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# THE GOOD SHEPHERD AND HOST

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Exegetical Research for Psalm 23



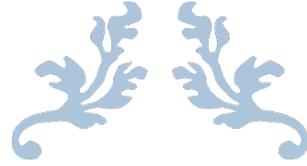
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# ABSTRACT

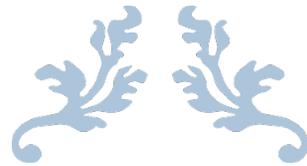
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Why Psalm 23?



Psalm 23:1-6 is one of the most beloved and well-known portions of the Old Testament. Sunday school teachers have required their youngest pupils to memorize these six verses for decades. Few chapters are requested more often in nursing homes and on death beds than this famous passage. It is both theologically rich and practically concise, teaching us that God is the good shepherd who leads us, protects us, and sustains us now and forever.

Does a passage as familiar as Psalm 23 really need exposition? Definitely. Due to the passage's popularity, its general translation into English has not varied since early attempts. So why does the English text typically conclude with the phrase "I shall dwell in the house of the Lord forever" when the Hebrew word for "forever" is not present? (The phrase "length of days" is in the Hebrew text, but that is a far cry from forever.) Also, what does an oily head and messy cup have to do with the goodness of God? Hopefully, these questions and more will be answered through careful exposition of the text.



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# SYNTACTICAL ANALYSIS

## PART 1

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Psalm 23:1-3



## Translation #1

[1] A psalm of David.

Yahweh is my shepherd. I lack nothing.

[2] He causes me to lie down in green pastures.

He guides me to restful waters.

[3] He restores my soul.

He leads me in tracks of righteousness

for the sake of His name.

[4] Also, if I walk in a valley of death-shadow,

I will never fear evil, for You are with me.

Your rod and Your staff, they comfort me.

[5] You prepare a table before me

in the presence of my enemies.

You have anointed my head with oil.

My cup is satiated.

[6] Surely goodness and loving kindness

will pursue me all the days of my life,

and I will dwell in the house of Yahweh for the length of my days.

## Introduction

The goal of this paper is to determine and analyze the syntactical elements of Psalm 23:1-3 in order to obtain a more accurate and exegetical understanding of the text. Definitions will occasionally be cited, but not in every instance. This paper hopes to highlight the more obvious exegetical observations and address the relative significance they may have on the passage's meaning. The text will be evaluated in phrases according to the Masoretic placement of disjunctive accents.<sup>1</sup>

## Verse 1

מִזְמוֹר לְדָוִד

Common singular absolute noun (מִזְמוֹר) followed by a preposition (לְ) attached to a masculine singular absolute proper noun (דָּוִד). Even though “psalm” (מִזְמוֹר) is not in construct, the preposition can form a genitive relationship between both nouns because they do not agree in definiteness.<sup>2</sup> David (דָּוִד) wrote many of the psalms, so context does not dictate him to be the recipient, but rather its author. He owns this psalm. Therefore, the best translation of this introductory phrase is “A psalm of David.”

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<sup>1</sup> William R. Scott, *A Simplified Guide to BHS* (Richland Hills, TX: BIBAL Press, 1987), 25-34.

<sup>2</sup> Bill T. Arnold and John H. Choi, *A Guide to Biblical Hebrew Syntax* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 113 (§4.1.10g).

## יְהוָה רֹעִי

Masculine singular absolute proper noun (יְהוָה) followed by a Qal masculine singular participle in construct (רֹעִי) containing a first person singular pronominal suffix (אִי). There are at least two ways to interpret this phrase based upon one's understanding of the participle. One possibility is "Yahweh is my shepherd" (where the participle is substantive)<sup>3</sup> and the other is "Yahweh is shepherding me" (where the participle is attributive).<sup>4</sup> I would argue from context that the former is a better translation. This verbal noun does not describe the temporary nature of Yahweh's superintendence. Rather, it is attributive to Yahweh's unchanging nature and continued provision as seen in the ultimate conclusion of verse 6. Therefore, the preferred translation of this phrase is "Yahweh is my shepherd."

## לֹא אֶחְסֶר:

Particle of negation (לֹא) followed by a Qal imperfect first person common singular verb (אֶחְסֶר). According to Chisholm, "Hebrew has a variety of negative particles, the major one being לֹא."<sup>5</sup> Barrick and Busenitz also say that the "negative לֹא normally denotes permanent

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<sup>3</sup> Frederic Clarke Putnam, *Hebrew Bible Insert: A Student's Guide to the Syntax of Biblical Hebrew* (Ridley Park, PA: Stylus Publishing, 1996), 35 (§2.2.5c).

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 34 (§2.2.5a).

<sup>5</sup> Robert B. Chisholm, Jr., *From Exegesis to Exposition: A Practical Guide to Using Biblical Hebrew* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1998), 75.

prohibition (i.e., never do something).”<sup>6</sup> According to Holladay, חסר means “do without” or “lack.”<sup>7</sup> The simple imperfect state of this verb implies an uncompleted, continual action. Context also determines that this action defines the author’s present experience and not a future hope. Therefore, the best translation of this phrase is “I lack nothing.”

## Verse 2

בְּנֵאוֹת דְּשֵׂא יִרְבִּיצָנִי

Preposition (בְּ) attached to a feminine common plural absolute noun (נֵאוֹת) followed by a masculine common singular absolute noun (דְּשֵׂא) followed by a hiphil imperfect third person masculine singular verb (יִרְבִּיצָנִי) with a first person singular pronominal suffix (אֲנִי). בְּ is the common preposition “in”<sup>8</sup> and נֵאוֹת means “pasturage”<sup>9</sup> or “grazing place.”<sup>10</sup> HALOT and

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<sup>6</sup> William D. Barrick and Irvin A. Busenitz, *A Grammar for Biblical Hebrew* (Sun Valley, CA: Grace Books International, 2011), 116 (§2B).

<sup>7</sup> William L. Holladay, *A Concise Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing, 1988), 112 (חסר).

<sup>8</sup> Holladay, *Lexicon*, 32 (בְּ).

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 230 (נֵאוֹת).

<sup>10</sup> Ludwig Koehler, Walter Baumgartner, M. E. J. Richardson, and Johann Jakob Stamm, *The Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament Volume 2* (Leiden; New York: E.J. Brill, 1995), 678 (נֵאוֹת).

Holladay both translate אֲשַׁבֵּר to mean “greenness or vegetation.”<sup>11</sup> Hiphal conjugation makes the verb “to lie down” (רָבַץ) active causative.<sup>12</sup> Yahweh not only protects and provides, He actively makes rest for the author possible. Therefore, a good translation of this phrase is “He causes me to lie down in green pastures.”

עַל־מַי מְנַחֵת יְנַהֵלֵנִי:

Preposition (עַל) with a common masculine plural noun in construct (מַי) followed by a common feminine plural absolute noun (מְנַחֵת) followed by a piel imperfect third person masculine singular verb (נַהֵל) with a first person singular pronominal suffix (נִי). Literally, this phrase can be translated, “To (or beside) waters of resting places, He guides me.” The preposition (עַל) can be tricky because it typically means “on” or “over.”<sup>13</sup> Since sheep cannot be led on or over water without the aid of a bridge or boat, and neither are listed in this psalm, it is safe to assume that a fair translation of the preposition would be “to,” “beside,” or “along.”

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<sup>11</sup> Ludwig Koehler, Walter Baumgartner, M. E. J. Richardson, and Johann Jakob Stamm, *The Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament Volume 1* (Leiden; New York: E.J. Brill, 1995), 233 (אֲשַׁבֵּר); Holladay, *Lexicon*, 75 (אֲשַׁבֵּר).

<sup>12</sup> Barrick and Busenitz, *A Grammar for Biblical Hebrew*, 155 (§1A).

<sup>13</sup> Holladay, *Lexicon*, 272 (עַל).

Unlike the imperfect hiphil imperfect verb of the previous phrase (יְרִי־צִנִּי), the piel imperfect form of נָהַל implies that the verbal action of “guiding” is responsible for a continual state of being rather than an isolated event.<sup>14</sup> The first half of verse 2 describes Yahweh’s provision for His sheep with rest and food. The second half of this verse depicts His provision for rest and drink. Therefore, a good translation of this phrase is “He guides me to restful waters.”

### Verse 3

נִפְּשֵׁי יְשׁוּבָה

A common singular noun in construct (נִפְּשֵׁי) with a first person singular pronominal suffix (אֲנִי) followed by a piel imperfect third person masculine singular verb (שׁוּב). This phrase can literally be translated, “My soul He restores.” The piel imperfect form makes the verb active and continual.<sup>15</sup> Yahweh is restoring the author’s soul. Therefore, the best translation of this phrase is “He restores my soul.”

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<sup>14</sup> Arnold and Choi, *A Guide to Biblical Hebrew Syntax*, 43 (§3.1.3).

<sup>15</sup> Putnam, *Hebrew Bible Insert*, 25 (§2.1.4).

