



Translation, Interpretation and Exposition of Psalm 23

"It is in moments of crisis that the Lord moves from an abstract concept (a 'he' about whom one has memorized doctrinal statements) to a living God with whom one has a relationship (a 'you' in whom one trusts, to one speaks, on whom one can rely)." (Jacobson, 243.)

"[T]he destination one reaches after being . . . harried by God's pursuing goodness and hesed is none other than God's very self." (Jacobsen, 245.)

"The movement of the psalm as a whole can be summarized by considering the first, the middle, and the last words: 'The Lord . . . with me . . . to the end.'" (Limburg, adapted, cited in Greidanus 348, n.33.)

"And you, O Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are by no means least among the rulers of Judah; for from you shall come a ruler who will shepherd my people Israel." (Matthew 2:6, citing Micah 5:2.)

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THE TEXT OF HOLY SCRIPTURE

A Psalm pertaining to David.

A Shepherd

¹**Yahweh** [is] my Shepherd;^a

I lack nothing.^b

² He makes me lie down in green pastures,^c

He leads me beside restful^d waters.^e

³ He revives my core self.^f

A guide^g

He leads^h me into the rightⁱ paths^j

As His character deems fit.^k

⁴ Even if I walk through a deathly-dark^l valley,^m

I shall fear no evil,

For You are with me.ⁿ

Your rod^o and Your staff,^p

'Tis they that encourage^q me.

A host^r

⁵ You set a (lavish) table for me
in plain view of my foes.

You anoint my head with oil,

My cup overflows!

A beneficent stalker

⁶ Surely Goodness and Loyalty^s will pursue^t me^u

My whole life long.

And I shall return^v to the house of **Yahweh**

For the entirety of days.

^a“Shepherd” was also a title used of a king; the psalmist, identified in the title as David, applies a term to the Lord that was similar to *two* of his own roles. In short, David the shepherd-king has the Lord as his Shepherd King.

^b Compare Ps. 34:10: “Young lions can go without and be hungry, but those who seek the Lord lack for nothing good.” The psalmist attests to the Lord as the caring royal provider of everything necessary. (Note the two “I shall not”s: “lack” in v. 1 and “fear” in v. 4.)

^c “Causing the flock to *lie down* there rather than simply *feed* suggests ample provision. It implies that they have eaten, are satisfied, and have no need to move on to look for further grass: this pasture will provide the next meal too. . . . Lying down after feeding also hints at security (Ezek 34:14-15; Zeph 3:13; also Job 11:19; Isa 17:2).” (Greidanus, 354, citing Goldingay I, 349, emphasis mine.)

^d Given the previous line and the unusualness of “rest” with waters—waters at rest might well be stagnancy—the meaning could well be waters conducive to [or in a place of] rest; hence the JPSV: “He leads me to water in places of repose.” Alternatively, it could refer to shepherds “calming” torrential streams running down wadis by making “a small dam in the rocky wadi, forming a pool of still waters where the flock may come down easily from the burning hillsides” (Greidanus, citing Eaton, *Psalms*, 77).

^e The imagery of the provision of pasture and water is no less typical of claims made by kings in respect of their people than “shepherd”; compare the proud claim of King Hammurabi in the epilogue of his law code: “I have sought for them peaceful places . . . I made the people of all settlements lie in safe pastures.” In our psalm, however, the imagery of lying down in *green* pastures stresses both rest and provision. Yet the land in Ps 23 is not said to be safe; presumably God’s presence ensures such safety rather than that inherent to the land, which was at an international crossroads and subject to conquest.

^f That *the revival of the self comes as a result of the previous rest and refreshment* is supported by the context and also by the reference to “fountain of life,” which comes on the heels of a reference to drinking water in Ps. 36:9. (My rendition “core self” is often rendered ‘soul’, which is nonetheless often misunderstood as being other than bodily. The Hebrew word ‘soul’ can also mean ‘throat’; note how the throat is a locus of life and vulnerability—compare our referring to the ‘jugular.’ Hence my “core self.”)

^g “Eastern shepherds *lead* their sheep. They walk ahead of the flock and the sheep follows.” (Greidanus, 354.)

^h “Guiding (*nāhal*) is the act of a powerful but caring party toward a weaker and needy party. . . , just as Yhwh took Israel through the wilderness and into the promised land (Exod 15:13).” (Greidanus, 354 fn 49, citing Goldingay.)

