

so that if one died, there was at least the possibility of descendants worshipping God (v 31). "He who did not keep his life" (v 30)—these words, in context, may refer to those who did not receive a positive oracle from God, who did not escape death; see further the discussion of v 22c above. The deliverance of a sufferer was ground for praise, but the death of a sufferer was not the end, for God's mighty acts would still be told in the future, beyond the funeral, to generations yet unborn (vv 31-32). It is this sentiment which sets the perspective for the whole liturgy, regardless of the specific will of God for the individual sufferer. Death, after all, comes to all mankind sooner or later, but the mighty acts of God will continue to be told from generation to generation.

### Explanation

To Pascal has been attributed the saying that at the end of life, "one dies alone" (*"on mourra seul"*). The psalmist begins his lament with an expression of the loneliness of dying; it is loneliness in the absence of God, compounded by the presence of evil human beings who offer neither companionship nor consolation. Thus, at its beginning, the psalm supplements those other writings in the OT which express profound desolation—the dreadful curse of Job (3:1-26) and the lament of Jeremiah (20:14-18). And like both Job and Jeremiah, the psalmist thinks back to the time of his birth and wonders why life has come to this (22:10-11). Yet the psalm differs finally from the record of the experiences of Job and Jeremiah by virtue of its liturgical character; the liturgy immediately sets the loneliness of dying into the context of a caring community. And the worshiper, who begins his words in utter desolation, ends by inviting his fellow worshipers to join in the praise of God (22:23). The agent of deliverance from desolation is God himself, but the context in which that deliverance is declared is none other than the community of God's people.

Though the psalm is not messianic in its original sense or setting (though some scholars would interpret vv 28-32 as a messianic *relecture*: see Martin-Achard, art. cit.), it may be interpreted from a NT perspective as a messianic psalm par excellence. It is clear, from the recorded words of Jesus on the cross, that he identified his own loneliness and suffering with that of the psalmist (Matt 27:46; Mark 15:34). And it is clear that the evangelists interpreted the crucifixion in the light of the psalm, utilizing its words in their description of the scene (Matt 27:39; Mark 15:29; cf. Luke 23:35; Ps 22:8). Indeed, the psalm takes on the appearance of anticipatory prophecy; the high priests, scribes and elders employ the modes of words of the psalmist's enemies against Jesus (Ps 22:19; cf. John 19:24; Matt 27:35; Mark 15:24; Luke 23:34). It is not without reason that the psalm has been called the "Fifth Gospel" account of the crucifixion (Frost, *CJT* 8 [1962] 102-15).

What is most significant about the NT perspective is the self-identification of Jesus with the suffering psalmist, for it provides an insight into one part of the meaning of the crucifixion. The sufferer of Ps 22 is a human being, experiencing the terror of mortality in the absence of God and the presence of enemies. In the suffering of Jesus, we perceive God, in Jesus, entering

into and participating in the terror of mortality; he identifies with the suffering and the dying. Because God, in Jesus, has engaged in that desolation, he can offer comfort to those of us who walk now where the psalmist walked. But there is also a remarkable difference between the experience of the suffering psalmist and that of Jesus. The psalm concludes with praise because the sufferer escaped death; Jesus died. Yet the latter half of the psalm (vv 22-32) may also be read from a messianic perspective. The transition at v 22 is now understood not in deliverance *from* death, as was the case for the psalmist, but in deliverance *through* death, achieved in the resurrection. And it is that deliverance which is the ground of praise, both for the sufferer (vv 23-27) and for the "great congregation" (vv 28-32).