## יְהִינִי בְּמַעַגְלֵי צְדָקָה

Hiphil imperfect third person masculine singular jussive verb (נָהַר) with a first person singular pronominal suffix (אֲנִי) followed by a preposition (בְּ) attached to a common masculine plural noun in construct (מַעַגְלֵי) paired with a common singular absolute noun (צְדָקָה). Both HALOT and Holladay translate מַעַגְלֵי to mean “wagon tracks.”<sup>16</sup> These are not broad footpaths, but trenches of righteousness that restrain the traveler to its steady course. Therefore, the best translation of this phrase is “He leads me in tracks of righteousness.”

## לְמַעַן שְׁמוֹ:

Preposition (לְ) followed by a common singular noun in construct (שֵׁם) with a third person masculine singular pronominal suffix (אֵינוֹ). The translation from Hebrew to English is extremely straightforward. The preposition (לְ) literally means “with regard to,” “for the sake of,” or “because of.”<sup>17</sup> This phrase reveals that one of Yahweh’s purposes for His provision is to uphold His reputation. Therefore, a solid translation for the final phrase is “for the sake of His name.”

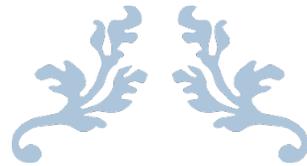
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<sup>16</sup> Koehler, Baumgartner, Richardson, and Stamm, *The Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament Volume 2*, 609 (מַעַגְלֵי); Holladay, *Lexicon*, 205 (מַעַגְלֵי).

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 207 (לְ).

## **Conclusion**

From this psalm's beginning, Yahweh bears the role of a personal shepherd. The only direct verbal action assigned to the sheep appears in verse 1. Here, the author says that he lacks nothing through his total negation of the phrase "I lack." The remaining verbs are assigned to the Shepherd directly. The constant use of the imperfect hiphil and piel verbal forms denote present, continual attributes to Yahweh's provisional actions. He leads His sheep to restful areas of food and water, restores their vitality, and keeps them entrenched in the ways of righteousness. He does these wonderful things for the sake of His perfect, unchanging, divine reputation.



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# SYNTACTICAL ANALYSIS

## PART 2

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Psalm 23:4-6



## Translation #2

[1] A psalm by David.

Yahweh is my shepherd. I lack nothing.

[2] He causes me to lie down in green pastures.

He guides me to restful waters.

[3] He restores my soul.

He leads me in tracks of righteousness

for the sake of His name.

[4] Also, though I walk in a valley of deep darkness,

I will never fear evil, for You are with me.

Your rod and Your staff, they give me comfort.

[5] You prepare a table before me

in the presence of my enemies.

You have refreshed my head with oil.

My cup is more than full.

[6] Surely goodness and kindness

will pursue me all of the days of my life,

and I will dwell in the house of Yahweh for the length of my days.

## Introduction

The goal of this paper is to determine and analyze the syntactical elements of Psalm 23:4-6 in order to obtain a more accurate and exegetical understanding of the text. Definitions will occasionally be cited, but not in every instance. This paper hopes to highlight the more obvious exegetical observations and address the relative significance they may have on the passage's meaning. The text will be evaluated in phrases according to the Masoretic placement of disjunctive accents.<sup>18</sup>

### Verse 4

גַּם כִּי־אֵלֶיךָ בָּגִיא צִלְמוֹת

Adverb (גַּם) followed by a conjunction (כִּי) and a qal imperfect first person common singular verb (אֵלֶיךָ) preceding a preposition (בָּ) attached to a masculine singular common noun (בָּגִיא) in construct with a feminine singular absolute common noun (צִלְמוֹת). The context of the passage narrows the conjunction's (כִּי) definition to four potential entries in *HALOT*.<sup>19</sup> The use of this word is either temporal, conditional, concessive, or modal. According to Arnold and Choi, כִּי can introduce “a clause that should, or is expected to, lead to the action of the main clause, but

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<sup>18</sup> William R. Scott, *A Simplified Guide to BHS* (Richland Hills, TX: BIBAL Press, 1987), 25-34.

<sup>19</sup> Ludwig Koehler, Walter Baumgartner, M. E. J. Richardson, and Johann Jakob Stamm, *The Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament* (Leiden; New York: E.J. Brill, 1995), 2:471 (כִּי).

in fact, does not.”<sup>20</sup> They then go on to say, “Thus, the main clause occurs in spite of the clause introduced by the ׀.”<sup>21</sup> The main clause of this verse (I will never fear evil) occurs in spite of the clause introduced by the ׀ (I walk in a valley of depression), not because of it. Therefore, the conjunction is concessive.

Holladay translates צְלִמְוֹת to mean “darkness”<sup>22</sup> while *HALOT* prefers “gloom.”<sup>23</sup>

Likewise, the parallel references *HALOT* provides<sup>24</sup> are all translated “gloom,” “deep darkness,” and “deep shadow.” A modern word for such an illustrative disposition of deep, dark, gloominess is “depression.” However, to translate it as such would destroy the poetic metaphor the author is using to make his point. A rod and staff are not needed to protect sheep from the dangers of depression. Therefore, a solid translation for the beginning of verse 4 is “Also, though I walk in a valley of deep darkness.”

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<sup>20</sup> Bill T. Arnold and John H. Choi, *A Guide to Biblical Hebrew Syntax* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 152 (§4.3.4h).

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 152 (§4.3.4h).

<sup>22</sup> William L. Holladay, *A Concise Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing, 1988), 306 (צְלִמְוֹת).

<sup>23</sup> *HALOT, Lexicon*, 3:1029 (צְלִמְוֹת).

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 3:1029 (Isa 9:1, Jer 2:6, Job 10:21, 38:17).

## לֹא-אֶיִרָא רָע

Particle of negation (לֹא) followed by a qal imperfect first person common singular verb (אֶיִרָא) and a masculine singular absolute common noun (רָע). According to Chisholm, “Hebrew has a variety of negative particles, the major one being לֹא.”<sup>25</sup> Barrick and Busenitz also say that the “negative לֹא normally denotes permanent prohibition (i.e., never do something).”<sup>26</sup> Therefore, the preferred translation of this phrase is “I will never fear evil.”

## כִּי-אֲתָהּ עִמָּדִי

Conjunction (כִּי) and a masculine singular second person personal pronoun (אֲתָהּ) followed by a singular common noun (עִמָּדִי) with a first person singular pronominal suffix (אֲנִי). According to Arnold and Choi, the conjunction (כִּי) can present “the evidence or motivation that lies behind a statement, rather than presenting the cause of an action or situation.”<sup>27</sup> This conjunction’s use is evidential because Yahweh’s presence motivates the author’s sense of

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<sup>25</sup> Robert B. Chisholm, Jr., *From Exegesis to Exposition: A Practical Guide to Using Biblical Hebrew* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1998), 75.

<sup>26</sup> William D. Barrick and Irvin A. Busenitz, *A Grammar for Biblical Hebrew* (Sun Valley, CA: Grace Books International, 2011), 116 (§2B).

<sup>27</sup> Arnold and Choi, *A Guide to Biblical Hebrew Syntax*, 149 (§4.3.4b).

security as he walks through the valley. Therefore, the best translation of this phrase is “for You are with me.”

שִׁבְטְךָ וּמִשְׁעַנְתְּךָ

Masculine singular common noun (שִׁבְט) with a masculine second person singular pronominal suffix (אָתָּה) followed by a conjunction (וְ) and a feminine singular common noun (מִשְׁעַנֶּת) with a masculine second person singular pronominal suffix (אָתָּה). Concerning progressive parallelism in Hebrew poetry, Chisholm says, “sometimes the second line makes a logical and/or temporal advance on the previous line.”<sup>28</sup> In this case, the comfort of Yahweh’s tools is providing the confidence for the author’s previous statements. The translation for this phrase is “Your rod and Your staff.”

הִמָּה יִגְמָלוּנִי:

Masculine plural third person personal pronoun (הִמָּה) followed by a masculine piel imperfect third person plural verb (גָּמַל) with a first person singular pronominal suffix (אֲנִי). According to Putnam, “in poetry, piel parallels qal and other stems, without any necessary

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<sup>28</sup> Chisholm, *From Exegesis to Exposition*, 144.

difference in function.”<sup>29</sup> However, the piel is also “the most elusive of the Hebrew stems.”<sup>30</sup> According to Arnold and Choi, this form “frequently expresses the bringing about of a state of being.”<sup>31</sup> They also reach the following conclusion: “In the Piel, the object of causation is in a state of suffering the effects of an action and is inherently passive in part.”<sup>32</sup> Therefore, in an attempt to capture the nuance of causation in a passive state of being, an accurate translation of this phrase is “they give me comfort.”

### Verse 5

תַּעֲרֶהָ לְפָנַי וְשִׁלְחָן גִּגְדֵּךְ צִרְרִי

Qal imperfect second person masculine singular verb (תַּעֲרֶהָ) and a masculine plural common noun (פְּנֵה) with a preposition (לְ) and a first person singular pronominal suffix (אֲנִי) followed by a masculine singular absolute common noun (שִׁלְחָן), a masculine singular common noun in construct (גִּגְדֵּךְ), and a qal masculine plural participle (צִרְרִי) with a first person singular pronominal suffix (אֲנִי). The | is the weakest of Masoretic disjunctive accents, but it is still an

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<sup>29</sup> Frederic Clarke Putnam, *Hebrew Bible Insert: A Student’s Guide to the Syntax of Biblical Hebrew* (Ridley Park, PA: Stylus Publishing, 1996), 26 (§2.1.4d).

