

Is There More to Psalm 23 Than Words of Solace and Comfort?

An Old Testament KnoWhy¹ relating to the reading assignment for Gospel Doctrine Lesson 25: “Let Every Thing That Hath Breath Praise the Lord” (Psalms) (JBOTL25A)



Figure 1. James Tissot: King David — Sweet singer of psalms

Question: Is there more to Psalm 23 than words of solace and comfort?

Summary: Bible readers have long looked to the book of Psalms as a source of solace and comfort.² Countless books have been written about the psalms in a devotional mood, including many volumes devoted specifically to the twenty-third psalm³ — the main subject of this article. These beautiful and useful works of comfort and meditation focus on what we can read *out* of Psalm 23 by applying it prayerfully to our own situation. By way of contrast, this article explores can be read *into* it prayerfully based on our (admittedly limited) knowledge of its ancient setting.⁴ Ultimately, the more we can read *into* the psalm from our prayerful study, the more we can take *out* of it for application in our personal lives. Careful examination of the structure of the psalms will reveal that Psalm 23 is inseparably connected to the psalms that immediately precede and follow it. In order to enter fully into the peace of Psalm 23, one must first journey through the distress of Psalm 22. This journey culminates in the joy of exaltation in the presence of God depicted in Psalm 24. This sequence of events is replicated in the ritual journey of the priest-king, the redemptive journey of the Messiah, and the salvific journey of each one of the faithful. With this overarching picture in mind, a detailed verse-by-verse commentary on the psalm will be provided.

The Know

Before looking at Psalm 23 in detail, I will address two questions:

- Why should the book of Psalms be read as an ancient work?
- How do modern English translations help us understand Psalm 23?

I will then explain how Psalm 23 functions as a crucial piece of a larger story within the book of Psalms as a whole. I will show how this story can be applied in the lives of the priest-king, the Messiah, and each one of the faithful.

A detailed commentary of Psalm 23 will then be given, followed by final reflections.

Why should the book of Psalms be read as an ancient work?

Perhaps the most important answer to this question for me is this: I need to lay aside the outlook, expectations, and preoccupations of the present world in order to experience the world of the sacred, a world that is “very distant from our own.”⁵

I have found that as I try to understand — through study, prayer, and application — what the scriptures might have meant to those for whom they were originally written, I begin to see myself and my current situation differently. When I read in this fashion, I begin to feel less like “a stranger in a strange land”⁶ and more like a native and next-of-kin to the godly men and women I thus encounter. I learn something of what it was like to live in a culture saturated with an “immediate certainty”⁷ about the Divine and its central role in life, as opposed to a modern culture where religion has been pushed to the periphery of daily life. Through this knowledge, I am, in a certain measure, liberated from the secular habit of second-guessing the reality of heaven that mechanically drives my modernized spiritual reflexes and becomes the falsifying lens that unconsciously conditions how I view my personal universe, including scripture itself. As the saying goes, “We don’t know who discovered water, but we’re pretty sure it wasn’t [a] fish.”⁸

In his book of reflections on the psalms, C. S. Lewis wrote passionately about the need to read the Bible on its own terms as an ancient book in order to escape — or even to see — the errors of the present:⁹

The unhistorical are usually, without knowing it, enslaved to a fairly recent past. ... It is my settled conviction that in order to read old ... literature aright you must suspend most of the responses and unlearn most of the habits you have acquired in reading modern literature.

Elsewhere he elaborated:¹⁰

Every age has its own outlook. It is specially good at seeing certain truths and

specially liable to make certain mistakes. We all, therefore, need the books that will correct the characteristic mistakes of our own period. ... None of us can fully escape this blindness, but we shall certainly increase it, and weaken our guard against it, if we read only modern books.

To free ourselves from the modern preconceptions of a secular society and sound the depths of the Bible, it is not enough to be able to grasp the basic sense of a chapter word-by-word. Each word, each phrase, and each passage is laden with the history, culture, and worldviews of sacred antiquity — subjects that cannot be learned by rote but must be absorbed by frequent and prayerful immersion in the scriptures themselves.

How do modern English translations help us understand Psalm 23?

Despite the beauty of the traditional English words of Psalm 23, we cannot always assume that they still mean what they meant four hundred years ago when the King James version was first published. Two examples will serve as illustrations.



Figure 2. James Tissot: David prays in the night.

“The valley of the shadow of death.” This first example illustrates how a trend in misunderstanding of a key phrase in Psalm 23 led to its current status as “an American secular icon.”¹¹ Largely through the influence of devotional and popular literature in America in the course of the nineteenth century,¹² the twenty-third psalm — and in particular the phrase “Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death”¹³ — gradually “became intertwined with changing American views of death.”¹⁴ Before that time, the psalm was rarely invoked as a source of strength for mourners in a funerary setting.

Even though the phrase “valley of the shadow of death” had already been rooted in the English-speaking consciousness of that era through its appearance in John Bunyan’s *Pilgrim’s Progress*,¹⁵ it must be remembered that the valley referred to in that work “was the symbol not of death but of the dark night of the soul, where hell seems so near.”¹⁶ Restoring the more general meaning of the phrase in Psalm 23:4, newer translations provide alternatives to the “valley of the shadow of death” such as “dense darkness,” “a deathly shadow,” or “the darkest shadow.”¹⁷ An improved understanding of the likely meaning this phrase in the original tongue allow us to see that the psalm describes not only those times when death itself approaches, but also encounters with its spiritual likeness in other moments of darkness. Elder Jeffrey R. Holland eloquently captured this broader and more accurate sense of the phrase when he wrote of the “shadows that link” the mortal experiences of life and death:¹⁸

It may be useful to note that it is a “valley” we walk through in dark times. A “valley” is, in terms for a very contemporary illness, a “depression,” a low point or down spot in the terrain. No triumphant stand “high on the mountain top”¹⁹ here. No, we are down and maybe nearly out. And even to look up often reveals that there is such a long way to go.



