

ARTICLES

THE SHEPHERD PSALM: PSALM 23

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Few sections of the Old Testament, perhaps none, have been read as often or as thoroughly by the Christian believer as the Psalter. Why this has been so should not be difficult to ascertain. If one were further to narrow down this collection of 150 hymns to a single representative, surely the twenty-third psalm would be uppermost in our minds.¹ Its familiar words are so well known that their oral recitation has become almost formulaic. Nevertheless, there is a richness of nuance, meaning, and implication here that often the modern reader or interpreter of the Bible who has dealt only with one of the popular English translations might miss.

It should come as no surprise that Psalm 23 has not escaped the critical eye of Biblical exegetes with regard to dating, authorship, "Sitz im Leben," unity and related matters. A few of these areas of interest will be discussed below.

There are two parts to this Psalm: verses 1–4 God the Shepherd; verses 5–6 God the Host. Both parts have the same twin theme. Verses 1–3 of section A and verse 5 of section B have as their basic idea that of provision. Verses 4 and 6 again overlap in theme in that both of

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1. Although we are accustomed to a total of 150 Psalms the interested reader should be aware of at least two other traditions. The Septuagint has an additional Psalm, number 151. To this is attached the explanation "supernumerary," or more literally, "beyond the number." This suggests, of course, a special significance to the traditional number of 150. There is a second tradition in the Jerusalem Talmud, *Shabbath* 16: subsection 1 that there are a total of 147 Psalms, corresponding to the 147 years of the patriarch Jacob (Gen. 47:28). Even these do not exhaust the traditions of ancient manuscripts, as observed by C. D. Ginsburg, *Introduction To the Massoretico-Critical Edition of the Hebrew Bible* (New York: Ktav Publishing House, 1966), p. 18 n.1.

them deal with security and protection. Again, both sections feature interlocking allusions. To cite several illustrations, the eating and the drinking of verse 2 can be compared with the table and the cup in verse 5. As will be noted below, “pastures” in verse 2 is a synonym for “the house of the Lord.” Finally, one observes that the Psalm begins and ends with the Divine tetragrammaton, God’s personal name “Yahweh.” The evidence then is that the passage is a unity and certainly is not dealing with one or two psalms that have been joined artificially.²

Still, a number of scholars have been bothered by this switch in imagery, the presupposition being that one author could not combine in a single piece two themes. To eliminate this duality of imagery, recourse is made to textual emendation. The suggestion was first made by E. Power that “table” (*shulhan*) in verse 5 be changed to “arms,” (*shelah*).³ This latter word appears as part of the compound name of Mr. Senior Citizen in the Bible, Methuselah, literally, “man of the spear.” Power’s suggestion was later picked up and expanded by Morgenstern.⁴ Thus verse 5 is to read “You put a spear in front of me in the presence of mine enemies.” The oil is then the oil that is used to salve the wounds of the sheep, as in Isa. 1:7 and Luke 10:24. The cup is the shallow trench where the sheep obtains its refreshing drink of water. All of this is suggestion, of course, and is contingent on the textual emendation due to a case of alleged dittography.⁵ The image of the Lord as shepherd is common not only to the Bible but to the literature of the ancient Near East. Equally distributed in Scripture is the idea that we are God’s sheep. There are seven references alone in

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2. It is to the credit of the late Professor Umberto Cassuto of the Hebrew University in Jerusalem that he made shambles of the idea of composite authorship in the Pentateuch (long a sacred bastion of Biblical scholarship) simply by applying the criteria of stylistic analysis to the whole as we have done here. See principally his book, *The Documentary Hypothesis and the Composition of the Pentateuch*. Trans. Israel Abrahams, (Jensalem: The Magnes Press, 1961). Cassuto’s commentaries on Genesis and Exodus may also be consulted with great profit.
 3. E. Power, “The Shepherd’s Two Rods in Modern Palestine and Some Passages of the Old Testament,” *Biblica* (1928), p. 441.
 4. J. Morgenstern, “Psalm 23,” *Journal of Biblical Literature*, LXV (1946), 13–24.

the Psalms to Israel as God's sheep.⁶ In light of this introduction it is only natural that the phrase "I shall not want" should follow. Most frequently in the Old Testament the verb here in question is intransitive as in Isa. 51:14, "his bread is not lacking." If a man is a good shepherd he is always counting his sheep. Thus, in Jer. 33:13 there is an explicit reference to the shepherd who "counts" (not "tells" as in KJV) his sheep." Hence, the meaning here is, "I am not missing, I am someone. God is attentive to me. I have identity and personality."