<sup>30</sup> Arnold and Choi, *A Guide to Biblical Hebrew Syntax*, 41 (§3.1.3).

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 42 (§3.1.3).

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, 43 (§3.1.3).

accent nonetheless.<sup>33</sup> So the Masoretes saw the opening phrase “You prepare a table before me” as being an initial thought. It is connected to (but separate from) the following phrase “in the presence of my enemies.” The main thrust is placed on Yahweh’s provision in preparing a table (the placement of that table completes the thought as an added bonus). A good translation of this phrase is “You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies.”

דִּשְׁנַת בַּשֶּׁמֶן רֵאשִׁי

Piel perfect second person masculine verb (דִּשְׁנַת) preceding a masculine singular common noun (שֶׁמֶן) with a preposition (בְּ) and definite article (הַ) followed by a masculine singular common noun (רֵאשִׁי) with a first person singular pronominal suffix (אֲנִי). According to *HALOT*, the piel perfect form used in this verse means “to refresh.”<sup>34</sup> Therefore, a good translation of this phrase is “You have refreshed my head with oil.”

כּוֹסֵי רְנוּיָהּ:

Masculine singular common noun (כּוֹסֵי) with a first person singular pronominal suffix (אֲנִי) followed by a feminine singular absolute common noun (רְנוּיָהּ). There are no verbs in this

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<sup>33</sup> Scott, *A Simplified Guide to BHS*, 34.

<sup>34</sup> HALOT, *Lexicon*, 1:234 (דִּשְׁנַת).

phrase. Holladay defines **הַרְבֵּה** as meaning “overflow” and “superabundance” while providing this verse as the only example.<sup>35</sup> To say “my cup overflows” comes dangerously close to making the noun sound too verbal. Likewise, “My cup is satiated” sounds too personified. Therefore, a better translation of this phrase is “My cup is more than full.”

### Verse 6

אַךְ | טוֹב וְחֶסֶד יִרְדְּפוּנִי כָּל-יְמֵי חַיֵּי

Adverb (**אַךְ**) followed by a singular absolute adjective (**טוֹב**) a conjunction (**וְ**) and a masculine singular absolute common noun (**חֶסֶד**) preceding a qal imperfect third person masculine plural verb (**יִרְדְּפוּ**) with a first person singular pronominal suffix (**נִי**) followed by a singular common noun (**כָּל**) in construct with a masculine plural common noun (**יְמֵי**) followed by a masculine plural common noun (**חַיֵּי**) with a first person singular pronominal suffix (**נִי**).

According to Holladay, **חֶסֶד** means “faithfulness, kindness, grace” when used in reference to Yahweh’s relation to people or individuals.<sup>36</sup> The best translation of this phrase is “Surely goodness and kindness will pursue me all of the days of my life.”

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<sup>35</sup> Holladay, *Lexicon*, 335 (**הַרְבֵּה**).

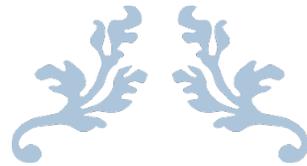
<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, 111 (**חֶסֶד**).

וְשָׁבְתִי בְּבֵית־יְהוָה לְאָרְךָ יָמִים:

A conjunction (וְ) with a qal perfect first person common singular verb (שָׁב) followed by a masculine singular common noun (בֵּית) with a preposition (בְּ) in construct with a masculine singular absolute proper noun (יְהוָה) preceding a masculine singular common noun (אָרְךָ) with a preposition (לְ) and a masculine plural absolute common noun (יָמִים). The final phrase is often translated “I will dwell in the house of Yahweh forever.” However, the Hebrew word for “forever” (לְעַד) is not used here, nor is an eternal meaning implied. Rather, the text says “for the length of my days” (לְאָרְךָ יָמִים). The context has already been established earlier in the verse with the phrase “all the days of my life.” Therefore, a solid translation for this final phrase is “and I will dwell in the house of Yahweh for the length of my days.”

### **Conclusion**

Yahweh is the Great Shepherd who protects, comforts, and provides for His sheep. The metaphor shifts away from Shepherd and sheep after verse 4. Now, the author is the recipient of a fine meal and finer realizations of Yahweh's faithfulness. His enemies are humiliated, his weariness restored, and needs provided for. This provision is active, as Yahweh's favor pursues those who are His, for the rest of their lives.



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# DIAGRAMMATICAL ANALYSIS

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Block Diagraming the Hebrew



### Translation #3

[1] A psalm by David.

Yahweh is my shepherd.

I lack nothing.

[2] He causes me to lie down in green pastures.

He guides me to restful waters.

[3] He restores my soul.

He leads me in tracks of righteousness for the sake of His name.

[4] Even, when I walk in a valley of deep darkness,

I will never fear evil, for You are with me.

Your rod and Your staff, they give me comfort.

[5] You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies.

You have refreshed my head with oil.

My cup is more than full.

[6] Surely goodness and kindness will pursue me all of the days of my life,

and I will dwell in the house of Yahweh for the length of days.

Hebrew Diagram #1

מִזְמוֹר לְדָוִד v. 1

יְהוָה רַעִי  
לֹא אֶחָסֶר:

בְּנֵאוֹת דָּשָׁא v. 2

יִרְבִּיצֵנִי  
עַל־מֵי מְנַחֹת  
יִנְהַלֵּנִי:

נַפְשִׁי יִשׁוּבֵב v. 3

יִנְחֵנִי  
בְּמַעְגְלֵי־צֶדֶק  
לְמַעַן שְׁמוֹ:

גַּם v. 4

כִּי־אֵלֶךְ  
בְּגֵיא  
צְלָמוֹת  
לֹא־אֵירָא רָע  
כִּי־אֵתָה עַמְדִי  
שִׁבְטֶךָ  
וְ  
מִשְׁעַנְתֶּךָ  
הִמָּה יִנְחַמֵּנִי:

v. 5 תַּעֲרֹךְ לְפָנַי |

שֶׁלַחַן

נֶגֶד צַרְרִי

דְּשַׁנְתָּ

בְּשֶׁמֶן רֵאשִׁי

כּוֹסֵי רוּיָה:

v. 6 אֶדָּ |

טוֹב

וְ

חֶסֶד

יִרְדְּפוּנִי

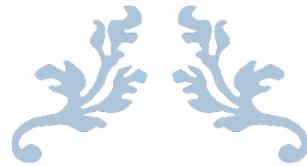
כָּל־יְמֵי חַיֵּי

וְ

שַׁבְּתִי

בְּבֵית־יְהוָה

לְאֶרֶץ יָמִים:



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# LEXICAL ANALYSIS

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From Verses 4 and 6



## Translation #4

- [1] A psalm by David.  
Yahweh is my shepherd.  
I will not lack.
- [2] He causes me to lie down in green pastures.  
He guides me to restful waters.
- [3] He restores my soul.  
He leads me in tracks of righteousness for the sake of His name.
- [4] Even when I walk in a valley of deep darkness,  
I will never fear evil, for You are with me.  
Your rod and Your staff, they give me comfort.
- [5] You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies.  
You have refreshed my head with oil.  
My cup is more than full.
- [6] Surely goodness and kindness will pursue me all of the days of my life,  
and I will dwell in the house of Yahweh for days without end.

## Introduction

Two words have been selected for lexical analysis in order to better understand their exegetical significance. A brief explanation as to why each word was chosen will then be followed by concordance research, lexicon research, and theological dictionary research. Each word will then be evaluated (in light of this research) to determine the most accurate translation that best fits the passage's context.

צְלֵמוֹת

### Why This Word

צְלֵמוֹת is typically translated, “shadow of death.” What does that mean? Is the shadow of death a metaphor for depression? Is this a specific reference to something David had in mind? Are there alternative ways to translate this cryptic phrase? The answers to these questions will bring greater exegetical clarity to the meaning of the text.

### Concordance Research

According to Abraham Even-Shoshan's *A New Concordance*, צְלֵמוֹת appears only 18 times in the Old Testament.<sup>37</sup> The highest concentration is in the book of Job (10 times). Isaiah and Amos only use the word once. Jeremiah uses it twice and it appears 4 times in the Psalms.

The typical usage of the term throughout Scripture can be easily evaluated due to its limited number of occurrences. In every case, the word is translated to mean “darkness,” “deep

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<sup>37</sup> Abraham Even-Shoshan, *A New Concordance of the Bible* (Jerusalem, Israel: Kiryat-Sefer Ltd., 1993), 987.

darkness,” “gloom,” “blackness,” “deep shadow,” etc.<sup>38</sup> According to concordance research alone, the word does not implicitly imply an imminent threat of death.

### Lexicon Research

Holladay translates אֲדָמָה to mean “darkness”<sup>39</sup> while *HALOT* prefers “gloom.”<sup>40</sup>

*HALOT* also states that this gloom is “(deeper than אֲדָמָה), an impenetrable gloom, pitch, darkness.”<sup>41</sup> Likewise, the parallel references *HALOT* provides are all translated “gloom,” “deep darkness,” and “deep shadow.”<sup>42</sup> No other options are presented for translating this word in either lexicon.

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<sup>38</sup> John R. Kohlenberger III and James A. Swanson, *The Hebrew English Concordance to the Old Testament with the New International Version* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1998), 1370.

