

Psalm 23: YHWH as Shepherd, Host, and Dwelling

Here's a summary of the paper I mentioned in the last e-mail. It places **Psalm 23** in the grouping of **Psalms 15-24**.

Toward the Kingdom: The Shape and Message of Psalms 15-24

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This paper is a summary of my dissertation. I presented the paper at the Institute for Biblical Research Emerging Scholar Session at The Society of Biblical Literature meeting in November, 2016.

In it, I investigate the shape and message of Psalms 15-24 by developing a methodology for identifying distinctive relationships between psalms with increased objectivity and precision. I analyze various literary links among Psalms 15-24 and find that these psalms form a chiasmic collection of the following sets of parallel psalms: 15 and 24; 16 and 23; 17 and 22; and 18, 20, and 21. Psalm 19 stands at the center of the collection, and is also closely linked with Psalms 15 and 24.

This study is also founded on the idea that parallel psalms involve not only repetition, but also movement. An assessment of the movement between each set of parallel psalms in this collection yields a storyline that progresses toward the kingdom of YHWH and the inclusion of the wider community. This movement toward the kingdom is initiated by YHWH's deliverance of the faithful Davidic king at the center of the collection (Psalms 18-21).

In addition to the progression toward the kingdom, this collection also exhibits an alternation between the ideal vision of the kingdom presented in the frame of the collection (Psalms 15, 19, and 24), and the realities of human experience and suffering presented in the intervening psalms. The effect is that until YHWH's arrival at the consummation of this kingdom, life is depicted as a journey involving suffering, yet confidence, in the kingship of YHWH.

1. How does reading and praying **Psalm 23** in its placement in this grouping impact your understanding of it and its application to your life?

Psalm 23 is a meditation on the benefits of a life of trust and confidence in God, all the LORD does for the one who trusts in him. It is the most famous of the psalms of trust and confidence. (Others are Psalms 11, 16, 27:1-6, 62, 63, 91, 121, 125, and 131.)

2. Think back on your own personal history with **Psalm 23**. What experiences with **Psalm 23** stand out to you now?

Psalm 23 challenges us to respond to the faithful love of the LORD, the greatest good in our lives, with daily commitment to trust and be confident in our Shepherd/Host LORD. It's a reminder to us as the LORD's sheep and also to the LORD's shepherds of the benefits of being shepherded and also shepherding in the LORD's "*hesed-powered*" way. (Remember that *hesed* is the wonderful Hebrew word for God's faithful, unfailing, covenant/committed love, mercy, and kindness.)

Look at the three images connected with God in **Psalm 23**. The first image starts the poem (**vv. 1-4**), continues as the Shepherd becomes a gracious Host (**v. 5**), and ends with the psalmist still centered on the LORD as his Dwelling, the place of Presence "for many long days." (**v. 6**)

Notice the movement of the poem into deeper trust. Meditating and reflecting deeply on YHWH as Shepherd and Host leads the psalmist to commit himself to dwell/abide in the "house of the Lord" for as many days of life as he has.

3. **Psalm 23** invites its readers to rest in the LORD. According to **Psalm 23**, how does the LORD our Shepherd quiet his sheep and give them confidence? (Consider where he leads them, how he protects, rescues and heals them.) What provisions stand out to you as you read **Psalm 23:1-4** with fresh, more attentive eyes?

Respond to this quote from Ralph L. Wilson in *Experiencing the Psalms*, p. 128: "God is in the restoration and wholeness business."

Why do you think the shepherd would lead the sheep through "the valley of the shadow of death," literally "darkest valley, deep darkness, or thick darkness"?

Why is the psalmist not terrorized in the deepest darkness? (v. 4b)

What change do you see in the poem that emphasize the psalmist's personal trust? (v. 4c)

What reason or motive does the LORD have for his attitudes and actions on our behalf? (especially v. 3c - What does that mean?)

How have the Shepherd's "rod and staff" comforted you? (end of v. 4)

4. The scene may shift here from the pasture to the banquet hall, or the shepherd may become the host by spreading a “table, *shulhan*,” Hebrew for a skin or leather mat spread on the ground. How does your knowledge of shared meals and the role of the Middle Eastern Host add to your understanding of **23:5**? (Luke 7:44-46) Comment on this quote from the Kellers’ *Songs of Jesus*, p. 41:

God has a celebration meal with us not after we finally get out of the dark valley but in the middle of it, in the presence of our enemies. He wants us to rejoice in him in the midst of our troubles. Is our shepherd out of touch with reality?

5. “Surely” marks the conclusion of the psalm which changes in **23:6** from a meditation about the LORD with imagery of a shepherd and a host to direct focus on the LORD in his holy house (tabernacle or temple). The psalmist’s meditation has deepened his understanding of the value of LORD’s “good loyal love (*hesed*),” goodness and mercy.

“Follow” in **23:6** is *radap*, “be behind, follow after, pursue, persecute.” In this context, enemies will not chase after him, but he will be pursued by goodness and mercy all the days of his life.

With this deepened understanding, the psalmist decides that he wants to be in the best place to avail himself of those divine provisions, “the house of Yahweh.” He wants to be where the LORD is worshipped and be in close communion with the LORD for the rest of his days. (Hebrew really has no synonym for eternity and forever.)

What thoughts and feelings does this psalmist’s conclusion/decision trigger in you?

6. In Jesus Christ, we have the one who announced to his disciples, “I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep” (John 10:11). In our union with Christ, we have information and experience this psalmist, probably David, did not yet have. The closest to a direct quotation of **Psalms 23** in the New Testament may be Revelation 7:17:

For the Lamb in the midst of the throne will be their shepherd, and he will guide them to springs of living water, and God will wipe away every tear from their eyes.