ⁱ The word ‘righteousness’ (so KJV) normally means moral rectitude, but here conveys its original physical meaning of correct, right (direct, simple); thus, “right paths.” (See Terrien, *Psalms*, 240.)

^j Over time sheep and goats create paths which crisscross the steep terrain. Which is the right path that will lead to the desired destination? Sheep don’t know, but the shepherd does. (See Greidanus, 355.)

^k “This is about far more than mere motivation; it is about God’s character. God’s very nature is said to be faithful. God has promised—through the sheer act of giving God’s name to Israel—to guide and protect those who bear God’s name. . . . It is a statement expressing the psalmist’s trust that God is completely committed to maintaining the relationship that God has established.” (Jacobsen, NICOT.)

^l The Hebrew behind KJV “shadow of death” is not a technical term for being at death’s door (though it could refer to this), but likely referred generally to ominous darkness, which could include situations of great danger and fear. And since Hebrew “shadow” could sometimes denote spirits, the deep darkness of oppression by demonic forces should not be ruled out.

^m “Sometimes the right paths do indeed run through ‘the darkest valley.’ In Israel, shepherds would often have to lead their flock through dark ravines. That is where danger lurked: wild animals looking for a good meal or robbers seeking to enrich themselves. . . . The good news is that our Shepherd is with us in these valleys . . . [j]ust as he was with Israel . . . in the wilderness. Moses exclaimed, “Surely the Lord your God . . . has been with you; you have lacked nothing (Deut. 2:7).” (Greidanus, 356, slightly adapted.)

ⁿ “The Hebrew phrase ‘you with me’ has 26 Hebrew words before it and 26 words after it. The ‘you,’ Yahweh (whose numeric value, on one reckoning, is 26) begins and ends the psalm (verses 1, 6). That is the center of Psalm 23 as well as its central message: “You are with me.” Yahweh is with us when we walk through the darkest valleys. Better, *especially* when we walk through the darkest valleys” (Greidanus, 356). Compare Mt. 1:23: ‘Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall call his name Immanuel [God with us].”

^o This Hebrew word for rod suggests its primary use was for protection, as in a club. [See also the note immediately below.]

^p The Hebrew word for staff indicates an emphasis on use for support, as in a crutch; the root meaning of the word is “lean, support” (BDB, 1043). Greidanus (357): “Shepherds carried a rod, a club, to fight off wild animals. That weapon encouraged sheep to go through dangerous, dark valleys. With his club the shepherd would protect them. Shepherds also carried a staff, a shepherd’s crook, to support themselves and to prod the sheep if needed. The fact that the shepherd carried a staff encouraged the sheep to keep walking, even through the darkest valley.” [See also RELEVANT TEXTS: Isaiah 36:6, Ezek. 29:5-8.]

^q The word is normally translated “comfort” but the Hebrew word *nhm* conveys more; a better translation is “encourage” (so Clines) or “assure”; Jacobsen goes so far as to say “give me courage.”

^r The basic interpretive challenge is to discern what type of banquet table the poem imagines. [See my Notes, ISSUES 2.] What is undeniable is that the Lord is a hospitable host who provides plenteous nourishment (my cup is abundant) and honor (you anoint my head with oil) for the psalmist in the face of hostile foes.” (Jacobson, NICOT, 244.)

^s The Hebrew word [*hésed*] is well known for its association with God’s mercy, lovingkindness and covenant love.

^t “Normally in the psalms it is the enemies who pursue the psalmist in order to inflict bodily harm . . . Here the divine attributes of goodness (*tôb*) and *hesed* are pictured as incarnate forces which will not rest until they have tracked down and provided a safe harbor for the endangered psalmist.” (Jacobson, 244, emphasis mine.) (Compare the incarnate Christ from whose hand no one can take one of His own.)

^u I can think of no better illustration of relentless pursuit than the professional trackers of Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid in the movie so named. See the scenes: “the chase” and “who are those guys?” in, respectively,

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jzKlKZCcnH4&ab_channel=commandercool1000

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-kbTbg00AJU&ab_channel=AaronB

^v The more traditional “dwell in” reflects the ancient and influential Greek translation of the OT. As Jacobsen notes, “the sense is not greatly altered, because a verb of motion . . . [such as ‘return’] followed by the preposition *b-* gives the sense of move to a place in order to remain

there permanently.” (Psalms NICOT, 240.). “The point of the metaphor is that the destination one reaches after being . . . harried by God’s pursuing *goodness* and *hesed* is none other than God’s very self. God is the shepherd’s destination.” (Jacobson, NICOT, 245.)

YOUR NOTES: