

SCHOOL OF THE WORD
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THE PSALMS
PSALM 23

Enjoying a Psalm

- Images and metaphors
- Parallelism (two lines together)
- Recognising the types of psalm
- Old Testament background
- New Testament "links"

Psalm 23 (NET)

- 1 The LORD is my shepherd,
I lack nothing.
- 2 He takes me to lush pastures,
he leads me to refreshing water.
- 3 He restores my strength.
He leads me down the right paths
for the sake of his reputation.
- 4 Even when I must walk through the darkest valley,
I fear no danger,
for you are with me;
your rod and your staff reassure me.
- 5 You prepare a feast before me
in plain sight of my enemies.
You refresh my head with oil;
my cup is completely full.
- 6 Surely your goodness and faithfulness will pursue me all my days,
and I will live in the LORD's house for the rest of my life.

Psalm 23 (Robert Alter)

- 1 The LORD is my shepherd,
I shall not want.
- 2 In grass meadows He makes me lie down,
by quiet waters He guides me.
- 3 My life He brings back.
He leads me on pathways of justice
for His name's sake.
- 4 Though I walk in the vale of death's shadows,
I fear no harm,
for You are with me;
Your rod and Your staff
– it is they that console me.
- 5 You set out a table before me
in the face of my foes.
You moisten my head with oil;
my cup overflows.
- 6 Let goodness and kindness pursue me all the days of my life,
and I shall dwell in the house of the LORD
for many long days.

Noticing things

- First of all: the parallelism - take out the pen...
- Then: the images used - let's make a list
- Other observations...
- Any questions?

Metaphor of the shepherd

- 1 The LORD is my **shepherd**,
I shall not want.
- 2 In **grass meadows** He makes me **lie down**,
by **quiet waters** He **guides** me.
- 3 My life He bring back.
He **leads** me on **pathways** of justice
for His name's sake.
- 4 Though I walk in the **vale** of death's shadows,
I fear no harm,
for You are with me;
Your **rod** and Your **staff**
– it is they that console me.

The song of the shepherd (1-4) unfolding in the following moments

- a thematic declaration: YHWH is my shepherd (1a)
- a pastoral description of rest (1b-3a)
- a pastoral description of travel (3b-4c)
- a thematic declaration (4d)

Metaphor of the guest

- 5 You set out a table before me
in the face of my foes.
You moisten my head with oil;
my cup overflows.
- 6 Let goodness and kindness pursue me all the days of my life,
and I shall swell in the house of the Lord
for many long days.

The song of the guest (5-6) unfolding in the following moments

- a thematic declaration: before me a table (5a)
- a general description of hospitality (5b-5d)
- a specific description of sacred hospitality (6)

Middle Eastern Background

It shall come to pass that he brings coolness upon the heart. Men shall say: "He is the headman of all men. Evil is not in his heart. Through his herd may be small, still he has spend the day caring for them.

Admonitions of Ipu-Wer
2300-2050 BC

In the Babylonian creation epic, Marduk is celebrated as the fertility god of the land, and in this role is called **faithful shepherd**. The epic is also political, elevating Marduk in the Semitic pantheon as **shepherd of all the gods**.

The Semitic sun god **Utu/Shamash**, the universal judge and guardian of justice, acquired a great following of the Mesopotamian masses and was called the "**Shepherd of the lower world, guardian of the upper**", and it is from this god that **Hammurabi** is depicted receiving his law code.



Old Testament Associations

Ps 28:9 Deliver your people!
Empower the nation that belongs to you!
Care for them like a **shepherd**
and carry them in your arms at all times!

Ps 95:7 For he is our God;
we are the people of his **pasture**,
the **sheep** he owns.
Today, if only you would obey him!

Ps 100:3 Acknowledge that the LORD is God!
He made us and we belong to him;
we are his people, the **sheep** of his **pasture**.



Then Jesse called Abinadab and presented him to Samuel. But Samuel said, "The LORD has not chosen this one, either." Then Jesse presented Shammah. But Samuel said, "The LORD has not chosen this one either." Jesse presented seven of his sons to Samuel. But Samuel said to Jesse, "The LORD has not chosen any of these." Then Samuel said to Jesse, "Is that all of the young men?" Jesse replied, "There is still the youngest one, but he's **taking care** of the **flock**." Samuel said to Jesse, "Send and get him, for we cannot turn our attention to other things until he comes here."

So Jesse had him brought in. Now he was ruddy, with attractive eyes and a handsome appearance. The LORD said, "Go and anoint him. This is the one!" So Samuel took the horn full of olive oil and anointed him in the presence of his brothers. The Spirit of the LORD rushed upon **David** from that day onward. (1 Sam 16:8-13)

For this is what the sovereign LORD says: Look, I myself will search for my **sheep** and seek them out. As a **shepherd** seeks out his **flock** when he is among his **scattered sheep**, so I will seek out my **flock**. I will rescue them from all the places where they have been scattered on a cloudy, dark day. I will bring them out from among the peoples and gather them from foreign countries; I will bring them to their own land. I will feed them on the mountains of Israel, by the **streams** and all the inhabited places of the land. In a **good pasture** I will **feed** them; the mountain heights of Israel will be their **pasture**. There they will **lie down** in a **lush pasture**, and they will **feed** on **rich grass** on the mountains of Israel. **I myself** will **feed** my **sheep** and **I myself** will make them **lie down**, declares the sovereign LORD. (Ezek 34:10-15)

Isaiah 40:10 Look, the sovereign LORD comes
as a victorious warrior;
his military power establishes his rule.
Look, his reward is with him;
his prize goes before him.

