s.
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- Henry Barclay Swete (1835–1917), Fellowship of the British Academy (FBA), was an English biblical scholar who became Regius Professor of Divinity at Cambridge in 1890. In 1911, he was appointed an honorary chaplain to King George V. In 1915, he retired with the title of Emeritus Professor.
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- Emanuel Tov, Ph.D. is a Dutch-Israeli biblical scholar and linguist, and Emeritus Professor of Bible Studies in the Department of Bible at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem. He has been

intimately involved with the Dead Sea Scrolls for many decades. In 1991, he was appointed Editor-in-Chief of the Dead Sea Scrolls Publication Project.

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Appendix A
Psalm 151 Version Comparison

Psalm 151 A and B in 11QPsa [Hebrew]	Psalm 151 in the Septuagint [Greek]
<p>(Psalm 151A) Hallelujah! A Psalm of David, son of Jesse.</p>	<p>This psalm is autographical, ascribed to David (but outside the number), after he had fought with Goliath in single combat.</p>
<p>1 I was smaller than my brothers, and the youngest of my father’s sons, so he made me shepherd of his flock and ruler over his little goats. 2 My hands fashioned a reed pipe, and my fingers a lyre;</p>	<p>1 I was small among my brothers, and the youngest in my father’s house; I would shepherd my father’s sheep. 2 My hands made a harp; my fingers fashioned a lyre.</p>
<p>and so I gave glory to the LORD. I said in my mind: 3 “The mountains cannot testify to him, nor can the hills proclaim – lift up my words, you trees, and my compositions, you sheep.</p>	<p>3 And who will tell my Lord? The Lord himself; it is he who hears.</p>
<p>4 For who can announce, and who can declare, and who can recount my deeds? The Lord of everything has seen, the God of everything has heard, and he has paid attention. 5 He sent his prophet to anoint me, Samuel to raise me up. My brothers went out to meet him, handsome of figure, handsome in appearance. 6 Although they were tall of stature and handsome because of their hair, the LORD God did not choose them. 7 But he sent and fetched me from behind the flock and anointed me with the holy oil, and he made me prince of his people</p> <p>and ruler over the sons of his covenant.</p> <p>(Psalm 151B) At the beginning of po[we]r for [Dav]id, after God’s prophet had anointed him.</p>	<p>4 a It was he who sent his messenger 4b Then he took me from my father’s sheep, 4c and anointed me with his anointing oil. 5 My brothers were handsome and tall, but the Lord was not pleased with them. 6 I went out to meet the Philistine, and he cursed me by his idols. 7 But I drew his own sword; I beheaded him, and took away disgrace from the people of Israel.</p>
<p>1 Then I s[a]w the Philistine, throwing out taunts from the r[anks of the enemy]. 2 ...I...the...</p>	

Flint, Peter W. (2024). Psalm 151 and the Dead Sea Scrolls. *Bible Odyssey*.

<https://academic.bibleodyssey.com/articles/psalm-151-and-the-dead-sea-scrolls/>

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Published Sept. 01, 2024 | Updated Sept. 01, 2024

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Content and references last reviewed 2024

The correct citation for this article is Doverspike, W. F. (2024). *How to find Psalm 151*. <http://drwilliamdoverspike.com/>