The Hebrew word "pasture(s)" is to be connected with the Akkadian root "*nawum*," especially as it occurs in the eighteenth century B. C. cuneiform texts from Mari. Its earliest meaning in Akkadian is "a flock of sheep," then "shepherd;" also, it is translated "pasture lands," and finally "a tent (of semi-nomads)." This explains why this word has so many different meanings in the Old Testament.⁷ In 2 Sam. 7:8 it means "pasture-land." In Isa. 33:20, however, it is the "shack" in which the shepherd lives, parallel to "tent." For our purposes, in Psalm 23 it is a synonym for "the Lord's house," as in 2 Sam. 15:25 and especially Psalm 83:12. This cannot here be simply a coincidence, particularly in light of the phrase "*beth Yahweh*" in verse 6. The verb "to lead" is also a technical term in Hebrew for allowing sheep to rest instead of driving them on.⁸

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5. Dittography ("written twice") is a type of copyist's error in which a letter or even a whole word is mistakenly duplicated. See some of the examples listed in G. Archer, *A Survey of Old Testament Introduction* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1964), p. 48. In this instance the two words in question are "table" "and in the presence of." In an unvocalized text without word separation the consonants appear as *s(h)lhningd*. The suggested emendation is *s(h)lhngd*.
 6. 74:1; 77:20; 78:52; 79:13; 80:1; 95:7; 100:3.
 7. F. Brown, S. R. Driver and C. A. Briggs, *A Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament* (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1962), p. 627.
 8. Compare Jer. 33:12, Ezek. 34:15, and C. A. Briggs, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Book of Psalms*, Vol. 1 (Edinburgh: T. and T. Clark, 1927), 211. There is also an interesting parallel to this in the epilogue of the famous Hammurapi Code. In citing his accomplishments as shepherd he says, "I made the peoples rest (*us(h)arbis*) in friendly habitations." The root and the stem of the Akkadian verb are identical with their Hebrew counterparts.

The second phrase of this verse, "he leads me beside still waters," may be translated, "by waters which are at resting places he quenches my thirst." The rendition "quiet waters" misses the point of the Hebrew construction. The substantive "*menuhot*," "quiet," is not an attribute of the waters. For the same noun compare Isa. 32:18. The verb, particularly rich in meaning, is used in several of Isaiah's messianic passages: Isa. 40:11, "He leads the sucklings to water," (because they can not do it themselves). In a similar vein compare Isa. 49:10; 51:18.

There are three notes of interest in the third verse. The verb "to restore" means simply to (re)turn.⁹ Originally it was a neutral verb, meaning to force a change in direction, either in the right or the wrong way. Our passage could read, "When I am straying God leads me back on the right tract; "or," God brings back my spirit in the right direction, it having strayed." The word "righteousness" seems straight forward enough. But is it physical or moral? The KJV prefers the latter and the RSV the former. Interestingly, terms for rightness in Biblical Hebrew and related languages can have both meanings. Is the author being deliberately ambiguous at this point, intending the reader to take both meanings from the word?¹⁰

The phrase "for his name's sake" is full of meaning.¹¹ "Name" in the Bible is to be equated with "fame, reputation essence."¹² God's own reputation is at stake here. If God is the kind of shepherd who abandons His sheep no one will trust Him.

In verse 4 occurs perhaps the most difficult word(s) in translating

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9. The Hebrew root *s(h)ub* has been admirably treated by W. L. Holladay, *The Root S(h)ubh in the Old Testament* (Leden: E. J. Brill, 1958).
 10. E. Vogt, "'The Place in Life' of Ps. 23," *Biblica*, XXXIV (1953), 206. Vogt's article, incidentally, is particularly rich and suggestive in observing the similarities between Psalms 23 and 27 (p. 210-211).
 11. J. Eaton, "Problems of Translation in Psalm 23:3f.," *The Bible Translator*, XVI (1965), 173.
 12. In the literature of the ancient Near East the recurring phrase "may his name be blotted out" means "may he be reduced to non-existence." If it can be proved absolutely, as has been often suggested, that the phrase "for the sake of" is the form of the infinitive in Aramaic of a terminally weak verb, in this case "to answer," then the expression in Psalm 23:3 comes through something like, . . . "to answer according to his reputation."

the original text of Psalm 23, "the valley of the shadow of death." Both the Septuagint and the Targums have taken "shadow of death" as composed of two words; shadow and death. The problem, however, is that compound words in Hebrew are very rare, if not altogether absent.¹³ The exceptions are, of course, words like "Hallelujah" or proper names, but these are different. Recently, D. W. Thomas has offered a study of "šalmawet" in the Old Testament.¹⁴ His general conclusion is that the word "death" is used here to give a superlative force to "shadow," thus "very deep/thick darkness." The word is found most often in Job. There it is mostly a term for the underworld as in 3:5; 16:16; 28:3; and best of all 38:17.

The Psalmist next states that God's rod and staff "comfort" him. How do they comfort him? In the sense that they give him reassurance, a feeling of security. Perhaps what lies behind the quaint translation of the KJV can be seen in our expression, "giving aid and comfort to the enemy." Incidentally, this is the same verb, in a different stem, that is used throughout Scripture for God's repenting. Note in this verse that the author switches the person of the pronoun. Previously, when speaking of God, he used "he." Now he uses "you." There is a reason. In the earlier part of the Psalm the writer has been speaking of God the shepherd in general terms. Now he is talking about his own awareness of and personal relationship to God, hence a change in pronoun as the language becomes more intimate.¹⁵

In verse 5 the imagery changes from God as shepherd to God as host. God is the host giving hospitality to a guest. Important here is an understanding of the law of hospitality in the Old Testament; simply, the host is entirely responsible for his guest and must protect him at all cost. The first example of this is Lot who must defend his visitors from his degraded townsmen.¹⁶ On at least two occasions this law of

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13. This statement will now have to bear some re-examination in light of examples from the Ugaritic texts.
 14. D. W. Thomas, "Šalmawet in the Old Testament," *Journal of Semitic Studies* (1962), pp. 191–200.
 15. The careful reader of Scripture will want to pay attention to such detail. Although this may appear only as a slight technicality, to some it is of great significance here and elsewhere in exegeting the Bible.
 16. Gen. 19:1–14.

hospitality was violated when the host murdered his guest(s): Jael's murder of her "guest" Sisera,¹⁷ and Jehu's preconceived plan of murder of Baalist priests under the false pretense of inviting them to a religious service in their temple.¹⁸ The choice of the Psalmist's imagery here should be obvious. To express his complete reliance on God he employs the image of God as host. And further, God does this in the presence of the author's enemies. The enemies have to stand and watch the ruler protect his own, and they are powerless to intervene.¹⁹ God is doing this in full view and not privately.

Not only all of this, but God also "anoints his head with oil." At this point a comparison with the words of Jesus in Luke 7:46 is enticing. The custom of anointing the King with oil at his coronation is well documented in the Old Testament (such as 1 Sam. 10:1). The implication of the Psalmist then is that God not only entertains him and protects him, but also treats him royally. If we are allowed to state it colloquially, "God is giving me the red carpet treatment."²⁰ In verse 6 the author reaches the climax of this paean of praise. "Goodness and mercy" shall pursue and overtake him.²¹ The verb is a colorful one, and is often used in the Scripture in a military context of troops in pursuit of each other. The writer's enemies pursue him to kill him. God pursues him to lavish him with His beneficences. The author does not have to search for it. Is this the "hound of heaven" idea?

The translation of the last verb in the Psalm is problematical. As it is pointed out in the Hebrew text the translation should be, "and I will return to the house of the Lord, (from the root "*s(h)ub*," rather

17. Jud. 4:17–21.

18. 2 Kgs. 10:18–28.

19. In Tell el Amarna text No. 100, lines 33–35 a minor chieftan praises the Egyptian Pharaoh in the third person, "May the King (the Pharaoh) give gifts unto his servants (i.e., himself) while our enemy look on." J. A. Knudtzon, *Die El-Amarna-Tafeln*, Vol. 1 (Otto Verlagsbuchhandlung, 1964), 453.

20. For two apparently contrasting ideas about anointing with oil compare Eccl. 9:8 (positive) and Amos 6:6 (negative, especially in light of Samaritan snobbishness).

21. "Goodness and mercy" occur only here in the Bible in this adjacent position with each other. Limitations of space do not allow us the careful exegesis these two Hebrew words deserve.

than “*yas(h)ab*”). To maintain the KJV “dwell” many commentators have suggested either a slight emendation in the text or a different vocalization of the consonantal text.²² It is possible, however, to maintain the Hebrew text in its present state and also the rendering “dwell” on the basis of Northwest Semitic evidence and other corollary information.²³ In any case, the Psalmist gratefully concludes on this felicitous note, “Wherever I am in the world I shall have God’s divine protection.” Can we ask for anything more?

22. Briggs, *op. cit.*, p. 213.

23. M. Dahood, *Psalms 1 1–50 of the Anchor Bible* (New York: Doubleday and Company Inc., 1966), p. 148.