*Figure 3. The god Shamash gives the emblems of royal power to Hammurabi*²⁰

“Thy rod and thy staff they comfort me.” Before entering specifically into the second example, let’s first consider more generally the great loss suffered when Psalm 23 is used with an eye only to extracting a measure of superficial spiritual comfort in times of sudden need; when it is repeated “with the spirit” but without “the understanding also.”²¹ As Old Testament scholar Margaret Barker has expressed:²²

The need now is not just for modern English, or modern thought forms, but for an explanation of the images and pictures in which the ideas of the Bible are expressed. These are specific to one culture, that of Israel and Judaism, and until they are fully understood in their original setting, little of what is done with the writings and ideas that came from that particular setting can be understood. Once we lose touch with the meaning of biblical imagery, we lose any way into the real meaning of the Bible. This has already begun to happen and a diluted “instant” Christianity has been offered as junk food for the mass market. The resultant malnutrition, even in churches, is all too obvious.

Likewise, as an astute observer of how the usage of the twenty-third psalm has changed over the centuries, William L. Holladay warns of the “danger” of “a sentimentalizing of the psalm, shaped by Sunday-School pictures, and, to the extent that the psalm defines our faith, a sentimentalizing of our faith.”²³

The great Christian scholar C. S. Lewis has addressed this same danger in strong and certain terms. He argues convincingly that we will gain little from any of the psalms if we seek to limit their function to a momentary lift of our current mood. Happily, a more durable sort of lifting is available to those who probe this profound poetry for its “deep memories”²⁴ of soul-nourishing doctrines, the spiritual rock beds of our religion that describe how peace can become *permanent*. Man cannot live by the watery soup of generic devotion alone!²⁵

In Lewis’ book on the Psalms, he shows how its verses of despair, petition, and praise cannot be properly felt or appreciated apart from their strong roots in the specific religious worldview of the Bible. He devotes a significant number of pages — indeed whole chapters — to lesser known subjects within the psalter, including surprising and sometimes shocking material on judgment, cursings, death, and connivance.²⁶

Even when the Psalms speak of “comfort,” the word may have connotations that are unfamiliar to many readers. This is arguably so in the case of Psalm 23, a chapter that has become an icon of divine “comfort” in the modern sense of the term.²⁷ However, what is lost in translation for today’s readers is the anticipation of the symbolism of kingship in the last half of the psalm as the meaning of “rod” changes from a shepherd’s club to God’s royal scepter.²⁸ This hint was nicely captured by the King James translators in their choice of the word “comfort” to describe the function of the shepherd’s “rod” and “staff.”²⁹ The meaning of “comfort” in this context been well-explained by LeGrand Baker and Stephen L. Ricks:³⁰

In 1622, when the English word was nearer in time to its Latin origins, the first definition of “comfort” meant just exactly what the Latin said: “with strength,” to strengthen or to empower. “Comfort” still meant that in 1787 when the American Constitution was written, and treason was defined as “giving aid and comfort to the enemy.” (That did not mean it was treason to

give the enemy an aspirin and a warm blanket. It meant that it is treason to empower an enemy.) ...

[This] definition can account for the way the English translators used the word “comfort” to mean the bestowal of authority or power — an empowerment — and it also adds substantial depth to the meaning of the 23rd Psalm and other scriptures where “comfort” might be read as “to give consolation,” they might also be read as “to give power and authority, thus enabling one to transcend sorrow” ...

In the words, “Thy rod and thy staff they comfort me,” a rod is a scepter, the symbol of kingship; the staff is a shepherd’s crook, the symbol of priesthood. So the words say, “I am empowered by the symbols of priesthood and kingship.”

Like the well-known symbolism of the crook and flail of Egyptian kingship (or the rod/ring and battle axe in Mesopotamian kingship), the Jewish commentator Rashi follows the *Midrash Tehillim* in interpreting the implements of the shepherd antithetically: “the rod as a metaphor for the sufferings, which atone for sin; the staff as a metaphor for God’s love.”³¹ (This matches President Harold B. Lee’s characterization of “the function of the Church [as being] something like that of the newspaper: to comfort the afflicted and to afflict those who are too [comfortable].”³²)

Having argued for the value of considering Psalm 23 in its ancient setting and with the help of modern translations, we now turn to an analysis of the psalm itself. The following section will describe Psalm 23 in its larger scriptural context. After that, we will give a detailed verse-by-verse commentary on the psalm.

How does Psalm 23 function as a crucial piece of a larger story?

Connectedness with Psalms 22 and 24. In recent decades, several scholars of the Psalms have shifted their attention from a study of the individual psalms to the shape of the book of Psalms as a whole.³³ Interested scholars have concluded that the placement of individual psalms and groups of psalms in their current order is not a mere accident of history but rather the result of deliberate strategy.

Thus, it is impossible to interpret Psalm 23 adequately without taking its “strong connectedness”³⁴ with Psalms 22 and 24 into account.³⁵ For example, Nancy L. deClaissé-Walford points out that Psalm 22 is incomplete without the concluding elements of the succeeding two psalms. She notes that, unusually, the lament of Psalm 22 “is not followed by an expression of confidence and trust in God, but only by a terse petition” concluding with “a flood of praise.”³⁶ Thus her argument that the “extravagant lament” in 22:11-18 might be seen as the center of a larger structure that is concluded by an equally “extravagant outpouring” of trust and praise:³⁷

Prologue
Lament (22:1-2)

Body
Trust (22:3-5)
Lament (22:6-8)
Trust (22:9-10)
Petition (22:11)
Lament (22:12-18)
Petition (22:19-21)
Praise (22:22-31)
Trust (Psalm 23)
Praise (Psalm 24)

Figure 4. Nancy deClaissé-Walford: The Structure of Psalms 22, 23, and 24



Figure 5. The Levites bear the Ark in procession to the Jerusalem temple

The ritual journey of the king. Taken as a whole, the unit formed by these three psalms might have provided fitting words for the entrance liturgy that would have been sung in ancient Israel as worshipers in procession, led by the king, ascended the steps to enter the temple mount at Jerusalem.³⁸ Summarizing this proposal, deClaissé-Walford suggested:³⁹

The lamenting king in Psalm 22, who is surrounded by bulls and dogs and evildoers, expresses confidence in Psalm 23 to the Lord as the “shepherd-king” who provides for the psalmist’s needs — green pastures, still waters, right paths, protection, a secure dwelling place. And in Psalm 24, the king leads the congregation in a celebration of the Lord’s sovereignty, justice, kingship and glory.



Figure 6. Giambattista Pittoni: *King David Before the Ark of the Covenant*, 18th century

The redemptive journey of the Messiah. Of course, the entire liturgical sequence from heartrending lament to triumphal entry not only typifies the journey of the king of Israel from the place of his trials to the outer gates of the Lord's earthly sanctuary but also foreshadows the humiliation of the coming Messiah on the cross (Psalm 22:1 (Mark 15:34): "My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?") and His eventual ascent in glory to His Father within the innermost gate of the heavenly temple (Psalm 24:7, 9 (John 20:17): "Lift up your heads, O ye gates; and be ye lift up, ye everlasting doors; and the King of glory shall come in").

C. S. Lewis points out that Psalm 110, one of the richest of the Messianic psalms in its signification, is appointed as the scripture reading for Christmas Day in the Church of England:⁴⁰

We may at first be surprised by this. There is nothing in it about peace and goodwill, nothing remotely suggestive of the stable at Bethlehem. It seems to have been originally either a coronation ode for a new king, promising conquest and empire, or a poem addressed to some king on the eve of a war, promising victory.

It is full of threats. The “rod” of the king’s power is to go forth from Jerusalem, foreign kings are to be wounded, battle fields to be covered with carnage, skulls cracked. The note is not “Peace and goodwill” but “Beware. He’s coming.”

One response to this imagery is to say that Christians are mistaken in applying the violence in this psalm to the life and mission of Christ. However, Lewis points out that Jesus is identified unmistakably and repeatedly in that psalm in the New Testament.⁴¹ And the implication in the psalm is that the king it describes derives his authority from the divinely delegated priesthood named for the ancient priest-king Melchizedek, the same individual who conferred upon Abraham the fulness of the priesthood. Lewis continues:⁴²

Melchizedek resembles (in his peculiar way he is the only Old Testament character who resembles) Christ Himself. For he, like Melchizedek claims to be Priest, though not of the priestly tribe, and also King. Melchizedek really does point to Him; and so of course does the hero of Psalm 110 who is a king but also has the same sort of priesthood.



Figure 7. James Tissot: Dedication of Solomon's temple

The salvific journey of the faithful. The Latter-day Saints believe that the sequence of events outlined for Israelite priest-kings and the Messiah they typified is by no means irrelevant to the life of the ordinary disciple of Christ in the eternal scheme of things.⁴³ John Eaton observed:⁴⁴

To enter fully into the peace of [Psalm] 23, the pilgrim must first make the daunting journey through [the distress] of [Psalm] 22, through that place where the lonely representative suffers to the utmost, holds true, and obtains victory; having stood with Him in that [dreadful⁴⁵] place, the pilgrim will know the joy of the homecoming.

Reinforcing the idea of the journey in the psalm as a departure and homecoming⁴⁶ is the related theme of spiritual development in the life of the

faithful. The individual begins as a sheep, lacking nothing because all such an animal requires is that which sustains life and breath. Next, however, the Lord “restoreth [its] soul,” bringing new life to one who was spiritually dead, “someone who has almost stopped breathing.”⁴⁷ As in the Animal Apocalypse of *1 Enoch*, the animal has become a man as part of a divinely induced spiritual transformation.⁴⁸

Consistent with this transformation, the imagery that follows reflects dimensions “more appropriate for humans”⁴⁹ than for animals: “right paths”/“paths of righteousness” and “for his name’s sake.” “One is also struck by the change in verse 4, as the speaker now addresses God, rather than talking about Him.”⁵⁰ Finally, according to Benjamin Segal:⁵¹

The term “with me”⁵² grows more central. Elsewhere, it is a strong term when used with the Deity, which is rarely: three times by Jacob (God being with him on his journey⁵³); once inviting Moses to stand with God;⁵⁴ and once by Job recalling God’s former support.⁵⁵ The term, an implied act of grace, is placed here in the center of the psalm. (Yaakov Bazak notes that the Hebrew of “for You are with me”⁵⁶ is precisely the middle of the psalm by word count, without the title). One wonders whether the psalm comes to define this rare and challenging phrase: what it means to “be with” God. ...

Verse 5 continues the ascent, the idea of being “with” God now being made public as God plays solicitous host, with surprising hyperbole, God honoring man! Warmth and intimacy abound, all dangers left outside the metaphoric hosting tent.

Verse 6, in turn, maximizes the element of time: dwelling in God’s presence *all* of the years (“days”) of one’s life. By returning to reference to God in the third person as at the beginning, the verse encloses the psalm (as does its *inclusio*, “Lord”) and invites immediate comparison to its opening. Indeed, the change is massive. The original “lacking nothing,”⁵⁷ which implied having basic food and rest, has moved all the way to lifelong intimacy and protection with and by God! Thus the psalm has evolved, smoothly but quickly, between extremes — from minimal to maximal degrees of association and support. ...

The physical movement across the psalm is marked: from stream and lea, through a valley, to a tent (presumably, where the food is offered) [cf. the Tabernacle and its shewbread], to the metaphor of a mountain [the Lord’s own dwelling place]). The physical progress mirrors the expansion of the relationship.

Paralleling the idea of the Psalm 23 as a chronicle of spiritual development is the suggestion by some of the early Christian fathers that it is an allegory describing the ordinances of salvation. Athanasius, a fourth-century bishop of Alexandria, taught⁵⁸ that “he leadeth me beside the still waters” is “perhaps to be understood as holy baptism,” that “thou anointest my head with oil” means “the mystic

chrism” (the oil used in the anointings of early Christian ordinances), and “thou prepares a table before me,” means “the mystic table” — in other words the sacrament in LDS parlance, strongly associated by early Christians with the table of shewbread in the temple.⁵⁹

Cyril of Alexandria went on to suggest a reading for the idea of feasting in the presence of one’s enemies:⁶⁰ “You have prepared for us a spiritual table, so that by eating and being strengthened we will be able to face our persecutors at any time. ... For Satan fears those who become pious participants in the mysteries.”

Commentary

1 The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want.

The Lord is my shepherd. Holladay’s explanation of this phrase are worth quoting verbatim:⁶¹

Even though I do not accept the view that King David wrote all the psalms, I think it is worth pursuing the possibility that King David wrote this one. ... If it was written by David, then there are two points to be considered in the use of “shepherd” for God.

The first is that David himself had been a shepherd as a boy.⁶² If David is the singer, then it is ironic that he, the erstwhile shepherd, now elevated to the highest position of the nation Israel, himself acknowledges a divine shepherd, God, so that he, David has an identity as [one of God’s sheep].⁶³

The second point, of which many people are not aware, is that in the ancient Near East a ruler was called “shepherd” of his people: this is the regular usage in Assyrian and in Homeric Greek.⁶⁴ In Jeremiah 2:8, for example, the prophet uses “shepherds” [KJV: “pastors”] to mean the rulers of Israel. ... So if David “shepherds” his people, then there is a divine shepherd, a divine ruler, above David. Indeed, Psalm 78 is almost a commentary on the twenty-third psalm: in Psalm 78:52, God “led his people like sheep, and guided them in the wilderness like a flock,” and then, in verses 70-71, God “chose his servant David, and took him from the sheepfolds, from tending the nursing ewes he brought him to be the shepherd of his people Jacob, of Israel, his inheritance.”

The Lord. When the term “Lord” is capitalized in the Old Testament, we can almost always assume that it stands for the Hebrew “Yahweh” or “Jehovah.” This was the special name for the God of Israel revealed to Moses in Exodus 3. So the ancient reader would have understood the phrase to mean specifically “It is Yahweh [as opposed to the gods of other nations] who is my shepherd.”⁶⁵ Later, Christians would have been reminded of the Savior, who is referred to as “the Lord”⁶⁶ in the Gospels. John records that He described Himself as the Good Shepherd.⁶⁷

I shall not want. The individual begins the psalm as a sheep, lacking nothing because all such an animal requires is that which sustains life and breath. See also comment on verse 4 “I will fear no evil” below.

I. Segal observes:68 “Whereas most Jewish prayer is in the plural, this speaker refers to himself seventeen times!”

2 He maketh me to lie down in green pastures: he leadeth me beside the still waters.

Segal comments:69

The needs filled are minimal, as God provides food, water, and calm. All is well, and the scene is idyllic. (Threats will be articulated only later.) Sforno emphasized that the image attributes all good to God’s mercy and none to the merit of the speaker (who is here only a sheep).

3 He restoreth my soul: he leadeth me in the paths of righteousness for his name's sake.

He restoreth my soul. “Though ‘He restoreth my soul’ is time-honored, the Hebrew *nefesh* does not mean ‘soul’ but ‘life breath’ or ‘life.’ The image is of someone who has almost stopped breathing and is revived, brought back to life.”70

the paths of righteousness. “‘Right paths’ imply right behavior and ethical restoration, as well as a common second meaning of the term, paths of victory, emphasizing the life-saving element of the verse.”71

for his name’s sake. Baker and Ricks point out the temple allusions of the current verse:72

“Name” is almost always a key word because new covenants are almost always associated with new names.

The psalm’s “he leadeth me in the paths of righteousness for his name’s sake” is about as straightforward as it can be. “Paths” equal ordinances,73 “righteousness” is *zedek* [cf. the name “Melchizedek” = my name is righteousness], and name is “covenant.” Without changing its meaning, it might read, “He leads me through the priesthood ordinances for the sake of the covannts we make together.”

4 Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil: for thou art with me; thy rod and thy staff they comfort me.

the valley of the shadow of death. The Hebrew phrase is much shorter than the

English one: “*begey tsalmawet*. Though philologists assume that the Masoretic *tsalmawet* is actually a misleading vocalization of *tsalmut* — probably a poetic word for ‘darkness’ with the *ut* ending simply a suffice of abstraction — the traditional vocalization reflects something like an orthographic pun on a folk etymology (*tsel* means ‘shadow,’ *mawet* means ‘death’), so there is justification in retaining the death component.”⁷⁴

I will fear no evil. Robert Alter gives the modern equivalent of this sentence as “I fear no harm.”⁷⁵ In verse 1, the long phrase “The Lord is my shepherd” was followed by the short phrase “I shall not want.”⁷⁶ Similarly here, “Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death,” is followed by “I will fear no evil.” Robert Alter points out that the imbalance produced by a long line followed by a short line in verse 4, “gives these words a climactic effect as an affirmation of trust after the relatively lengthy evocation of the place of fear.”⁷⁷

thy rod and thy staff they comfort me. Segal comments:⁷⁸

God watches over the life (safety) of the speaker (lamb, which has evidently strayed into danger), taking him through the right (appropriate) paths, guiding him safely through the dangerous (predator-infested) routes. The sheep trusts fully in the shepherd, whose symbols are the rod (a club) and the staff (walking stick) he carries.

The implements of the shepherd foreshadow the two similar emblems of kingship and priesthood that are implicitly bestowed on the king in verse 6. Similarly, the word “comfort” in the King James Translation hints anticipates that these instruments of protection for the sheep will be changed into symbols of authority and enabling power in the hands of the king.

**5 Thou preparest a table before me in the presence of mine enemies:
thou anointest my head with oil; my cup runneth over.**

Thou prepares a table before me. ... thou anointest my head with oil. According to Eaton:⁷⁹

The Lord is now pictured as host to the psalmist, with only the two figures at the table. The Lord has “arranged” or “put in order” the table — spread it with good fare; he has anointed the psalmist’s head with oil, a custom for a festive meal; and he has amply filled his cup. The scene suggests the communion meal of worship [in the sanctuary], where offerings were made and from them a meal shared as it were with the Deity.⁸⁰

in the presence of mine enemies. Superficially seen, the picture might seem to be that “the speaker gloats over the humiliation of his enemies,” an idea that accords with other passages in the Bible and elsewhere in the ancient world but is inconsistent with Jesus’ teachings that we must love and do good for our enemies.⁸¹ C. S. Lewis commented:⁸²

The poet's enjoyment of his present prosperity would not be complete unless those horrid Joneses (who used to look down their noses at him) were watching it all and hating it. ... The pettiness and vulgarity of it, especially in such surroundings, are hard to endure.

However, what is forgotten in the tack of trying to explain the meaning of the verse with reference to petty quarrels among neighbors is that most likely "the setting of this psalm was originally royal ... — hence ... the 'enemies' mentioned ... are probably Israelites plotting against the king or, less likely, national enemies."⁸³ Similar to Cyril of Alexander's imagery mentioned above, where God imparted the strength through His bounteous table that early Christians would need to face deadly persecutors, the enemies of the king referenced in this verse constituted persistent, lethal threats to his life and the well-being of his people. The continual presence of these enemies was not a welcome opportunity to gloat, but rather a sober reminder of the constant need for God's watchful care. Eaton comments:⁸⁴

The generous gestures of the Lord to this single guest are done in the sight of and over against his adversaries; they are demonstrative, warning foes that the Covenant-Lord will protect his Chosen One.

Baker and Ricks observe that one might see an allusion to the sure promises of the Lord in priesthood ordinances⁸⁵ in the phrase "in the presence of mine enemies." This phrase "is a reiteration of the promise of invulnerability — that the covenants will be fulfilled no matter who tries to prevent it."⁸⁶

Though it probably has nothing to do with the way an ancient reader would have understood this phrase, Harold S. Kushner suggests an interpretation that may be of interest to modern readers:⁸⁷

The Hebrew word translated "in the presence of [mine enemies]" is *neged*, which ordinarily means "opposite." Might we take the verse to mean, God, You prepare a table before me in contrast to the people around me, to whom I turned for emotional nourishment, only to be disappointed. ... The psalmist concludes, God, thank You for being there when many of my human friends weren't up to the challenge. Thank You for sustaining my faith in my own worthiness. Thank You for nourishing me with Your presence when so many others could not help me.

thou anointest my head with oil. "If David is the psalmist, 'anointing' here also suggests the anointing he received in becoming king."⁸⁸

my cup runneth over. Baker and Ricks comment:⁸⁹

To have one's cup run over is to have so many blessings that there is not room enough to receive them.⁹⁰ That blessing is a logical — even necessary —

conclusion to the coronation ceremony and the sacred temple feast that confirms it.

6 Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life: and I will dwell in the house of the Lord for ever.

goodness and mercy shall follow me. “Follow” could be read more strongly as “pursue.” David Freedman points out the ancient Near East background of the phrase:⁹¹

In the background is the mythological picture of the principal deity accompanied by lesser divine beings who serve him as retinue and later bodyguard.⁹² The pre-Israelite tradition has been preserved almost intact in Habakkuk 3:5 where Pestilence (*deber*) and Plague (*resp*) are described as marching before and behind Deity. Elsewhere the accompanying figures have been demythologized in the form of divine attributes, as, e.g., in Psalm 96:6:

Honor and majesty are before him
Strength and beauty are in his sanctuary

In Psalm 23, there is a further adaptation. The divine virtues will leave their posts in the heavenly court, and accompany the Psalmist throughout his life. There is a hint that something approaching divine honors is being accorded to the Psalmist. Perhaps we have here an early form of the later doctrine of guardian angels.

I will dwell in the house of the Lord. The “house of the Lord” “may refer to Solomon’s fine courts and building, but could also refer to the earlier sanctuary of David’s time.”⁹³ “to God he returns to dwell on the sacred hill of Zion (where temple and palace adjoined).”⁹⁴

for ever. “This concluding phrase catches up the reference to ‘all the days of my life’ in the preceding line. It does not mean ‘forever.’”⁹⁵

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Further Study

Elder Jeffrey R. Holland has written a very moving devotional commentary on the Psalms (J. R. Holland, *For Times of Trouble*).

In writing this article I have greatly appreciated these three excellent commentaries: R. Alter, *Psalms*; J. H. Eaton, *Psalms Commentary*; B. Segal,

New Psalm. In addition, I strongly recommend William L. Holladay's history of the reception of the Psalms (W. L. Holladay, *Psalms*).

I have also appreciated the work of LDS scholars LeGrand Baker and Stephen L. Ricks, who have written a detailed commentary on the book of Psalms emphasizing themes on the temple and the plan of salvation (L. L. Baker, *et al.*, *Who Shall Ascend*).

This Book of Mormon KnoWhy from Book of Mormon Central contains an insightful discussion motivating the description of three paths (including "the path of righteousness," mentioned in Psalm 23:3):
<https://knowhy.bookofmormoncentral.org/content/why-does-alma-mention-three-kinds-of-paths-in-one-verse>

For other scripture resources relating to this lesson, see The Interpreter Foundation Old Testament Gospel Doctrine Index (<http://interpreterfoundation.org/gospel-doctrine-resource-index/ot-gospel-doctrine-resource-index/>) and the Book of Mormon Central Old Testament KnoWhy list (<https://knowhy.bookofmormoncentral.org/tags/old-testament>).

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Endnotes

1 Used with permission of Book of Mormon Central. See <https://knowhy.bookofmormoncentral.org/reference-knowhy>.

2 Of course, for Christians they also serve an important purpose as a collection of poignant foreshadowings of the life and mission of Christ.

3 Representational devotional works written in recent decades include one authored by a shepherd (P. Keller, Psalm 23), another by a Jewish rabbi (H. S.

Kushner, *Lord Is My Shepherd*), as well as an eloquent volume by an LDS apostle, Elder Jeffrey R. Holland (J. R. Holland, *For Times of Trouble*).

4 Bible scholar John Walton has insightfully observed (J. H. Walton *et al.*, *Lost World of the Israelite Conquest*, p. 9):

The Bible is written *for* us (that is, we are supposed to benefit from its divine message and expect that it will help us ...), but it is not written *to* us (not in our language or in response to our culture). ... The Bible was written to the people of ancient Israel in the language of ancient Israel, and therefore its message operates according to the logic of ancient Israel.

Of course, these two approaches to reading are complementary rather than opposed. For example, we find that Joseph Smith, like Nephi, sometimes reshaped the stories and teachings of scripture in order to better “liken them” (1 Nephi 19:24. See also 1 Nephi 19:23; 2 Nephi 11:2, 8) to the situation of his contemporary hearers, while at other times he taught that the Saints could profitably interpret scripture by “enquiring” about the particulars of the situation which “drew out the answer” for its ancient audience (J. Smith, Jr., *Teachings*, 29 January 1843, p. 276. Cf. J. Smith, Jr., *Words*, Willard Richards, 29 January 1843, p. 161; J. Smith, Jr. *et al.*, *Journals*, 1841-1843, 29 January 1843, p. 252).

In all this, of course, we must never lose sight of the essential role of Holy Ghost as a companion in scripture study. We neither receive nor teach “the word of truth” except “by the Spirit of truth” (D&C 50:19). In an important message on this subject, Elder Dallin H. Oaks has written (D. H. Oaks, *Scripture Reading*; D. H. Oaks, *Scripture Reading*):

What makes us different from most other Christians in the way we read and use the Bible and other scriptures is our belief in continuing revelation. For us, the scriptures are not the ultimate source of knowledge, but what precedes the ultimate source. The ultimate knowledge comes by revelation. With Moroni we affirm that he who denieth revelation “knoweth not the gospel of Christ” (Mormon 9:8).

5 W. L. Holladay, *Psalms*, p. 10.

6 Exodus 2:22.

7 Charles Taylor has discussed the process and consequences of the loss of “immediate certainty” of the moral/ spiritual in Western culture (C. Taylor, *Secular Age*, pp. 11ff). See also T. Asad, *Construction*, pp. 47–52.

8 Attributed to John Culkin, as quoted by Howard Gossage in “*Ramparts Magazine*”, April 1966, p. 37 in <https://www.unz.com/print/Ramparts-1966apr-00034/> (accessed July 2, 2018). Although the saying has a long history, it was popularized in the work of Marshall McLuhan (<https://quoteinvestigator.com/2013/12/23/water-fish/> [accessed July 2, 2018]), who explained the statement as follows: “One thing about which fish know exactly nothing is water, since they have no anti-environment which would enable them to perceive the element they live in” (M. McLuhan *et al.*, *War and Peace*, p. 175).

9 C. S. Lewis, *Psalms*, pp. 12, 13. Cf. Marshall McLuhan: “I come from a 19th century country, Canada, and this gives me a great advantage in looking at the

20th century” (<http://www.themediumisthemassage.com/the-film/>
[accessed July 2, 2018])/

10 C. S. Lewis, *On the Reading*, p. 202.

11 W. L. Holladay, *Psalms*, p. 359.

12 In his excellent discussion, *ibid.*, pp. 362-365 cites sources such as the chapter Louisa May Alcott’s popular *Little Women* (1868, chapter 40, where Jo witnesses the death of her younger) as well as the well-known and widely reprinted excerpt from Henry Ward Beecher’s sermon on Psalm 23 (H. W. Beecher, *Life Thoughts*, pp. 6-7):

David has left no sweeter psalm than the short twenty-third. It is but a moment's opening of his soul; but, as when one, walking the winter street, sees the door opened for some one to enter, and the red light streams a moment forth, and the forms of gay children are running to greet the comer, and genial music sounds, though the door shuts and leaves the night black, yet it cannot shut back again all that the eye, the ear, the heart, and the imagination have seen—so in this psalm, though it is but a moment's opening of the soul, are emitted truths of peace and consolation that will never be absent from the world.

The twenty-third psalm is the nightingale of the psalms. It is small, of a homely feather, singing shyly out of obscurity; but, oh! it has filled the air of the whole world with melodious joy, greater than the heart can conceive. Blessed be the day on which that psalm was born.

What would you say of a pilgrim commissioned of God to travel up and down the earth singing a strange melody, which, when one heard, caused him to forget whatever Sorrow he had? And so the singing angel goes on his way through all lands, singing in the language of every nation, driving away trouble by the pulses of the air which his tongue moves with divine power. Behold just such an one! This pilgrim God has sent to speak in every language on the globe. It has charmed more griefs to rest than all the philosophy of the world. It has remanded to their dungeon more felon thoughts, more black doubts, more thieving sorrows, than there are sands on the sea shore. It has comforted the noble host of the poor. It has sung courage to the army of the disappointed. It has poured balm and consolation into the heart of the sick, of captives in dungeons, of widows in their pinching griefs, of orphans in their loneliness. Dying soldiers have died easier as it was read to them; ghastly hospitals have been illumined; it has visited the prisoner and broken his chains, and, like Peter's angel, led him forth in imagination, and sung him back to his home again. It has made the dying Christian slave freer than his master, and consoled those whom, dying, he left behind mourning, not so much that he was gone, as because they were left behind, and could not go too. Nor is its work done. It will go singing to your children and my children, and to their children, through all the generations of time; nor will it fold its wings till the last pilgrim is safe, and time ended; and then it shall fly back to the bosom of God, whence it issued, and sound on, mingled with all those sounds of celestial joy which make heaven musical for ever.

13 Psalm 23:4.

14 W. L. Holladay, *Psalms*, p. 360.

15 J. Bunyan, *Progress*, pp. 77, 80-81.

16 W. L. Holladay, *Psalms*, p. 360. Cf. J. Bunyan, *Progress*, p. 81: “that dark and dismal state.”

17 W. L. Holladay, *Psalms*, p. 11. Cf. the discussion of translation issues in this phrase in R. Alter, *Psalms*, p. 79.

18 J. R. Holland, *For Times of Trouble*, pp. 215-216.

19 Hymns (1985), *Hymns (1985)*, “High on the Mountain Top,” #5.

20 Photograph from J. M. Renger, *Hammurabi*.

21 1 Corinthians 14:15.

22 M. Barker, *Earth*, pp. 1-2.

23 W. L. Holladay, *Psalms*, p. 13.

24 M. Barker, *Hidden*, p. 34.

25 Herberg has characterized America’s “faith in faith” as a “strange brew of devotion to religion and insouciance as to its content” (S. Prothero, *Literacy*, p. 113). As an example, Stephen Prothero cites a statement by President Dwight D. Eisenhower to a Soviet official in a December 1952 meeting that “our form of government has no sense unless it is founded in a deeply felt religious faith, and I don’t care what it is” (*ibid.*, p. 113). The same fierce loyalty to an abstract “idea” of God divorced from any particulars is expressed more prosaically in an off-the-street comment made to a sociologist by a high-school student in the Middle West, “Yeah, we smoke dope all over, in our cars, walking around before class, anytime, but that doesn’t mean we don’t believe in God or that we’ll let anybody put God down” (P. Fussell, *Class*, p. 150).