<sup>39</sup> William L. Holladay, *A Concise Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing, 1988), 306.

<sup>40</sup> Ludwig Koehler, Walter Baumgartner, M. E. J. Richardson, and Johann Jakob Stamm, *The Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament* (Leiden; New York: E.J. Brill, 1995), 3:1029.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, 3:1029 (Isa 9:1, Jer 2:6, Job 10:21, 38:17).

## Theological Dictionary Research

Some scholars disagree as to the word's etymology and nuanced meaning. According to John E. Hartley, צְלִמְוֹת is “the strongest word in Hebrew for darkness.”<sup>43</sup> He arrives at this conclusion because of four uses in Job, the one use in Amos, and the internal emotional anguish described by David in other psalms.<sup>44</sup> James D. Price believes the word refers to “extreme danger” in Psalm 23.<sup>45</sup>

Whether the word means darkness or danger, where does the commonly translated “shadow of death” come from? According to Adrian Curtis, “This latter translation assumes that the Hebrew word is a compound noun, comprising the two elements ‘shadow (of)’ and ‘death’, an understanding supported by the way vowels have been added to the consonants (known as vocalisation) in the received Hebrew text.”<sup>46</sup> So צְלִמְוֹת is either a noun for “deep darkness” or a compound word for “shadow of death” or “death-shadow.”

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<sup>43</sup> John E. Hartley, *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament 2 Volumes*, eds, R. Laird Harris, Gleason L. Archer Jr., and Bruce K. Waltke (Chicago; IL: Moody Press, 1980), 2:1923 (1921b צְלִמְוֹת).

<sup>44</sup> Ibid.

<sup>45</sup> James D. Price, *New International Dictionary of Old Testament Theology and Exegesis 5 Volumes*, ed, William A. VanGemeren (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1997), 3:809 (#7516 צְלִמְוֹת).

<sup>46</sup> Adrian Curtis, *Epworth Commentaries: Psalms*, (Peterborough, England: Epworth Press, 2004), 50.

## Contextual Evaluation and Determination

Context is key to determining the most accurate translation of this word. It is only found in Hebrew poetry and always conveys a sense of heavy darkness or gloom. Even if it is a compound word, the meaning of death could more superlatively be applied to the shadow itself, rendering the translation: deathly shadow (or extreme darkness). A modern word for such an illustrative disposition of deep, dark, gloominess is “depression.” However, to translate it as such would destroy the poetic metaphor the author is using to make his point. A rod and staff are not needed to protect sheep from the dark dangers of depression. Therefore, a solid translation for the beginning of verse 4 is “Even when I walk in a valley of deep darkness.”

לְאֶרְךָ יָמִים:

### Why This Word

The biblical Hebrew text literally says, “for” (לְ) the “length” (אֶרְךָ) of “days” (יָמִים). Why is this final phrase almost always translated “forever?” Either the majority of history’s translators and exegetes are consistently sloppy when they get to verse 6, or there is a good reason for this construction to be replaced by the word “forever.”

### Concordance Research

The construction, לְאֶרְךָ יָמִים, occurs 9 times in the Old Testament.<sup>47</sup> It is used 4 times in Psalms, twice in Proverbs, and once in Deuteronomy, Job, and Lamentations. The limited number of uses helps identify the phrase’s typical meaning in most biblical contexts. Of the 4

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<sup>47</sup> Abraham Even-Shoshan, 110.

poetic uses in Psalms, 3 are typically translated to carry a meaning of eternity (Ps 21:4; 23:6; and 93:5).<sup>48</sup>

### Lexicon Research

Holliday associates אַרְיָא with the meaning of “long life” found in Deuteronomy 30:20.<sup>49</sup>

*HALOT* goes a step further by grouping the “length of life” meaning to Psalms 21:5; 23:6; 91:16; 93:5; Job 12:12; Proverbs 32:16; and Lamentations 5:20 (as well as Deuteronomy 30:20).<sup>50</sup> Both lexicons state that the word is either spatial or temporal when used by itself.

### Theological Dictionary Research

According to J. A. Thompson and Elmer A. Martens, the hiphil use of the word in verb form means to “lengthen or extend one’s days.”<sup>51</sup> *The Dictionary of Classical Hebrew* says that the אַרְיָא יְמֵי־ construction means “length of days i.e. long life.”<sup>52</sup> However, Victor P. Hamilton takes a different stand. He asserts that, “‘Length of days’ might in some contexts signify the

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<sup>48</sup> Kohlenberger and Swanson, 186.

<sup>49</sup> Holladay, 28.

<sup>50</sup> *HALOT*, 1:88.

<sup>51</sup> J. A. Thompson and Elmer A. Martens, *NIDOTTE*, 1:517 (#802 אַרְיָא).

<sup>52</sup> David J.A. Clines, *The Dictionary of Classical Hebrew vol. 1*, (Sheffield, England: Sheffield Academic Press, 1993), 1:380 (אַרְיָא יְמֵי־).

everlasting afterlife, according to Dahood (Ps 23:6; 91:16; Isa 53:10, *yā'ārik*).<sup>53</sup> Dahood himself prefers to translate the phrase “for days without end.”<sup>54</sup>

### **Contextual Evaluation and Determination**

Literally, the construction by itself means “length of days.” However, the context of the passage denotes a continual action that never stops. David has already established that goodness and kindness will pursue him all of the days of his life. He then states that he will dwell in (or continually return to) the house of Yahweh for “the length of days.” Adrian Curtis observes, “Even if the translation ‘dwell’ is accepted, there is no need to assume that the psalmist would be a member of the Temple personnel and actually live there.”<sup>55</sup> He then concludes, “The image is of continuing to dwell with the good host in his house and enjoying his ongoing blessing and protection.”<sup>56</sup> In other words, the action is continual for the rest of his days and beyond. Therefore, a solid translation for the last half of the last verse is “and I will dwell in the house of Yahweh for days without end.”

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<sup>53</sup> Victor P. Hamilton, *TWOT*, 1:72 (162a יָרֵךְ).

<sup>54</sup> Mitchell Dahood, *The Anchor Bible: Psalms 1-50*, (Garden City, NY: Doubleday & Company, 1965), 149.

<sup>55</sup> Curtis, 51.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*

## **Conclusion**

Poetry can be difficult to translate with precision. The words of this study carry exegetical significance and rely on the passage's immediate context for greater translation accuracy. The first word is better translated "deep darkness" than "shadow of death." The second construct can appropriately be translated "forever." However, if there is a way to capture a sense of continually dwelling for the lengthening of days in Yahweh's spiritual house, then that translation would be more true to the meaning and more accurate to the poetic word-choice of the author. Therefore, "for days without end" is a better translation.

God has preserved His Word. Classical translations have not missed the mark. However, a richer meaning can be discovered by examining the author's choice of words.

Hebrew Diagram #2

מִזְמוֹר לְדָוִד v. 1

יְהוָה רָעִי  
לֹא אֶחְסֶר:

בְּנֵאֲוֹת דָּשָׂא v. 2

יִרְבִּיעַנִי  
עַל־מֵי מְנַחֹת  
יִנְהַלְנִי:

נַפְשִׁי יִשׁוּבֵב v. 3

יִנְחֵנִי  
בְּמַעְגְלֵי־צֶדֶק  
לְמַעַן שְׂמוֹ:

גַּם כִּי־אֵלֶךְ v. 4

בְּגִיָּא צְלֻמוֹת  
לֹא־אֵירָא רָע  
כִּי־אַתָּה עִמָּדִי  
שְׁבִטְךָ  
וּמִשְׁעֲנֵתְךָ  
הִמָּה יִנְחֵמְנִי:

v. 5 תַּעֲרֹךְ לְפָנַי | שְׁלֹחַן

נֶגֶד צַרְרֵי

דְּשַׁנָּתְךָ

בְּשֵׁמֶן רֵאשִׁי

כּוֹסֵי רוּיָה:

v. 6 אֵדָךְ | טוֹב

וְחֶסֶד

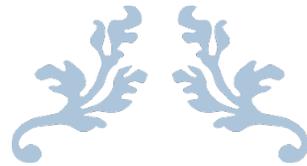
יִרְדְּפוּנִי

כָּל־יְמֵי חַיֵּי

וְשַׁבְּתֵי

בְּבֵית־יְהוָה

לְאֵרֶךְ יָמַי:



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# TEXTUAL CRITICAL ANALYSIS

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The Masorah Parva and Textual Critical Apparatus



## Translation #5

- [1] A psalm by David.  
Yahweh is my shepherd.  
I will never lack.
- [2] He causes me to lie down in green pastures.  
He guides me to restful waters.
- [3] He restores my soul.  
He leads me in tracks of righteousness for the sake of His name.
- [4] Even when I walk in a valley of deep darkness,  
I will never fear evil, for You are with me.  
Your rod and Your staff, they give me comfort.
- [5] You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies.  
You have refreshed my head with oil.  
My cup is more than full.
- [6] Surely goodness and kindness will pursue me all of the days of my life,  
and I will dwell in the house of Yahweh for days without end.