11 Like a **shepherd** he tends his **flock**;
he gathers up the **lambs** with his arm;
he **carries** them close to his **heart**;
he **leads** the **ewes** along.

New Testament Associations

'And you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are in no way least among the rulers of Judah, for out of you will come a ruler who will **shepherd** my people Israel.'" (Matt 2:6)

When he saw the crowds, he had compassion on them because they were **bewildered** and helpless, like **sheep** without a **shepherd**. (Matt 9:36)

Then Jesus said to them, "This night you will all fall away because of me, for it is written: 'I will strike the **shepherd**, and the **sheep** of the **flock** will be **scattered**.'" (Matt 26:31)

So Jesus told them this parable: "Which one of you, if he has a hundred **sheep** and loses one of them, would not leave the ninety-nine in the open **pasture** and go look for the one that is **lost** until he finds it? Then when he has found it, he places it on his **shoulders**, rejoicing. Returning home, he calls together his friends and neighbours, telling them, 'Rejoice with me, because I have found my **sheep** that was **lost**.' I tell you, in the same way there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous people who have no need to repent. (Luke 15:3-7)

"I am the **good shepherd**. The **good shepherd** lays down his life for the **sheep**. The hired hand, who is not a **shepherd** and does not own **sheep**, sees the **wolf** coming and abandons the **sheep** and runs away. So the **wolf** attacks the **sheep** and scatters them. Because he is a hired hand and is not concerned about the **sheep**, he runs away.

"I am the **good shepherd**. I know my own and my own know me—just as the Father knows me and I know the Father—and I lay down my life for the **sheep**. I have other **sheep** that do not come from this sheepfold. I must bring them too, and they will listen to my voice, so that there will be one **flock** and one **shepherd**." (John 10:11-16)

Then one of the elders asked me, "These dressed in long white robes—who are they and where have they come from?" So I said to him, "My lord, you know the answer." Then he said to me, "These are the ones who have come out of the great tribulation. They have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the **Lamb**! For this reason they are before the throne of God, and they serve him day and night in his temple, and the one seated on the throne will shelter them. *They will never go hungry or be thirsty again, and the sun will not beat down on them, nor any burning heat*, because the **Lamb** in the middle of the throne will **shepherd** them and lead them to **springs of living water**, and *God will wipe away every tear from their eyes.*" (Rev 7:13-17)

Commentary

1a The Lord is my shepherd

- Opening words of the best loved Psalm.
- In Hebrew: The Lord shepherds me (i.e. it is a verb rather than a noun. The Greek and Latin - verbs).
- As always: Lord = YHWH.
- "Shepherding" is a metaphor, pointing to some lived experience of the person praying.

1b I shall not want.

- The tense used points to a generalised, on-going experience of protection. "I am lacking nothing" or "I will go on lacking nothing."
- The metaphor is not so evident here because this is the voice of the person praying.
- The next few lines will expand on this.

2 In grass meadows He makes me lie down, by quiet waters He guides me.

- He makes me or allows me to lie down.
- The voice is still generalising.
- Quiet waters could also be refreshing waters.
- Shepherds typically watered their sheep from well, not from pools.

3 My life He brings back. He leads me on pathways of justice for His name's sake.

- My life (nephesh) could also be simply "me".
- Again, the tense suggest what is typical or usual.

- Paths of justice could also be “right paths”.
- Name means reputation or esteem.
- God is faithful because that is God’s very nature.

**4a Though I walk in the vale of death’s shadows,
 I fear no harm,
 for You are with me;**

- Lit. shadow of death or deathly darkness or just darkness.
- A dark ravine suggests dangerous and threatening situation of some kind.
- Harm - to be taken literally for sheep, but metaphorically for some ethical or moral danger for the person praying.

**4b Your rod and Your staff
 – it is they that console me.**

- This is the final instance of the pastoral imagery.
- Console - to be taken literally for humans.
- In the case of sheep, it means to calm their nerves and reassure them.
- The underlying reality is the emotional stability God provides the psalmist during life-threatening situations.

**5a You set out a table before me
 in the face of my foes.**

- Hospitality: behind it stands the image of a royal banquet.
- “In the face of my foes” means (a) that the danger was very near and (b) that the person praying is under the protection of God’s hospitality.

**5b You moisten my head with oil;
 my cup overflows.**

- The oil is a symbol of welcome and takes place before the guest sits down (!) – a very pleasing gesture in the super dry climate of the Middle East.
- In that context, it could easily be translated “you refresh.”
- Overflow: it means full to the brim – not necessarily spilling over as many translations have it. (Just too messy!)

**6 Let goodness and kindness pursue me
 all the days of my life,
 and I shall dwell in the house of the Lord
 for many long days.**

- Goodness is “tōb” in Hebrew. Cf. Ps 68:10.
- Kindness is the rich word “hesed,” meanings God’s covenantal faithfulness. In Psalms it is often rendered as “loving kindness” or “steadfast love” because of the practical benefit to the person at prayer.
- The house of the Lord sustains the metaphor of hospitality but also points to the Temple in Jerusalem.
- Often translated as “for ever”, the last phrase does not point to eternal life but to length of days.

- Terms which cross over
- Sense of danger in both parts
- Change from "he" to "you"
- Psalm of trust
- Rhythm of lament
- Covenant qualities of God

Conversation