26 C. S. Lewis, *Psalms*.

27 It is true that in the phrase “thy rod and thy staff they comfort me” (Psalm 23:4), “the Piel of נָחַם (*nakhām*) [cf. 1 Nephi 16:34] when used with a human object, means ‘comfort, console’” (NET Bible, NET Bible, Psalm 23:4 n.) in something close to the common sense of the word today. However the royal context of the psalm hints at a forthcoming transformation of the shepherd’s homely implements into the emblems of investiture that will be divinely bestowed on the king (B. Segal, *New Psalm*, p. 104). For more on the symbolism of divine investiture of rod and staff in the ancient world, see J. M. Bradshaw *et al.*, *Investiture Panel*, pp. 34-39.

28 B. Segal, *New Psalm*, p. 104.

29 The change in meaning of the word “comfort” in modern times has also affected modern readers’ understanding of the “Comforter” (Paraclete) spoken of in John 14:16, 26; 15:26; 16:7. Raymond Brown writes (R. E. Brown, *Gospel According to John XIII-XXI*, p. 1137):

No one translation of *paraklētos* captures the complexity of the functions forensic and otherwise, that this figure has. The Paraclete is a witness in defense of Jesus, and a spokesman for him in the context of his trial by his

enemies; the Paraclete is a consoler of the disciples for he takes Jesus' place among them; the Paraclete is a teacher and guide of the disciples and thus their helper.

30 L. L. Baker *et al.*, *Who Shall Ascend*, pp. 467, 469, 469 n. 525. See also pp. 627-629.

31 Rashi, *Psalms*, p. 266 n. 18.

32 H. B. Lee, *The Message*. The full context of President Lee's statement reads:

Somewhere I read a statement that the function of a newspaper is to comfort the afflicted and to afflict the comforted. In some respects, I think, this is what the Church is all about—to comfort the afflicted and to afflict the comforted. We are to care for the needy, the fatherless, the widows. In the words of the Savior, we are to care for those who are “an hungred,” “thirsty,” “a stranger,” “naked,” “sick,” and “in prison.”

It is easy to see that we are to care for the physical, social, emotional, and mental needs of each other. But the reverse of this statement about a publication is also true. There are those who are too comforted and too much at ease and too unresponsive to their responsibilities and opportunities. Some persons need to share with others their material blessings of the earth. Some persons are too comforted and too much at ease in their life style—and they need to become dissatisfied enough to change for the better.

There are some who are too much at ease in their prejudices and ideas—and they need to humble themselves before the spirit of brotherhood and the principles of the gospel. In other words, many persons need a call to repentance. Thus you see what I mean when I say that in some respects the function of the Church is something like that of the newspaper: to comfort the afflicted and to afflict those who are too comforted.

The origin of this saying seems to be the observation of “Mr. Dooley,” the alias of Finley Peter Dunne (1867-1936) (*Observations by Mr. Dooley, Newspaper Publicity*, cited in J. Bartlett *et al.*, *Familiar Quotations* (2012), p. 600 no. 16):

Th' newspaper does ivrything f'r us. It runs th' polis force an' th' banks, commands th' milishi, controls th' ligislachure, baptizes th' young, marries th' foolish, comforts th' afflicted, afflicts th' comfortable, buries th' dead an' roasts thim affther ward.

33 H. P. Nasuti, *Interpretive Significance*, p. 311.

34 N. L. deClaissé-Walford, *Intertextual Reading*, p. 143.

35 Manuscript evidence for the connectedness of these three psalms can be seen in three ways: 1. the way they interrupt the flow of surrounding psalms in our current Old Testament; 2. Their grouping in a different place in the Nachal Chever manuscripts; and 3. Their absence in the Dead Sea Scrolls (*ibid.*, pp. 141-142).

In addition, similar themes appear in the description of the troubles facing the psalmist in 22 and 23 (*ibid.*, p. 148):

Psalm 22

“the dust of death” (v. 15)

Psalm 23

“the valley of the shadow of death (v. 4)

“dogs” (v. 16)

“evil” (v. 4)

“be not far from me” (vv. 11, 19)

“thou art with me” (v. 4)

“trouble is near” (v. 11)

“in the presence of mine enemies” (v. 5)

36 Ibid., p. 146. Cf. J. H. Eaton, *Psalms Commentary*, p. 123; J. H. Eaton, *Kingship*, p. 36.

37 N. L. deClaissé-Walford, *Intertextual Reading*, p. 147.

38 D. J. Larsen, *Ascending*. DeClaissé-Walford’s suggestion differs with LeGrand Baker and Stephen L. Ricks’ proposal that Psalm 23 might have been sung independently “on the eighth day of the temple drama,” representing “both a summation and a continued promise of all that the ceremony had shown” (L. L. Baker *et al.*, *Who Shall Ascend*, p. 634).

Failing to consider the placement of Psalm 23 just prior to Psalm 24, Sigmund Mowinckel saw the former merely as “a pure expressing of confidence in God, unhindered by all special historical circumstances” (S. Mowinckel, *Psalms*, 2:41).

39 N. L. deClaissé-Walford, *Intertextual Reading*, p. 151.

40 C. S. Lewis, *Psalms*, p. 122.

41 Matthew 22:41-46; Mark 12:35-37; Luke 20:41-44; Acts 2:34-35. See also Hebrews 7. While actual violence was averted during the first coming of Christ, Ellis Rivkin eloquently portrays how the threat of violence moved Jesus’ enemies to action (E. Rivkin, *Jesus*, pp. 145-146):

What, after all, is one to expect? Sweetness and light, genteel polemic, serene travail when a charismatic of charismatics challenges the authority of the Scribes-Pharisees, exposes the Jews to Roman wrath by preaching the coming of God’s kingdom and not the continuity of Caesar’s kingdom, attracts crowds who could go berserk, causes a rumpus in the Temple area in the midst of maddening crowds, evokes shouts of “Long live the King of the Jews,” “Long live the son of David, Hosanna in the highest” and neither affirms nor denies that he is King of the Jews? ...

Those were harsh and unruly times. Judea had proved to be ungovernable. There was not a day without its violence, a week without its demonstrations, a year without its insurrections. ... In this maelstrom of violence and anarchy, no charismatic was likely to come out alive, least of all a gentle charismatic with no political ambitions, only a prophetic impulse to awaken his people to the coming of God’s kingdom. To the degree that his teachings found a hearing and to the degree that his preachings attracted crowds of listeners and to the degree that his wonder-working aroused awe, to that degree was he bound to attract the attention of the high priest, appointed by the procurator, and arouse his concern. All that was needed was some incident that spelled potential danger and his fate was sealed.