### Masorah Parva

Vs.	Text	MP	Meaning
23:1	מִזְמוֹר לְדָוִד	ח ר"פ	This phrase is found eight times at the beginning of a verse.
23:1	רְעִי	ה	This phrase is found five times in the Hebrew OT.
23:2	יִרְבִּיצְנִי	ל	This phrase is found only once in the Hebrew OT.
23:2	מִנְחֹת	ל כות כן	This word is found only once in the Hebrew OT, although similarly written instances occur in Scripture.
23:3	יִנְתְּנִי	ב	This phrase is found two times in the Hebrew OT.
23:4	אֲמַשְׁעֲנֶנְךָ	ל	This phrase is found only once in the Hebrew OT.
23:5	צִרְרִי	ב חס	This phrase is found two times in the Hebrew OT and is defectively written here.
23:5	רֵאשִׁי	כו	This phrase is found twenty-six times in the Hebrew OT.
23:5	כּוֹסִי	ל	This phrase is found only once in the Hebrew OT.
23:6	נִתְחַסֵּד	ה	This phrase is found five times in the Hebrew OT.
23:6	וְשִׁבְתִּי	ב מלרע	This phrase is found two times in the Hebrew OT and the accent is placed on the last syllable.
23:6	בְּבֵית-יְהוָה	לט	This phrase is found thirty-nine times in the Hebrew OT.
23:6	לְאַרְבַּע יָמִים:	ג	This phrase is found three times in the Hebrew OT.

### Textual Critical Apparatus

Vs.	Text	TCA	Meaning
23:2	יִרְבֵּיצְנִי	huc tr ∴.	Hither transposed ∴ instead of ..
23:4	יִנְחֲמֵנִי	prp יִנְחֲנִי	This word has been proposed to mean יִנְחֲנִי.
23:5	שְׁלֶחֶן	prp שְׁלַח (נ dttg)	This word has been proposed to mean שְׁלַח by dittography.
23:5	כּוֹסֵךְ	Ⓢ* καὶ τὸ ποτήριόν σου = וְכוֹסֶךָ	LXX has καὶ τὸ ποτήριόν σου which is the same as וְכוֹסֶךָ.
23:6	טוֹב	Ⓢ cj c 5	Connects with verse 5 in the LXX.
23:6	וְחֶסֶד	ⓈⓈ + suff 2 sg	This suffix appears only here and in verse 2 in both the LXX and Peshitta.
23:6	וְשִׁבְתִּי	Ⓢ(σ') καὶ τὸ κατοικεῖν με = 'וְשִׁ' cf 27, 4, Ⓢ d "mr = 'וְשִׁ?	Symmachus' version of the LXX says καὶ τὸ κατοικεῖν με which is the same as 'וְשִׁ (see Psalm 27:4's text critical note). Peshitta has a different (but questionable) reading of 'וְשִׁ.

## Preliminary Observations

*Biblia Hebraica Stuttgartensia* contains Masoretic shorthand and textual footnotes. These aids help the student of Scripture to better understand where multiple interpretations of textual variants come from, as well as critically determine the strongest use of most variants. Here are a few noteworthy observations taken from the *Masorah parva* and *Textual Critical Apparatus* of Psalm 23.

### Masorah Parva

There are four words and phrases in Psalm 23 that only appear once in the entire Hebrew Old Testament. They are יִרְבֵּיצְנִי (verse 2), מְנַחֵם (verse 2), וְיִמְשְׁעֵנִי (verse 4), and כּוֹסִי (verse 5). The first two appear in verse 2 (*He causes me to lie down and resting place*). The other two instances are found in verse 4 (*and your staff*) and verse 5 (*my cup*). This information begs for the use of וְיִמְשְׁעֵנִי in verse 4 to be researched. Why did David use a simile in this psalm that is uncommon to the biblical record? How often does this same root word for “staff” appear in Scripture and what are the contexts for those instances?

### Textual Critical Apparatus

It is most likely an error on the part of the LXX for טוֹב to be connected with verse 5. However, the biggest interpretive issue is found in verse 6. According to the *Textual Critical Apparatus*, וְשָׁבַתִּי can mean “to dwell” or “to stay” with “to dwell” as the stronger option. It argues that this interpretation is stronger because of the contextual use of the word found in Psalm 27:4 and the stronger use of it in the LXX as opposed to Peshitta.

Hebrew Diagram #3

מִזְמוֹר לְדָוִד v. 1

יְהוָה רָעִי  
לֹא אֶחְסֶר:

בְּנֵאֲוֹת דָּשָׂא v. 2

יִרְבִּיעֲנִי  
עַל־מִי מְנַחֹת  
יִנְהַלְנִי:

נַפְשִׁי יִשׁוּבֵב v. 3

יִנְחֵנִי  
בְּמַעְגְלֵי־צֶדֶק  
לְמַעַן שְׂמוֹ:

גַּם כִּי־אֵלֶךְ v. 4

בְּגִיָּא צְלֻמוֹת  
לֹא־אֵירָא רָע  
כִּי־אַתָּה עִמָּדִי  
שְׁבִטְךָ  
וּמִשְׁעֲנֹתֶךָ  
הִמָּה יִנְחַמְנִי:

v. 5 תַּעֲרֹךְ לְפָנַי | שְׁלֹחַן

נֶגֶד צַרְרֵי

דְּשַׁנָּתְךָ

בְּשֵׁמֶן רֵאשִׁי

כּוֹסֵי רוּיָה:

v. 6 אֶדָּן | טוֹב

וְחֶסֶד

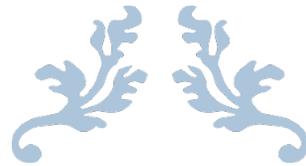
יִרְדְּפוּנִי

כָּל־יְמֵי חַיֵּי

וְשַׁבְּתֵי

בְּבֵית־יְהוָה

לְאַרְךְ יָמַי:



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# LITERARY ANALYSIS

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Form/Genre and Literary Devices



## Translation #6

- [1] A psalm by David.  
Yahweh is my shepherd.  
I will never lack.
- [2] He causes me to lie down in green pastures.  
He guides me to restful waters.
- [3] He restores my soul.  
He leads me in tracks of righteousness for the sake of His name.
- [4] Even when I walk in a valley of deep darkness,  
I will never fear evil, for You are with me.  
Your rod and Your staff, they give me comfort.
- [5] You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies.  
You have refreshed my head with oil.  
My cup is more than full.
- [6] Surely goodness and kindness will pursue me all of the days of my life,  
and I will dwell in the house of Yahweh for days without end.

## Literary Form/Genre Identification and Exegetical Significance

According to *Cracking Old Testament Codes*, psalms are generally classified as either descriptive or declarative praise.<sup>57</sup> At first glance, Psalm 23 acts as a hybrid of the two because it appears to incorporate both elements. David effectively describes Yahweh's piloting, provisional, and protective attributes through the declaration of praiseworthy acts. However, this interchange is certainly one-sided due to the metaphorical nature of these actions. Praise is not being declared for the sake of Yahweh's deeds. Rather, metaphorical activities are being employed to describe Yahweh's goodness and David's gratitude. Therefore, Psalm 23 has a descriptive literary form.

Identifying the descriptive literary form of Psalm 23 is exegetically significant because Yahweh's divine nature is immutable. The attributes of His personality have not changed across the millennia. What was true for David is also true for us as we follow the same Shepherd. Recognizing the literary form also provides a standard outline for the exegete's consideration. Typically, descriptive psalms contain a call to praise, a cause to praise, and a conclusion to praise.<sup>58</sup> In Psalm 23, the call to praise is found in the opening identification that Yahweh is David's shepherd. Verses 2-4 flesh the metaphor out to provide greater clarity and more cause to praise. Finally, David departs from the metaphor with a renewed call to praise in the concluding two verses.

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<sup>57</sup> Kenneth L. Barker, "Praise," in *Cracking Old Testament Codes*, ed. D. Brent Sandy and Ronald L. Giese, Jr. (Nashville, TN: B&H Publishing Group, 1995), 218.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*, 221.

## Literary Devices and Exegetical Significance

The first verse introduces a metaphor where Yahweh is David's personal shepherd. This literary device is exegetically significant because it provides a visible illustration that aids in understanding certain invisible qualities of Yahweh's nature. According to Kenneth Barker, metaphors such as this one are "used in praise of God, and they are to be understood in the sense of what they symbolize."<sup>59</sup> How does Yahweh care for those who belong to Him? In the same way a good shepherd cares for his sheep.

Verses 2-3 extend the metaphor by providing examples through Hebrew parallelism. They are not entirely synonymous, antithetical, or synthetical in the formal sense of their classification. However, their arrangement follows a definite synonymous/synthetical structure. Both verses begin with the Shepherd actively providing rest and restoration for His sheep. In this sense, they are synonymously similar. Nevertheless, neither statement stands as a rephrasing of the other's thought. Verse 2 refers to rest for the body, while the restoration in verse 3 is for the soul. In this way, the differences are synthetical because the former thought is being complemented by the latter. Unfortunately, this too falls short of formal classification because the second phrase does not complete or expand upon the original phrase's thought.

The latter sections of each verse are also vaguely parallel. In verse 2, the Shepherd actively guides His sheep to restful waters. In verse 3, the Shepherd leads His sheep in tracks of righteousness. Much like their former counterparts, these phrases depict similar actions that complement each other, but fail to mirror or explain their corresponding expressions. They are similar but not synonymous; complementary but not connected.