## The Shepherd Psalm (23:1-6)

### Bibliography

- Ammassari, A.** "Il Salmo 23." *BeO* 16 (1974) 257-62. **Freedman, D. N.** "The Twenty-third Psalm." *Michigan Oriental Studies in Honor of George C. Cameron*, ed. L. I. Orlin. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan, 1976, 139-66. **Johnson, A. R.** "Psalm 23 and the Household of Faith." *Proclamation and Presence*, ed. J. R. Durham and J. R. Porter (1970), 261-71. **Koehler, L.** "Psalm 23." *ZAW* 68 (1956) 227-34. **Loretz, O.** "Psalmstudien III." *UF* 6 (1974) 187-91. **Meek, T. J.** "Old Testament Notes, I: the Metrical Structure of Psalm 23." *JBL* 67 (1948) 233-35. **Merrill, A. L.** "Ps 23 and the Jerusalem Tradition." *VT* 15 (1965) 354-60. **Milne, P.** "Psalm 23: Echoes of the Exodus." *SR* 4 (1974/75) 237-47. **Morgernstern, J.** "Psalm 23." *JBL* 65 (1946) 13-24. **Power, E.** "The Shepherd's Two Rods in Modern Palestine and Some Passages of the Old Testament," *Bib* 9 (1928) 434-42. **Vogt, E.** "The 'Place in Life' of Ps. 23." *Bib* 34 (1953) 195-211. **Von Rohr Sauer, A.** "Fact and Image in the Shepherd Psalm." *CTM* 42 (1971) 488-92.

### Translation

- <sup>1</sup> A Psalm of David.  
*The Lord is my shepherd;* (2+2)  
*I shall not want.*
- <sup>2</sup> *In grassy meadows he will make me lie down;* (3+3)  
*beside placid waters he will lead me.*
- <sup>3</sup> *He will refresh my soul;* (2+2+2)  
*he will lead me in paths of righteousness*  
*for his name's sake.*
- <sup>4</sup> *Even though I shall walk* (2+2+2)  
*in the valley of death's shadow,*  
*I shall fear no evil.*  
*For you are with me:* (2+2+2)  
*your rod and your staff—*  
*they<sup>a</sup> shall comfort me.*

- <sup>5</sup> You will spread a table <sup>a</sup> for me (3+2)  
before my enemies.  
You have anointed my head with oil: (3+2)  
my cup is full. <sup>b</sup>  
<sup>6</sup> Surely goodness and lovingkindness shall pursue me (3?+2)  
all the days of my life,  
and I shall dwell again <sup>a</sup> in the house of the Lord (3+2)  
for days without end. <sup>b</sup>

### Notes

4.a. דַּבַּר: "they." Dahood translates "behold," on the basis of Ugaritic *hm* (*Psalms I*, 147; also Freedman, "The Twenty-third Psalm," 157-58, and others). Against this translation, see the note on Ps 9:8 (above).

5.a. Power has suggested emending ׀ללשׁ, "table," to ׀לשׁ ("weapon, spear, javelin"), on the basis of dittography (*Bib* 9 [1928] 434-42); he translates: "thou preparest arms for my defence against my enemies" (cf. Koehler, *ZAW* 68 [1956] 234, and Morgernstern, *JBL* 65 [1946] 13-24). The translation is possible, but the substance of v 5 c-d, and the absence of support from the versions, makes such a change from the standard reading of the text unnecessary.

5.b. G renders vv 5c-6a differently from MT: "And your cup cheers me like the best (wine?). Also, your mercy shall follow me. . . ." G joins the first two words of v 6 with the last word of v 5 (cf. S and Vg), but such a construction would be anomalous in Hebrew and it is best rejected.

6.a. ׀ללשׁ: literally, "and I shall return in the house of the Lord." The construction is pregnant, implying "and I shall return and I shall dwell (׀ללשׁ) in the house of the Lord" (Cf. Delitzsch, *Biblical Commentary on the Psalms*, I, 40).

6.b. Literally, "length of days."

