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THE SHEPHERD AND THE EXEGETES

Hermeneutics through the Lens of Psalm 23

By Richard M. Davidson

Introduction

The hermeneutical process, as it emerges according to Scripture's own testimony, may be outlined in rough comparison with the biblical Decalogue ("Ten Words") of Exodus 20. Just as the first table of "Four Words" deals with the divine-human (vertical) relationship, so there are four general principles arising out of the divine-human nature of Scripture, which constitute foundational presuppositions undergirding the entire hermeneutical endeavor. Similarly, just as the second table of "Six Words" in the Decalogue encompasses the human (horizontal) relationships, so the specific hermeneutical guidelines for the interpreter may be organized under six basic headings.¹

Many years ago I read a book entitled *God's Finger Wrote Freedom*,² in which the author argued that each "commandment" of the Decalogue is really a safeguard allowing freedom to experience the ten positive principles of the Ten Commandments set forth by God. I would like to suggest that the "Hermeneutical Decalogue" which arises from Scripture likewise constitutes safeguards to preserve our freedom to receive the meaning of the biblical passage which God intends to impart to us. The truth shall set us free (John 8:32). Let us see how this plays out in the case of Psalm 23.³

The Hermeneutical Decalogue ("First Table") and the 23rd Psalm

I. *Sola Scriptura* ("By Scripture Alone")

First, the *sola Scriptura* principle (Isaiah 8:20) frees us from the tyranny of tradition, and philosophy, science, reason, and experience (Matthew 15:3, 6; 1 Timothy 6:20; Proverbs 14:12). These are no longer the authoritative norms by which we read and interpret the Bible. The Bible is free from these restrictions. The Bible and the Bible alone is the rule of our faith and practice, and by Scripture alone are we to judge what is truth. We are freed to read Scripture without having to critique what it says by our reason. We have to critique every other book and source of information in the world, but when we come to the Scripture (and the writings of Ellen White, which have met the Scriptural test of a true prophet), we can breathe "pure oxygen" of truth, and use our reason, guided by the Spirit, not to critique, but to receive, and understand, Scripture (Isaiah 66:2).

We do not need to accept the traditions of the church fathers regarding the allegorical meaning of the Psalm, nor be swayed by the historical-critical dissections, conjectures and reconstructions or post-modern deconstructions of the text. We can

engage in the interpretation of the psalm accepting its own claims!

II. *Tota Scriptura* ("By the Totality of Scripture")

Second, the *tota Scriptura* (2 Timothy 3:16–17; 2 Peter 3:14–16) principle frees us to accept all of Scripture, all of Psalm 23, not just the part that fits a predetermined worldview. We seek to view the psalm in the light of the totality of Scripture and its own worldview, rather than impose our own worldview upon the text. For example, when the superscription of Psalm 23 states that it is a "Psalm of David," (*mizmor ledavid*), we do not need to have a hermeneutic of suspicion regarding the authenticity of such a superscription, but with a hermeneutic of consent we are free to accept all that the text says, including the superscription, without taking out the redactor's scalpel to perform surgery on the text.

III. Analogy of Scripture ("Scripture Interprets Scripture")

The totality of Scripture implies the third presupposition: if all Scripture is inspired by the same Spirit, then there is an underlying harmony among the various parts of the Word. The "analogy of Scripture" frees us to allow Scripture to interpret Scripture (Luke 24:27; 1 Corinthians 2:13). As Jerome Skinner has demonstrated in

his recently-defended dissertation on the Davidic psalms with historical superscriptions, the Hebrew *lamed* in the phrase *mizmor ledavid* (“Psalm of David”), used in the superscriptions of 73 psalms in the Psalter, is a *lamed* of authorship, indicating that the author of these psalms (including Psalm 23) is David.⁴ We are freed to look at the historical books (1 Samuel 16) to see the background of David as a shepherd boy, as well as parallel psalms such as Psalm 78, which describe God taking David from shepherding to be a shepherd king.

With the biblical principle of the analogy of Scripture, we are free to accept the consistency and clarity of Scripture, and we do not have to resort to a deconstruction of its meaning according to some postmodern, post-colonial agenda of power politics.