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<sup>59</sup> Barker, *Cracking Old Testament Codes*, 227.

Verses 2-3 may not fit comfortably in our formal classifications for Hebrew parallelism, but that does not mean they are not parallel. The similarities between them in purpose, structure, and action are not accidents. Together, they describe Yahweh as the Shepherd who provides rest and restoration for His sheep while guiding them to restful waters through tracks of righteousness. David knew what he was doing when he cleverly crafted this psalm under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit.

More literary devices appear in Psalm 23 than metaphors and Hebrew parallelism. The “valley of deep darkness” found in verse 4 is a metonym for extreme gloom or depression. Similarly, the “more than full” cup in verse 5 does not refer to David’s royal dinnerware, but excessive goodness and blessing that comes from Yahweh. Such poetic distinctions are exegetically significant because they figuratively display realities that are greater than the figures themselves. The Shepherd’s protection and provision are beautifully praised in these expressions of man’s darkest depths and Yahweh’s abundant heights.

### **Argument/Theme Identification**

As the Expositor’s Bible Commentary states, “The structure of the psalm is both simple and complex.”<sup>60</sup> The central theme, however, is easily recognized and strikes an emotional chord with all believers. Charles Spurgeon once wrote, “There is no inspired title to this Psalm, and none is needed, for it records no special events, and needs no other key than that which every

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<sup>60</sup> Willem A. VanGemeren, “W. Psalm 23: The Goodness of God,” in *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary, Volume 5: Psalms, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs*, ed. Tremper Longman III and David E. Garland (Peterborough, England: Epworth Press, 2004), 252.

Christian may find in his own bosom.”<sup>61</sup> Psalm 23 describes the piloting, provisional, and protective attributes of Yahweh’s care for those who are His and benefit from His goodness.

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<sup>61</sup> Charles H. Spurgeon, *The Treasury of David, Volume 1: Psalms 1-57* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 2011), 353.

## Final Hebrew Diagram

מִזְמוֹר לְדָוִד v. 1

Yahweh is our Shepherd (v1)

יְהוָה רֹעֵי  
לֹא אֶחָסֶר:

His Piloting (v2-3)

בְּנֵאוֹת דָּשָׂא v. 2  
יִרְבִּיצֵנִי  
עַל־מֵי מְנַחֹת  
יְנַהֲלֵנִי:

נַפְשִׁי יִשׁוּבֵב v. 3

יְנַחֲנֵי  
בְּמַעְגְלֵי־צֶדֶק  
לְמַעַן שְׂמוֹ:

His Protection (v4)

גַּם כִּי־אֵלֶיךָ v. 4

בְּגֵיא צְלָמוֹת  
לֹא־אֵירָא רָע  
כִּי־אֵתָהּ עִמָּדִי  
שָׁבֵטךָ  
וּמִשְׁעֲנֹתֶיךָ  
הִמָּה יְנַחֲמֵנִי:

His Provision (v5)

תַּעֲרֹךְ לְפָנַי | שְׁלֹחַן v. 5

נֶגֶד צַרְרִי

דְּשַׁנְתָּ

בְּשֶׁמֶן רֵאשִׁי

בּוֹסִי רוּיָה:

His Permanence (v6)

אֵדָךְ | טוֹב v. 6

וְחֶסֶד

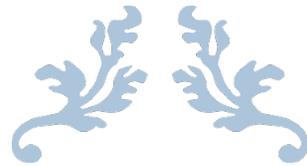
יִרְדְּפוּנִי

כָּל־יְמֵי חַיֵּי

וְשַׁבְּתִי

בְּבֵית־יְהוָה

לְאֵרֶךְ יָמַי:



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# CONTEXTUAL ANALYSIS

## PART 1

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Biblical Analysis



## Translation #7

- [1] A psalm by David.  
Yahweh is my shepherd.  
I will never lack.
- [2] He causes me to lie down in green pastures.  
He guides me to restful waters.
- [3] He restores my soul.  
He leads me in tracks of righteousness for the sake of His name.
- [4] Even when I walk in a valley of deep darkness,  
I will never fear evil, for You are with me.  
Your rod and Your staff, they give me comfort.
- [5] You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies.  
You have refreshed my head with oil.  
My cup is more than full.
- [6] Surely goodness and kindness will pursue me all of the days of my life,  
and I will dwell in the house of Yahweh for days without end.

## Author

Psalm 23 begins with the phrase, “A psalm by David.” However, not everyone agrees that David wrote it. Some scholars, theologians, and learned men believe the “house of Yahweh” mentioned in verse 6 refers to the Temple that was built by David’s son, Solomon.<sup>62</sup> Many commentators gloss over the opening heading all together. Even the popular *Expositor’s Bible Commentary* inaccurately states that *Yahweh* is “the first word of the psalm.”<sup>63</sup>

Nothing will alter the divinely inspired, inerrant text that simply states who wrote the psalm. It is possible to ignore Hebrew grammar at the beginning and cling to a literal understanding at the end that dates the psalm after David. Unfortunately, this approach ignores the issue of David’s name appearing in the opening line. The Holy Spirit has provided the author’s identity. As Charles Spurgeon once wrote, “It is David’s Heavenly Pastoral; a surpassing ode, which none of the daughters of music can excel.”<sup>64</sup>

## Audience

The recipients of this psalm are unclear. Unlike the author, no specific identification is provided within the psalm itself. The intended audience might have been participants of a sacrificial banquet of liturgical thanksgiving in temple worship. This view is generally derived

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<sup>62</sup> Adrian Curtis, *Epworth Commentaries: Psalms*, (Peterborough, England: Epworth Press, 2004), 49.

<sup>63</sup> Willem A. VanGemeren, “Psalm 23: The Goodness of God,” in *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary, Volume 5: Psalms, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs*, ed. Tremper Longman III and David E. Garland (Peterborough, England: Epworth Press, 2004), 253.

<sup>64</sup> Charles H. Spurgeon, *The Treasury of David, Volume 1: Psalms 1-57* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 2011), 353.

from a more literal (and less metaphorical) interpretation of the final two verses.<sup>65</sup> However, the banquet hypothesis is more likely for those who reject David as the author, since Solomon built the Temple.

Psalm 23 is an expression of confident trust in Yahweh to guide, protect, and provide as a good shepherd does for his sheep. The employment of personal possessive pronouns does more than bring clarity to the metaphor. It provides a deep sense of ownership. David owns this expression of experiential faith in Yahweh's faithfulness. In doing so, he relates his experience to an open audience of anyone else who can relate. Those who confidently place their trust in Yahweh are the intended recipients.

### **Overall Contextual Analysis**

Psalms is divided into individual five books. The first book contains psalms 1–41. Since most of these psalms were written by David, it is also likely that he arranged their ordering. Nestled a little right of center of book one is the 23<sup>rd</sup> psalm. The entry preceding it contains messianic prophecy. David's poetic descriptions of pain paint a vivid picture of Christ's coming afflictions. Psalm 22 foretells that He would be forsaken by God in His agony (Ps 22:1), He would be ridiculed and hated (Ps 22:7–8), His hands and feet would be pierced (Ps 22:16), and some would even gamble over His clothes (Ps 22:18). Conversely, Psalm 24 is full of Yahweh's blessing, salvation, and glory. It is often appropriately titled, "The King of Glory."

The cross of Christ's first coming has fulfilled the messianic prophecies of psalm 22. Creation eagerly anticipates the King of Glory's kingdom (of psalm 24) to one day be

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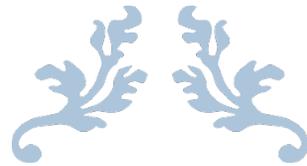
<sup>65</sup> Peter C. Craigie, *Word Biblical Commentary: Psalms 1-50, Volume 19* (Columbia: Thomas Nelson, 2004), 205.

established upon the earth. In the meantime, every believer lives under the faithful care of the good Shepherd described in psalm 23. Jesus is crushed in psalm 22, with us in psalm 23, and victoriously glorified in psalm 24.

### **Remote Context**

Yahweh is referred to as the Shepherd of His people within the broader context of Scripture. Ezekiel 34:11-16 contains strikingly similar imagery to the metaphors found in psalm 23. In the opening verse of psalm 80, Asaph addresses Yahweh as the “Shepherd of Israel.” Psalm 95:7 says, “For He is our God, and we are the people of His pasture, and the sheep of His hand.”

This side of the cross, we see Christ is the New Testament reality behind these Old Testament truths. Jesus refers to Himself as “the Good Shepherd” twice in John 10 (verses 11 and 14). Matthew 18:10-14 and Luke 15:1-7 share a parable in which He leaves the ninety-nine sheep to find the one which was lost. He does not quote psalm 23 with direct reference to Himself. He does not have to. His perfect fulfilment of psalm 22 and promises of future fulfilment that parallel psalm 24 prove His faithfulness to individually shepherd His flock.