### Form/Structure/Setting

Although Ps 23 is short and relatively free from textual and translation problems, it is nevertheless particularly difficult to interpret with respect to such matters as its form and original social or cultic setting. There has been general agreement since Gunkel's time that the psalm is a *psalm of trust* or *confidence*. Those who do not accept such a view differ more in nuance than in substance; thus Vogt (*Bib* 34 [1953] 195-211) considers the psalm to be a *thanksgiving psalm*, basing his view in part on a particular interpretation of the setting (below). But, as Loretz (*UF* 6 [1974] 187-91) has indicated, at certain points in its history the psalm could be related to either genre. The identification of the psalm as a *royal psalm* poses more serious problems (so Merrill, *VT* 15 [1965] 354-60 and Eaton, *Kingship and the Psalms*, 36-38): the view is not implausible, but the substance of the psalm is so general and so laden with metaphor, that a specific interpretation in terms of royal psalmody is, of necessity, highly hypothetical.

The structure of the psalm is also difficult to define with clarity or certainty. There is some consensus that the psalm falls into two main sections: (1) the Lord as shepherd (23:1-4); (2) the Lord as host (23:5-6). Yet even this basic analysis is subject to criticism. There is little disagreement that the first four verses utilize the metaphor of the divine shepherd; there is considerable debate, however, as to the interpretation of vv 5-6. Traditionally, the verses have been interpreted as reflecting a change in imagery from the Lord

as shepherd to the Lord as host. But several scholars have argued that the shepherd metaphor is retained throughout the psalm (so Koehler, *ZAW* 68 [1956] 227-34). Yet another possibility is that vv 5-6 do not contain metaphorical language at all, but should be interpreted more literally with respect to a sacrificial banquet, which provides the setting for the psalm (see Vogt, art. cit.).

The problems pertaining to form and structure naturally culminate in a variety of views with respect to the setting of the psalm. At one end of the spectrum is the view of Morgernstern (*JBL*, 65 [1946] 13-24) that the psalm was not composed for use in temple worship, but was a pious Jew's expression of faith and confidence in the Lord. Vogt, on the other hand, proposes a fairly elaborate hypothesis, inferring from the substance of the psalm a liturgical ritual of thanksgiving, of which a sacrificial banquet was a part. Still another proposal is that of Milne, who interprets the psalm in an exilic context (*SR* 4 [1974/75] 237-47); the shepherd metaphor, which contains within it reminiscences of the Exodus (cf. Freedman, art. cit.), provides hope for an exiled community cut off from home and temple.

The sheer diversity of views is a clear indication of the most fundamental problem with respect to the interpretation of the psalm: it is that the language of the psalm is not sufficiently explicit to establish beyond dispute its original sense and setting. Thus, several of the various interpretations noted above are plausible, but several also go beyond the clear evidence of the psalm (e.g. royal interpretations, liturgical interpretations, or exilic interpretations); they are not thereby wrong, merely hypothetical. In the interpretation presented in the comment that follows, it has been impossible to avoid hypothesis; nevertheless, a relatively simple interpretation is given to reduce the element of hypothesis as far as possible.

It is proposed that the psalm must be interpreted as a *psalm of confidence* in the context of some ritual or the context of thanksgiving, without being so specific as Vogt. Such a setting is implied in vv 5-6 (especially v 6c: see *Comment*), though the possibility of a noncultic interpretation such as that of Morgernstern remains open. It is presumed that initially the psalm was an *individual psalm*, utilized in such a setting, though later in its history, it may well have come to function as a *communal psalm*. The following basic structure is proposed: (1) the divine shepherd (23:1-4); (2) anticipation of future thanksgiving in God's house (23:5-6). The metrical and stichometric analysis is fraught with difficulties (cf. the analyses of Meek, Loretz, Freedman, and others): the translation above reflects an attempt to show the simplest analysis of the lines, though a more complex structure may in fact be present.

