

PSALM 23
SONG OF CONFIDENCE

Structure

	MT	RSV
I. Superscription	1a	—
II. Confessional statement	1b-3	1-3
III. Affirmation of confidence	4-5	4-5
IV. Expression of hope	6	6

The SUPERScription "song of David" is dealt with in the analyses of Psalms 3, 15, 29, etc.

A CONFESSIOAL STATEMENT of the individual in cultic contexts is destined for a small or large audience. The one at hand (vv. 1b-3) claims a special status with the Lord. The initial formula "Yahweh, my shepherd!" has become an almost ageless expression of personal faith. Yahweh is in the third person, being referred to as Elohim in Ps 62:3, 7 (RSV 2, 6; "only he is my rock and my help") or in Ps 18:3 (RSV 2; "Yahweh is my rock"). In contrast to this type of affirmation, we may single out the personal, direct-address formula "you, Yahweh, are my strength" (Ps 18:2 [RSV 1]) or "you are my rock and my fortress" (Ps 71:3c; cf. Ps 31:4-5 [RSV 3-4]), which certainly serves a different liturgical end. All of these phrases are characterized by the suffixed noun (e.g., "my shepherd"), indicating a possessive—i.e., the closest possible—relationship to the deity previously named (Yahweh, Elohim). Grammatically, the deity mentioned may be predicate (van Zyl, against Kohler). The force of such confession can be evaluated only in the context of personal or, better, familial religion (Vorländer; Albertz, *Frömmigkeit*). The formula ostensibly functions to activate familial bonds in the face of danger (see 2 Sam 19:5 [RSV 4]; 1 Kgs 3:17-26). It also pledges allegiance to the Lord and calls on him to intervene (cf. Ps 22:2 [RSV 1]). The imagery of God, the Shepherd, clearly occurs mainly in national psalms (Pss 77:21 [RSV 20]; 80:2 [RSV 1]; 100:3). In the ancient Near East "shepherd" was also a royal title (de Fraine; J. A. Soggin, *THAT II*, 793-94). But there cannot be any doubt that it was used early in small, pastoral groups (cf. Gen 48:15).

The interpretation above is corroborated by the balancing negative assertion "I shall not want" (v. 1b; see v. 4). Who needs this kind of defiant assurance? Not so much the afflicted supplicant himself (not even in Ps 42:6 [RSV 5]) as the participants in the ceremony. They are waiting to see the results of supplication; some are hoping to see the sufferer perish (see v. 5). Similar expressions of not being defeated frequently occur exactly in conjunction with confessional trust (Pss 16:8; 25:2; 31:2 [RSV 1]; 62:3 [RSV 2]; 71:1; the formulations do vary, and the indiscriminate use of negative particles is notable). This combination of positive confession and negative assertion must presuppose outward hostility (see Pss 13:5 [RSV 4]; 38:17 [RSV 16]). The wise one puts the experience of no more want into a general statement (see, e.g., Ps 34:10-11 [RSV 9-10]).

V. 1b with its two balancing phrases is the general confession of personal faith. (It is important to note also the absence of any invocation element.) What follows in vv. 2-3 only serves to unfold the assertions made. Yahweh guides and protects his affiliated faithful (three verbs of guidance; see Preuss; Vetter). Substantial parallels are found in Isa 40:11; 49:10.

The second element (vv. 4-5) has a nucleus very similar to the first: "I do not fear evil, because you are with me" (v. 4; see v. 1b). This time, the negative statement precedes the positive one, and most important, we are confronted with

prayer language (second-person address of Yahweh). This style is kept through the elaboration of vv. 4-5 (three verbs that express divine care). The central formula of v. 4 has evidently evolved from the liturgical practice of communicating salvation and well-being to the supplicant (Begrich). The fundamental pattern of such oracular or liturgical message would have been "do not fear, for I am with you" (see Gen 15:1; 26:24; Deut 20:1; 31:8; Isa 41:10, 13; 43:1, 5; etc.). The liturgical response, whether at the moment of receiving the divine promise or in anticipation, could have been exactly as in v. 4. Near parallels are Ps 118:6 and Jer 20:11. Extensive recent studies (Preuss; Vetter; Albertz, *Frömmigkeit*, 81-87) have proved the widespread use of the "I am with you" formula in Israel and its ultimate rootage in small-group theology and cult. The shift of imagery within the second element from shepherd to host does not affect its liturgical function.

The final verse of Psalm 23 returns to objective, confessional language, at least as far as the MT is concerned. To stay in the sanctuary is probably metaphorical for keeping close contact with the personal God (see Pss 27:4-5; 52:10 [RSV 8]; 61:5 [RSV 4]; 62:6-9 [RSV 5-8]; 63:2-9 [RSV 1-8]; Eissfeldt, "Bleiben," goes too far, however, in declaring the phrase to be "a-cultic"). Some scholars think of the privileged Levites (e.g., Kraus, *Psalmen I*, 340). In any case, the closing verse is a strong EXPRESSION OF HOPE over against threatening persecution (see v. 5 and the verb *rādap*, "persecute," in v. 6a). The LXX makes v. 6 part of the prayer of vv. 4-5.

On the whole, the psalm is structured according to liturgical needs. Most modern analysts, however (e.g., Gunkel; Kohler; Beyerlin; Ridderbos; Kraus; Mittmann; etc.) unilaterally consider meter, metaphors, and ideas expressed in the psalm to be the decisive criteria.

Genre

Every reader of Psalm 23 will agree that the motif of trust is predominant in the psalm. Are we entitled, then, to make the "song of confidence" (see, e.g., Psalms 4; 11; 16; 27; 56; 62; and 131; Gunkel and Begrich, 254ff.) a separate genre? Is it right to interpret them as noncultic, private, spiritualized songs or prayers? Or do we have to classify these psalms with the complaint or thanksgiving songs, if not with royal psalms? The answers depend on the determination of the original life situation.

Setting

The extremely personal tone of Psalm 23 excludes its royal and national use (against Eaton; Merrill). On the other hand, personal experience here has not created a totally individualistic poem (against Mowinckel, *W II*, 127). Taking seriously the confessional attitude of vv. 1-3, 6, and the prayer stance of vv. 4-5, we may think of a worship service for an individual person held within the small circle of family or clan. Defiant trust (vv. 1b, 4-5) belongs to such complaint and petition ceremonies (see "Introduction to Cultic Poetry," section 4B).

There is no reference to danger already overcome, as is customary in thanksgiving songs. Instead, confidence and hope are articulated looking at the future, especially in v. 6. The role of the sanctuary need not be overemphasized. The psalm mentions neither Zion nor Jerusalem (against Deleka; Merrill). Nor does it necessarily point to a refugee who sought asylum in the temple (thus Delekat, 233-35; Schottruff, 100-104). Admission into the presence of the divinity to celebrate a family sacrifice and have a meal (see 1 Sam 20:29) was valued so highly that the image easily entered into prayer language (von Ungern-Sternberg).

Intention

The prayer aims at reestablishing the personal relationship with God, probably within a ritual of petition for individual sufferers who were perhaps persecuted or ostracized (see Schottruff, 104; Gerstenberger and Schrage).

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