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# CONTEXTUAL ANALYSIS

## PART 2

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Extra Biblical Analysis



## Translation #8

- [1] A psalm by David.  
Yahweh is my shepherd.  
I will never lack.
- [2] He causes me to lie down in green pastures.  
He guides me to restful waters.
- [3] He restores my soul.  
He leads me in tracks of righteousness for the sake of His name.
- [4] Even when I walk in a valley of deep darkness,  
I will never fear evil, for You are with me.  
Your rod and Your staff, they give me comfort.
- [5] You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies.  
You have refreshed my head with oil.  
My cup is more than full.
- [6] Surely goodness and kindness will pursue me all of the days of my life,  
and I will dwell in the house of Yahweh for days without end.

## Historical/Political/Economic Context

Psalm 23 has been conveniently imprinted with the author's signature. However, the precise date of its authorship has not been included. Some believe David composed it while he was taking refuge in the forest of Hereth (1 Sam 22:5).<sup>66</sup> Truthfully, no one can assign a date to this ancient text when it does not have one. It was likely written sometime after David's youth as a shepherd in Bethlehem because its use of shepherding metaphors and mature perspectives.

Shepherding is one of the oldest and most necessary occupations. Abel, Adam's oldest son, was the first shepherd (Gen 4:2). Sheep were tended to become sacrificial animals and provide people with food, milk, fat, wool, skins, and horns.<sup>67</sup> Despite its importance, shepherding was one of the humblest professions of the ancient Near East. Scripture uses David's humble beginning as a shepherd to contrast his elevated status of kingship in 2 Samuel 7:8 and Psalm 78:70-71.

Shepherding was a tireless occupation of dedicated commitment. It was a full-time job that occupied several responsibilities. Unlike independent goats, sheep were dependent upon a shepherd to find water and pasture for them. The economic value of the sheep stood in direct proportion to his care. He also provided shelter, medication, and protection for his otherwise helpless flock. The typical tools of his trade were a club-like rod (worn at the belt) and a six foot staff. Both could be used as weapons to protect and control their commodities.<sup>68</sup>

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<sup>66</sup> Mayer I. Gruber, *Rashi's Commentary on Psalms 1-89 (Books I-III)* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1998), 132.

<sup>67</sup> Paul J. Achtemeier, ed., *The HarperCollins Bible Dictionary* (New York: HarperCollins, 1996), 1012.

<sup>68</sup> John H. Walton, Victor H. Mathews, and Mark W. Chavalas, *The IVP Bible Background Commentary: Old Testament* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2000), 524.

## Geographical Context

The first four verses of Psalm 23 look back to David's days as a young shepherd on the hills near Bethlehem. The area is drier and more rugged than the region of Samaria to the north. However, there was enough top soil for agriculture to be possible. According to John Beck, the farmers of that region would enter into contracts with shepherds that would allow them to bring their flocks into the fields. He says, "The animals would pick through the harvested field for any leftovers that they might find, while at the same time leaving behind manure that would fertilize the soil in advance of the next planting season."<sup>69</sup>

The Western Mountains of Judah are full of wadis (gullies that have been formed from runoff erosion). According to one source, "Some of these wadis are wide, allowing easy travel; others are narrow, steep, and easily defended."<sup>70</sup> Extensive valleys of eroded limestone also littered the landscape between Bethlehem and the Dead Sea. These became natural roads through the region for travelers, thieves, and predatory beasts. It is likely that David had such a gully or valley in mind when he penned the metaphor found in verse 4. James Montgomery Boice observed, "We are never so conscious of the presence of God as when we pass through life's valleys."<sup>71</sup>

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<sup>69</sup> John A. Beck, *The Land of Milk and Honey: An Introduction to the Geography of Israel* (Saint Louis, MS: Concordia Publishing House, 2006), 76.

<sup>70</sup> Thomas Brisco, *Holman Bible Atlas: A Complete Guide to the Expansive Geography of Biblical History* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1998), 16-18.

<sup>71</sup> James Montgomery Boice, *Psalms, Volume 1: Psalms 1-41* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1994), 211.

## Cultural Context

When an ancient Jew set out food, it was a gesture of hospitality (Gen 18:1-8; Exod 2:18-20). When one would do this publicly for another, the gesture would mark the establishment of a right relationship between the two parties.<sup>72</sup> In verse 5, Yahweh prepares a table for David in the presence of his enemies. In doing so, Yahweh has not only established a right relationship with David privately, He has publicly declared His alliance in the face of David's enemies.

When a king (such as David) was anointed with oil, it was to be “a sign of appointment to and equipping for sacral office.”<sup>73</sup> Another use for oil in the ancient Near East was to rub it into the hair to suffocate lice.<sup>74</sup> It was also customary for generous hosts to provide an assortment of fine oils for their banquet's guests. These oils smelled wonderful and produced a glistening sheen on their foreheads. According to one text from the time of Esarhaddon (an Assyrian king), he “drenched the foreheads” of his royal dinner guests with “choicest oils.”<sup>75</sup>

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<sup>72</sup> John H. Walton, ed., *Zondervan Illustrated Bible Backgrounds Commentary Volume 5: The Minor Prophets, Job, Psalms, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2009), 341.

<sup>73</sup> Tremper Longman III ed., Peter Enns, and Mark Strauss, *The Baker Illustrated Bible Dictionary* (Grand Rapids: Baker Publishing Group, 2013), 72.

<sup>74</sup> Philip J. King and Lawrence E. Stager, *Life in Biblical Israel* (Louisville, KY: Westminster Knox Press, 2001), 74.

<sup>75</sup> John H. Walton, Victor H. Mathews, and Mark W. Chavalas, *The IVP Bible Background Commentary: Old Testament* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2000), 524-25.

### Literary and/or Archaeological Context

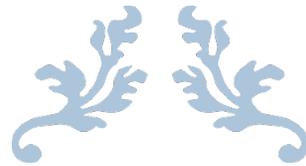
The shepherd metaphor is used to refer to God in the Old Testament (Ezek 34:11-16) and Jesus in the New Testament (John 10:11-15; Heb 13:20; 1 Pet 2:25, 5:4; Rev 7:15-17). Pagan cultures of the ancient Near East would apply the same metaphor to their gods and kings. For example, Amon, the Egyptian sun god, was described as being “a shepherd who brings his herds to pasture” because of the sun’s life-giving effect on crops.<sup>76</sup> Kings were also sometimes referred to as shepherds because their subjects depended upon them for protection as well as political and economic guidance. Yahweh used the metaphor to refer to the kingships of both Saul and David (2 Sam 5:2; Ezek 37:24).



*Wall painting from the third-century catacomb of St. Priscilla, Rome.*

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<sup>76</sup> Ibid., 515.



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# EXPOSITIONAL SKELETON

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Incorporation without Illustration



## Final Translation

- [1] A psalm by David.  
Yahweh is my shepherd.  
I will never lack.
- [2] He causes me to lie down in green pastures.  
He guides me to restful waters.
- [3] He restores my soul.  
He leads me in tracks of righteousness for the sake of His name.
- [4] Even when I walk in a valley of deep darkness,  
I will never fear evil, for You are with me.  
Your rod and Your staff, they give me comfort.
- [5] You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies.  
You have refreshed my head with oil.  
My cup is more than full.
- [6] Surely goodness and kindness will pursue me all of the days of my life,  
and I will dwell in the house of Yahweh for days without end.

## Introduction

Psalm 23 is arguably the most beloved psalm of all time. Our children memorize it in Sunday School. The Elderly request its recital at hospital bedsides. Who has not been comforted by this psalm in the darkest valleys of life's despair? It embodies the universal cries of human frailty and dependence upon the divine Shepherd for every good thing. Charles Spurgeon, the prince of preachers, once wrote, "There is no inspired title to this Psalm, and none is needed, for it records no special events, and needs no other key than that which every Christian may find in his own bosom." This is everyman's psalm. That said, let's begin with this morning's text.

### A Psalm of David

- [1] The Lord is my Shepherd; I shall not want.  
[2] He makes me lie down in green pastures.  
He leads me beside still waters.  
[3] He restores my soul.  
He leads me in paths of righteousness for his name's sake.  
[4] Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death,  
I will fear no evil, for you are with me;  
your rod and your staff, they comfort me.  
[5] You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies;  
you anoint my head with oil; my cup overflows.  
[6] Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me  
all the days of my life,  
and I shall dwell in the house of the Lord  
forever.

Let's pray. (Prayer)

“The Lord is my Shepherd.” Shepherding is one of the oldest and most assiduous occupations of all time. It demands dedication, persistence, and constant attention. And yet, David begins this masterpiece of a short psalm by declaring God to be his personal Shepherd. “The Lord is my Shepherd.” What could he possibly mean by that? As you remember, David is Israel's great historical king and the direct recipient of the Davidic Covenant. David shepherds the people, but who shepherds David?

And the following phrase of this psalm's thesis: “I shall not want.” Since when does a king not get what he wants anyway? A short study in 2 Samuel reveals he lacked much during the latter years of his rule and subsequent exile. So what does he mean when he says, “I shall not want?” The connotation behind this phrase is one of never lacking or being in a state of lack.<sup>77</sup> David is not saying that the Shepherd of his soul is obligated to fulfill his every desire. He is saying, however, that God will provide for his every need. This is statement about God's faithfulness, not David's desires.

The Lord is the supreme Shepherd of everyone who belongs to Him. In fact, He is not only the good Shepherd, He is the best Shepherd! He tirelessly cares for His sheep, and they never lack what they need in Him. This morning, if you are one of His sheep, you know you have a good Shepherd. You can testify to God's goodness like David does. But even the best of sheep are prone to wander from time to time. In this psalm, David gives four reasons why you can trust God to take care of you through every season of life. The first reason is simply that God pilots His people.