### Comment

*The divine shepherd* (23:1-4). The first four verses contain an extended metaphor: God is the shepherd, and the psalmist is a sheep belonging to his flock. The fundamental points expressed in the metaphor are the interrelated dimensions of *protection* and *provision*. Yet the metaphor is pregnant with meaning; it is not merely a picture drawn randomly from nature to illustrate the character of the relationship between God and the psalmist. It is a metaphor

drawing on the ancient resources of the Hebrew tradition; thus the psalmist, in utilizing the metaphor, is linking his thought to a broader concept, namely that of God who had been experienced as shepherd by many persons over many generations. And the metaphor is loaded in another sense, too; the terminology of the metaphor associates it with the Exodus from Egypt and the Hebrews' travels in the wilderness, when God's provision and protection had been known like that of a shepherd. Thus, in a subtle fashion, the psalmist is expressing confidence and trust in such a manner that his sentiments are linked to the great acts of divine salvation of the past, which in turn formed the basis of the covenant faith. Yet, in spite of this rich background to the use of the shepherd metaphor, it is possible that the particular words employed in the psalm may give some insight into the background of the psalm, namely the circumstances giving rise to such a profound expression of trust and confidence.

*The Lord* (v 1). The opening word (יהוה) sets the theme for the psalm as a whole and occurs again in the last verse to form an *inclusio*. The Lord is called "shepherd"; the metaphor, at this point, draws upon one of the oldest epithets of God in the Hebrew tradition (cf. Gen 49:24), an epithet which has parallels in Near Eastern religions (e.g. it is used of Shamash: *ANET*, 387). The poet takes the ancient epithet of God as a starting point, but then develops its metaphorical content by drawing out its inherent implications with respect to God's care for his people. In moving from the epithet to the metaphor, the psalmist is doing nothing distinctive, for the metaphor is employed in various psalms (e.g. 80:2; 77:21; 95:7). The distinctiveness in the opening words of this psalm lies in the use of the pronoun, *my* shepherd; the shepherd theme, traditionally interpreted communally of the "flock" (or nation), is here given its most personal interpretation in the entire biblical tradition. (Even if the use of "I/my" was intended, or later interpreted, in a communal sense, the implications of a personal association with the shepherd remain.)

As a consequence of the fact that the Lord is his shepherd, the psalmist can say: "I shall not want." Koehler's translation (art. cit., 228-29) expresses clearly the consequence implicit in the construction: *Solange weil Jahwä mein Hirte ist, leide ich keinen Mangel*—viz., "so long as the Lord is my shepherd, I suffer no lack." In general terms, the words reflect simply the shepherd's provision. But more than that, they recall God's provision for his people during the travels after the Exodus; see Deut 2:7, "you have not lacked a thing" (the same verb, נטפ, is used as in Ps 23). This is one example of the undertones of the Exodus which extend throughout the shepherd metaphor, as demonstrated clearly in the studies of Milne and Freedman.

Verses 2-3 extend the metaphor further, illustrating the nature of the shepherd's guidance and provision. It is these verses which form a central part of the evidence for Dahood's hypothesis, namely that the psalmist speaks of the Lord's guidance through the vicissitudes of life to the eternal bliss of Paradise (*Psalms I*, 145-46); specifically, the verses are said to contain a description of the "Elysian Fields." But such an hypothesis reads more into the text than it can clearly sustain; it is more suited to the later allegorical interpretations of the psalm in the early church than it is to the original

intent of the psalmist (see further Loretz, *UF* 6 [1974] 191). The verses develop primarily the role of the shepherd with respect to his sheep, but at a secondary level they elaborate still further the echoes of the Exodus. Thus the "meadows" (תולד) appear to recall the "holy pasture" (תולד: Exod 15:13) which was the immediate goal of the Hebrews in their Exodus from Egypt. (Note also that the verb לנה, "to guide," is used both in Exod 15:13 and Ps 23:2). The "placid waters" (literally, "waters of *placidity*": תולדות, an intensive plural) may recall the "resting place" or "placidity" (תולדות) associated with the ark in the wilderness wanderings (Num 10:33). The climactic point in vv 2-3, "for his name's sake," also associates the metaphor with the Exodus, as is indicated by the use of the same expression in Ps 106:8 in the context of the deliverance from Egypt. On the one hand, the psalmist speaks in confidence of the guidance and refreshment which he believes the Lord will continue to give to him; the implication is that he has recently experienced such blessing and expects the experience to continue in the future. On the other hand, the anticipation of this future refreshment and guidance is based upon something more solid than his own past experience; the undertones of the Exodus indicate that his expectation is established on the bedrock of Israel's faith, namely the precedent of God's refreshment and guidance in the Exodus and wilderness journeys.

