

## The Psalms and Qumran “Vibrant time of Psalm Composition”

The biggest news about the Dead Sea Scrolls from the Qumran community was that there was no big news. Before they were found, the oldest Hebrew texts of the Old Testament were from about 1000 A. D. The oldest complete copy in Greek, which also contains most of the Old Testament, is about 350 A.D. The ancient scrolls are in amazing agreement with what had been hand copied over the centuries. It is clear testimony that these texts, words, were considered special, holy, God’s words.

Among all the books of the Bible, the Psalms are most numerous in the Dead Sea Scrolls, which indicates their immense popularity at Qumran. But the form of the Psalter in these most ancient manuscripts is diverse and fascinating. Up to Psalm 89 or so, the scrolls contain material very much in the order used by Jews and Christians today, although there are a few variations. But from Psalm 91 onward, many of the Psalms scrolls differ radically from the Psalter as we know it.

There are no less than forty Psalms scrolls or manuscripts that incorporate Psalms, ranging in date from the mid-second century BCE to about 50-68 CE.

p 507 “The Dead Sea Scrolls Bible” Translated and with commentary  
by Martin Abegg Jr., Peter Flint & Eugene Ulrich Harper Collins NY 1999

The Psalms are made up of five books. Psalm 90 is first in the third book. The scholars think each book was compiled and then added to the earlier ones. The implication is clear. At the time of Jesus new Psalms were being composed and passed around. There is no record of discussions among early Christian or Jewish scholars about what to include. The Psalms were popular music. They were sung in private. Their use was not restricted to the Temple. There were synagogues everywhere. From the time of the Babylonian captivity a synagogue would meet in a house or outdoors. The first special buildings are in the time of Jesus.

This has a practical implication, concerning Mary’s song “The Magnificat”, Zacharias’s “Benedictus” and Simeon’s “Nunc Dimittus”. Modern scholars believe that some anonymous liturgical poet composed them in the few years between Jesus and the writing of the Gospels. The argument is that Mary and the others could not have had the skills and learning to compose the songs. Those times were very religious, with increasing devotion and knowledge. Villages were building synagogue buildings, ritual baths, stone kosher jars.

Traveling rabbis were going around bringing the latest news, the discussions of the great scholars in Jerusalem. I have known some young men, steeped in old English liturgical phasing and chant who could extemporaneously pray in perfect ancient style. I have no doubt that there were many in Jesus' day who could have done also.

Mary and Zacharias could have meditated on their experience and composed a proper psalm of praise. Simeon might have composed his short song on the spot out of all his past knowledge. The culture valued accurate recall of spoken words, no notepads. Mary and Joseph could have come up with an accurate memory of Simeon's words to them. We must not evaluate the abilities and interest of people in far different cultures and times on the basis of our personal experiences. However, it is based on my experience that I find it hard to believe that their songs were composed by authors who left nothing else.

Mary's mother was cousin to the priest Zacharias' wife Elizabeth. It was a class stratified society. They were from the priestly class, for generations steeped in worship. It was only a century since the scholars removed women from singing in the Temple. The synagogues would not have to follow that ruling. There could have been women choirs singing the old and new psalms. Some might even have composed their own to sing.

There are other important issues. The most frequently quoted Psalm in the New Testament is Ps 110. Jesus uses it to challenge the Pharisees. The Talmudic scholars made no claim that Jesus misused this Psalm. They accepted what Jesus affirms. "He said to them, "How is it then that David, in the Spirit, calls him Lord, saying, "'The Lord said to my Lord, Sit at my right hand, until I put your enemies under your feet'? If then David calls him Lord, how is he his son?" Mt 22:43f. Note, Jesus is not claiming David wrote the Psalm, He is saying that was the Pharisees understanding.

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[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The\\_Great\\_Psalms\\_Scroll](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Great_Psalms_Scroll)

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