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<sup>77</sup> אֵין in the imperfect denotes permanent prohibition.

### **Point #1: God Pilots His People**

Let's look at verses 2 and 3. "He makes me lie down in green pastures. He leads me beside still waters. He restores my soul. He leads me in paths of righteousness for his name's sake." Note the pattern that is used here to depict the good Shepherd's guardianship and guidance. He provides rest and He leads. He restores and He leads again.

Like us, sheep are often anxious and agitated. A shepherd may direct his sheep to streams of fresh water in a barren wasteland, but if that water spooks them, they would rather die than drink. An experienced shepherd knows where to lead his sheep; where they will remain calm and quiet, completely satisfied. In the same way, our good Shepherd brings us to fields of rest and quiet waters to restore our souls.

He also "leads me in paths of righteousness for his name's sake." The word David chose to use here for "paths" literally means "wagon tracks."<sup>78</sup> There are other words he could have chosen. Instead, he decided to use a very specific, narrow word that describes the tight nature of God's guidance. These wagon tracks of righteousness are not broad paths with plenty of wiggle room. They are thin trenches that restrain the traveler to a steady course. In other words, the good Shepherd sets the course and leads His sheep in steady trails of security.

The good news does not stop there, though. God's motivation for doing this is not based on our goodness. He does all of this for the sake of His name. Look at verse 3 again. "He leads me in paths of righteousness for his name's sake." Your poor performance as a sheep (who is prone to whine, wonder, and wander) does not deflate God's desire to lead you. Rather, He has put His divine reputation on the line to ensure that you get there! He knows our tendencies and

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<sup>78</sup> Both *HALOT* and Holladay translate לַמַּדְבָּר as "wagon tracks."

deficiencies, so He employs His own high honor for His motivation and our security. What a good Shepherd we have!

The opening three verses paint a tranquil scene, but not all of life is found in restful pastures beside quiet waters. There will be days when the sun does not shine; when darkness grips the heart like death and fear swells the throat against your windpipe. What about those days? When the desire for life has died and mortality mocks you from the shadows? The second reason you can trust God to take care of you through every season of life is because God protects His people.

### **Point #2: God Protects His People**

Look at verse 4. “Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for you are with me; your rod and your staff, they comfort me.” Don’t let the apparent definiteness of “the valley of the shadow of death” fool you. This verse does not refer to a certain valley or specific shadow. The metaphor used here denotes any valley of darkest gloom or death-shadow.<sup>79</sup> It encompasses more than the fear of physical death, which we all eventually face. This is any dark season of the soul.

“I will fear no evil.” The construction of this phrase mirrors what we examined in verse 1. There, David says he will never lack. Here, he declares he will never fear evil.<sup>80</sup> The emphasis is founded on never being afraid of evil. Where does this courage come from? What could

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<sup>79</sup> Holladay translates תַּלְמוֹתַי to mean “darkness” while *HALOT* prefers “gloom.”

<sup>80</sup> לֹא in the imperfect denotes permanent prohibition.

possibly transform a skittish sheep into a confident traveler through dangerous territory? Let's find out...

“For you are with me; your rod and your staff, they comfort me.” The typical tools of a shepherd's trade in ancient times were a club-like rod (worn at the belt) and a six foot staff. Both instruments could be used as weapons to protect and control their commodities. If a sheep happened to wander off, the staff was an easy tool for correcting the creature's rebellious course. In the dark despair of life's valleys, we have a Protector who is armed and ready for action. No matter how depressed or despondent your circumstances might be, He is piloting you, He is with you, and He is protecting you from a world of bloodthirsty terrors. So long as your Shepherd is near, you will never fear. Thirdly, you can trust the good Shepherd because God provides for His people.

### **Point #3: God Provides for His People**

What does verse 5 say? “You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies; you anoint my head with oil; my cup overflows.” David is no longer declaring the qualities of God with a shepherding metaphor. He has experienced the faithfulness of his Shepherd in the good times and the bad. So David shifts his attention and is now speaking directly towards God Himself. He first made the change in the middle of verse 4, while walking through a valley of darkness. “For you are with me; your rod and your staff, they comfort me.” Now, he is no longer being led, fed, and protected, but provided for in abundance.

“You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies.” In David's culture, much like ours, when someone presented food, it was a gesture of hospitality. When one would do this publicly for another, the gesture would often mark the establishment of a right relationship

between the two parties. By preparing a table for David in the presence of his enemies, God has not only established a right relationship with him privately, He has publicly declared His alliance in the face of those who would destroy him. He says, “You mess with him, you answer to Me.” So who wants to go toe to toe with the creator of the universe?

“You anoint my head with oil.” When a king (such as David) was anointed with oil, it was to be “a sign of appointment to and equipping for sacral office.” Another use for oil in the ancient Near East was to rub it into the hair to suffocate lice. It was also customary for generous hosts to provide an assortment of fine oils for their banquet’s guests. Because the scene described here is a banquet and not a coronation, it is likely that David had this custom in mind when he added this segment. These oils would have smelled wonderful and produced a glistening sheen on the guests’ foreheads. According to the ancient texts of one Assyrian king, he would “drench the foreheads” of his royal dinner guests with “choicest oils.”

In each of these scenarios (having food prepared before enemies and being drenched with oil before dinner), David’s needs are being personally met by a providing, protecting, preserving, and refreshing Host. God is not only the good Shepherd who pilots and protects, He is also the good Host who provides.

“My cup overflows.” Another solid way to render this phrase is, “My cup is more than full.”<sup>81</sup> This is not a “name it and claim it” affirmation of future wish-fulfillment. It is a statement of established fact. My cup is more than full and it continues to be so. Is this true for you? Has the good Host met you with more than a full cup? According to Colossians 2:9-10, “For in him the whole fullness of deity dwells bodily, and you have been filled in him, who is the

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<sup>81</sup> Holladay defines  $\text{הַכּוֹפֵּץ}$  as meaning “overflow” and “superabundance” while providing this verse as the only example.

head of all rule and authority.” The whole fullness of deity dwells bodily in Christ, our good Shepherd and Host. We need not look elsewhere for provision. Christ is the provider of everything we need and more.

And that brings us to the fourth and final reason for trusting God that is listed here in psalm 23. You can trust God because He promises life for His people.

#### **Point #4: God Promises Life for His People**

Let’s look at the last verse again. “Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life, and I shall dwell in the house of the Lord forever.” Note the air of confidence; “surely.” “All the days of my life.” “And I shall dwell in the house of the Lord forever.” For this moment and for always, for the rest of eternity, for days without end... the good Host will be our source of goodness, mercy, and home. That’s good news! What a great and gracious God we serve!

#### **Conclusion**

Let us remember (and never forget) that David’s Shepherd is our Shepherd. His Host is our Host. These are the unchangeable attributes of an Immutable God. Hebrews 13:8 says He is “the same yesterday and today and forever.” He will always pilot, protect, provide, and promise for those who belong to Him.

Are you scared? Don’t be afraid. The good Shepherd is with you and He is well equipped. You will not be destroyed. Because He is here, you have nothing to fear! Does the path you are on seem unclear and full of turns? Take heart! He knows your limitations and leads you in narrow trenches of righteousness for the sake of His divine reputation. You will not lose

your way, for He is leading you. Are you worrisome about the future? Don't be. He sees your needs and will ensure that you are never in a state of lack.

Are you weak and defenseless? The good Host has already prepared for you a table in the presence of your enemies. No one is able to stand against His might. Are you weary and in need of refreshment? He anoints your head with fine oils and overfills your cup. Are you afraid He will eventually tire of your company? He has prepared a dwelling place of permanence that spans eternity. This is a very encouraging psalm indeed. The secret to its timeless popularity should not be mystery to anyone. But...

Perhaps, you are here this morning without a Shepherd. Or maybe you have one, but you are beginning to realize that there is truly only one good Shepherd, and you would like to know how to become one of His flock? Let's turn for a moment to John chapter 10. Starting in verse 11, Jesus says,

[11] I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep.

Look also at verses 14 and 15.

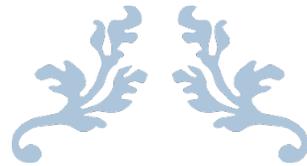
[14] I am the good shepherd. I know my own and my own know me,

[15] just as the Father knows me and I know the Father; and I lay down my life for the sheep.

There is only good Shepherd who protects, provides, and promises eternal life. His name is Jesus Christ.

After living a perfectly righteous, obedient, and sinless life, He suffered an agonizing death upon the cross. There, He paid the penalty for our sins and three days later, destroyed the grip of the grave. Now, He is waiting until the appointed time when He will return to judge the living and the dead. He laid down His life for the sheep. Therefore, they "shall dwell in the house

of the Lord forever.” But, for those who are not His, the Bible refers to them as goats. Eternity for goats is a hell of everlasting torment, suffering, and separation. If Christ is not your good Shepherd, call out to His today. Don’t delay! This life is just a vapor! For the rest of us thankful sheep, let us never forget how good our Shepherd and Host and really is. Let’s pray. (Prayer)



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