The meaning of the expression "the valley of death's shadow" (v 4) poses some difficulty. The Hebrew תולדות may properly be understood as a compound noun, with the literal sense "very deep shadow" (see D. W. Thomas, "šmwot in the Old Testament," *JSS* 7 [1962] 191-200), or even "total darkness" (Dahood, *Psalms I*, 147). As such, it is not only a part of the metaphor of the shepherd, but again has associations with the Exodus and the wandering through the "deep shadow" of the wilderness (Jer 2:6). But the expression may have been used deliberately to convey the threat of death, as is done in the poetry of Job (10:21-22). Thus the psalmist's confidence rests in the fact that even in the shadow of death itself, he need fear no evil. The reason for such confidence is found in God's protection, described in the metaphor as the shepherd's "rod" and "staff." Power (art. cit., 435) has illuminated the poetry from a modern context; the Palestinian shepherd normally carried two implements, a *club* (or rod) to fend off wild beasts and a *crook* (or staff) to guide and control the sheep.

*Anticipation of future thanksgiving in God's house* (23:5-6). Although the focus of the psalmist now shifts, v 5 forms a transition from the imagery of the shepherd to that of present and future banquets of thanksgiving. That is, although the shepherd imagery no longer dominates in the last two verses, it is still present in the transition, though some efforts to locate it may possibly be misguided. Thus the view of von Rohr Sauer that the word "table" continues the metaphor and is to be understood as "grass" is not entirely convincing; equally unconvincing is his suggestion that the contents of the *cup* were for the sustenance of weak sheep (*CTM* 42 [1971] 488-92). But Freedman's reference to Ps 78:19 (art. cit., 159) is convincing; in that psalm, containing allusions to the rebellion in the wilderness, there is reference to God "spreading a table," in which similar terminology to Ps 23 is employed. The psalmist, already participating in a banquet and anticipating further such occasions

in the future, recalls (by implication) God's provision of a "table" in the past. The reference to "enemies" is also difficult to interpret. To identify the term with specific enemies, such as the original inhabitants of Jerusalem (as proposed by Ammassari, *BeO* 16 [1974] 257-62), is a precarious task; at most, there may be allusions in the language of the poetry to enemies who were encountered in the wilderness. It is safer to assume that the psalmist had endured affliction in the past at the hands of enemies and had risen above that affliction in confidence. Now, as he anticipates the future, he has no illusions; there would still be enemies, perhaps even enemies present in the temple when he offered thanks, but God's provision would come, even in the presence of those enemies.

While v 5a-b appears to anticipate future banquets, v 5c-d makes reference to the banquet of thanksgiving in which the psalmist is actively engaged. "You have anointed . . ."; viz. prior to the banquet the traditional anointing ceremony of preparation had taken place. "My cup is full (or "overflowing")": the immediate reference is to the banquet cup from which the psalmist drank, but the symbolism is deeper. The banquet was a celebration of God's provision and protection; the psalmist's experience of life (*viz.* his *cup*) had been so bountiful, that it was life itself which was full of blessing, overflowing with thanksgiving. The experience of the past and the rejoicing of the present gave rise to the magnificent expression of confidence in the future in v 6. He would be pursued by "goodness" and "lovingkindness" (ΤΟΠ), the latter term specifically associating future blessing with the covenant of God. In a sense, the language of Exodus and wilderness which permeates the entire psalm comes to a head in the expression *lovingkindness*; the God of covenant, who in the past had expressed his lovingkindness to his people so bountifully in their redemption, would continue to do so in the future.