42 C. S. Lewis, *Psalms*, p. 123. On the conferral of the fulness of the priesthood on Abraham by Melchizedek and its relevance to similar temple ordinances received in our day, see J. M. Bradshaw, *Temple Themes in the Oath*, pp. 53-58; J. M. Bradshaw, *What Did Joseph Smith Know*, pp. 6-8.

43 E.g., D&C 76:56-59. This is, of course, consistent with Bible references such as Exodus 19:6; Romans 8:17; Revelation 1:6; 3:21 5:10.

44 J. H. Eaton, *Psalms Commentary*, p. 124.

45 Given the shift in current meaning of the term “awesome,” I substituted the word “dreadful” here.

46 Though Baker and Ricks’ interpretation of Psalm 23:1-3 as a description of a temple drama taking place in a premortal world is not convincing, a more general characterization of the psalm as symbolic epitome of a mortal journey and a heavenly homecoming is not without merit (L. L. Baker *et al.*, *Who Shall Ascend*, pp. 619-640).

47 R. Alter, *Psalms*, p. 78 n. 3.

48 Barker concludes that the full transformation of an “animal” to a “man” in the Animal Apocalypse of 1 Enoch 85-89 represent the acquiring of “angelic” status: “Noah [was] transformed from a bull into a ‘man’ after an archangel had taught him a mystery (G. W. E. Nickelsburg, 1 Enoch 1, 89:1, p. 364), and... Moses [was] transformed from a sheep into a man after he had been with the Lord on Sinai” (M. Barker, *Hidden*, p. 45). On the other hand, “the traditional interpretation of 1 Enoch 8:1 (G. W. E. Nickelsburg, 1 Enoch 1, 8:1, p. 188) — that the fallen angels taught ‘the changing of the world’—is that they taught how to change men into animals, that is, angels into mortals” (M. Barker, *Hidden*, p. 46).

49 B. Segal, *New Psalm*, p. 104.

50 *Ibid.*, p. 104.

51 *Ibid.*, pp. 104-105, 106.

52 Psalm 23:4.

53 Genesis 28:20; 31:5, 42.

54 Exodus 24:12.

55 Job 29:5.

56 Psalm 23:4.

57 Psalm 23:1.

58 J. P. Migne, *Patrologiae Graeca*, 27:col 140, cited in W. L. Holladay, *Psalms*, p. 13.

59 See J. M. Bradshaw *et al.*, *By the Blood Ye Are Sanctified*, pp. 185-192.

60 J. P. Migne, *Patrologiae Graeca*, 69:841-842, cited in W. L. Holladay, *Psalms*, p. 13.

61 W. L. Holladay, *Psalms*, p. 9.

62 1 Samuel 16:11.

63 Psalm 23:2-3.

64 F. Brown *et al.*, *Lexicon*, 945a, I *ra’*a, 1d; L. Koehler *et al.*, *Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon*, 1176a, 1 *r’b*, B 3.

65 See W. L. Holladay, *Psalms*, pp. 9-10. For a relevant reference to this idea from the life of David, see 1 Samuel 26:19.

66 E.g., Matthew 7:21-22; Luke 24:34.

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- 67 John 10:1-16.
- 68 B. Segal, *New Psalm*, p. 103.
- 69 *Ibid.*, p. 104.
- 70 R. Alter, *Psalms*, p. 78 n. 3.
- 71 B. Segal, *New Psalm*, p. 104.
- 72 L. L. Baker *et al.*, *Who Shall Ascend*, p. 625.
- 73 For more on the covenant path through the temple, see, e.g., M. Douglas, *Leviticus*; D. Calabro, *Joseph Smith and the Architecture*; J. M. Bradshaw *et al.*, *By the Blood Ye Are Sanctified*, pp. 144, 168.
- 74 R. Alter, *Psalms*, p. 79 n. 4.
- 75 *Ibid.*, p. 79 n. 4.
- 76 The contrast between the length of these two phrases is amplified in translation only. In Hebrew, their length is similar.
- 77 R. Alter, *Psalms*, p. 79 n. 4.
- 78 B. Segal, *New Psalm*, p. 104.
- 79 J. H. Eaton, *Psalms Commentary*, p. 124.
- 80 For more on the history and symbolism of this meal, see J. M. Bradshaw *et al.*, *By the Blood Ye Are Sanctified*, pp. 185-192; L. L. Baker *et al.*, *Who Shall Ascend*, pp. 630-631. See also Psalm 22:25-29.
- 81 See W. L. Holladay, *Psalms*, pp. 11-12. Cf. Matthew 5:44.
- 82 C. S. Lewis, *Psalms*, p. 21.
- 83 W. L. Holladay, *Psalms*, p. 9.
- 84 J. H. Eaton, *Psalms Commentary*, p. 124.
- 85 See J. M. Bradshaw, *Temple Themes in the Oath*, pp. 59-65.
- 86 L. L. Baker *et al.*, *Who Shall Ascend*, p. 631.
- 87 H. S. Kushner, *Lord Is My Shepherd*, pp. 132-134.
- 88 2 Samuel 2:4. Although the verb for the royal anointing is not the usual one (*d-sh-n* rather than *m-sh-ch*), Rashi reads the phrase as a metaphor for kingship: “By Your decree I have already been anointed as king” (Rashi, *Psalms*, p. 264 n. 5b. Cf. J. H. Eaton, *Psalms Commentary*, p. 124).
- 89 L. L. Baker *et al.*, *Who Shall Ascend*, p. 632.
- 90 Cf. Malachi 3:10.
- 91 D. N. Freedman, *Twenty-Third Psalm*, p. 298, as cited in L. L. Baker *et al.*, *Who Shall Ascend*, p. 633.
- 92 Elsewhere depicted as the the *seraphim* — cf. Isaiah 6.
- 93 J. H. Eaton, *Psalms Commentary*, p. 123. Cf. 2 Samuel 12:30.
- 94 *Ibid.*, p. 123.
- 95 R. Alter, *Psalms*, p. 80 n. 6.