With this confidence, the psalmist rejoices not only in the present moment of festivity and thanksgiving, but also anticipates future occasions when he would return and dwell again in the *house of the Lord* (the temple), in order once again to give thanks. The thanksgiving of the given moment was merely part of a larger series of thanksgiving ceremonies which would punctuate the entire life of the psalmist (see further the articles of Vogt and Johnson in the *Bibliography*).

### Explanation

There are few psalms in the Psalter which are so well-loved and well-known as Ps 23. Its appeal lies partly in the simplicity and beauty of its poetry, strengthened by the serene confidence which it exudes. But more than that, the genius of the psalmist is to be found in his extraordinary expression of a trusting relationship with God. To express such a relationship in simple language is no easy task; on the one hand, the psalm could sink to a monotonous repetition of affirmations, while on the other hand it could defy the abilities of language for articulate expression as a consequence of its profundity. The psalmist has avoided the extremes and found a middle path which is at once simple, yet also profound. The simplicity arises from the use of the shepherd metaphor, involving language which would be understood

readily by all living in a world where the landscape was dotted with sheep and shepherds. The profundity emerges in the beauty of the poetry, which transforms simple metaphor into profoundly spiritual expression. And the appeal of the psalm has continued through subsequent generations, partly because the beauty of the poetry has survived the process of translation, and partly because (until very recently) the pastoral metaphor has retained its significance and accessibility to the majority of human beings. The psalm is written consistently from the perspective of the sheep; that is, its expression of trust and confidence presupposes an awareness of helplessness and need on the part of the one who trusts. In a distinctive fashion, the psalmist has set forth the fundamentals of the covenant relationship, not in terms of Lord and servant, but in the more intimate language of shepherd and sheep.

Though its words are not explicitly quoted in the NT, Ps 23 is important nevertheless for understanding the substance of the Gospels. When Jesus said: "I am the good Shepherd" (John 10:11), he was not merely utilizing a metaphor familiar to his audience from their knowledge of the Hebrew Scriptures. He was also implying something about his person, for in Ps 23 and other psalms in which the metaphor is employed, it is God who is the shepherd. It is the words of Jesus himself, amplified by the early church (*cf.* 1 Pet 2:25 and 5:4), which make possible a "re-reading" of Ps 23 in the light of the gospel of redemption. The echoes of the Exodus and the redemption from Egypt in the psalm are transformed into echoes of the redemption won by the shepherd who lays down his life for his sheep (John 10:11).

## A Hymn to the King of Glory (24:1-10)

### Bibliography

Cross, F. M. *Canaanite Myth and Hebrew Epic* (1973) 91-99. Dijkstra, M. "A Ugaritic Pendant of the Biblical Expression 'Pure in Heart' (Ps 24:7, 73:1)," *UF* 8 (1976) 440. Treves, M. "Date of Psalm 24," *VT* 10 (1960) 428-34.

### Translation

<sup>1</sup> A Psalm of David.<sup>a</sup>

*The earth and its contents belong to the Lord,* (3+3)  
*the world and those who dwell<sup>b</sup> therein;*

<sup>2</sup> for<sup>a</sup> he has fixed it upon the seas (3+2)  
*and established it<sup>b</sup> upon the rivers.<sup>c</sup>*

<sup>3</sup> Who shall ascend into the mountain of the Lord (3+3)  
*and who shall stand up in his holy place?*

<sup>4</sup> He who has innocent hands and a pure heart,<sup>a</sup> (4+4+3)  
*who has not raised his mind<sup>b</sup> to what is false*  
*and has not sworn<sup>c</sup> deceitfully.<sup>d</sup>*

<sup>5</sup> He will receive blessing from the Lord, (4+3)  
*and righteousness from the God of his salvation.*