IV. Spiritual Things are Spiritually Discerned

As a fourth freeing principle, “Spiritual things are spiritually discerned” (1 Corinthians 2:11, 14), through the work of the Holy Spirit we have freedom in His power to begin to lay aside our own biased presuppositions and grasp Scripture’s worldview, freedom to see more and more clearly the meaning of Scripture through His enlightenment and be changed by that Scripture in our personal lives (John 5:46–47; 7:17; Psalm 119:33).

With these powerful four basic principles of hermeneutical freedom, arising from Scripture itself, we can plumb the depths and soar to the heights of truth, beauty, and goodness in our exegesis. As we catch this positive vision of the freeing effect of these foundational principles, we can explore the biblical text with new passion and joy as we apply the six practical steps of interpretation arising from the testimony and precedence of Scripture. Let us savor some of this passionate joy in regard to the 23rd psalm!

The Hermeneutical “Decalogue” (Second Table) and the 23rd Psalm

V. Text and Translation

Unlike many passages in Scripture, there is widespread agreement regarding the unity and integrity of the text. There are no textual variants displayed in the apparatus of BHS for this entire psalm. We are free to take the

full text as it reads, and seek to grasp its import. The translation is straightforward, although, as we will see, there are some surprises that await us.

VI–X. Other Practical Hermeneutical Steps of Interpretation

In what follows, I will integrate the various practical steps of the hermeneutical process that emerge from the self-testimony of Scripture (steps VI to X), as we move briefly through the psalm. These include: (VI) Historical Context/Questions of Introduction; (VII) Literary Context and Analysis; (VIII) Grammatical/Syntactical/Semantic Analysis; (IX) Theological Context/Analysis; and (X) Homiletical Application.⁵

Superscription: “A Psalm of David.”

As we have already noted above, the superscription *mizmor ledavid* informs us that the author of this Shepherd Psalm is David. When we go to 1 Samuel 16, we find the historical background of David’s own experience

So he shepherded them according to the integrity of his heart, and guided them by the skillfulness of his hands

as a shepherd as a youth, and Asaph continues to use the shepherd metaphor in depicting the nature of David’s kingship: “He also chose David His servant, And took him from the sheepfolds; from following the ewes that had young He brought him, to shepherd Jacob His people, and Israel His inheritance. So he shepherded them according to the integrity of his heart, and guided them by the skillfulness of his hands” (Psalm 78:70–72).

We are free to examine the various kinds of shepherd imagery in the psalm through the eyes of a shepherd and especially from a knowledge of the behavior patterns of a sheep. We can be aided in this search by the insights from modern Basque shepherders, who inform us of characteristics of the sheep,⁶ and from the topography of the areas where David probably led his sheep in the area around Bethlehem.

We can also gather clues to deeper meaning from the grammar, syntax, and word studies, literary structure, and larger theological context, as we move through the poetry of the psalm.

Verse 1: “The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want.” A surprise awaits us already in the opening line of the poetry. The word for “shepherd” in Hebrew comes from the verb *ra’ah*, which has two meanings for the same spelling: to “shepherd” and “to like, be fond of, delight in, associate with as a friend.”⁷ Thus, in the “unpointed” consonantal text (recall that in the original Hebrew text there were only consonants, no vowels) the verb (Qal active participle plus the 1cs ending) can be translated as either “my shepherd” or “my friend.” The MT points this word as *ro’i* “my shepherd” but it could just as well be pointed as *re’i* “my friend (as in Song 5:16). In the context of Psalm 23, it is clear that it refers to a shepherd, but the semantic ambiguity could lead one to associate the meaning “friend” with shepherd, with powerful connotations. The shepherd is also a close friend! Therefore the sheep will not lack any good thing.

Verse 2a: “He makes me to lie down in green pastures.” What picture does this poetic line in English evoke? I used to think that this describes a verdant place for the sheep to eat good quality grass, a place with plenty for the sheep to eat. But several indications are that this is not the primary force of David’s words:

1. The Hebrew word used here for “pasture” (*na’vah*) is not the normal word for a sheep’s feeding place; it means “comely, lovely, pleasant place.” The emphasis is upon beauty and pleasantness, not food.
2. The Hebrew word for “green” (*deshe’*) is really a noun, not an adjective. It refers to “tender, fresh soft grass” (cf. Proverbs 27:25). This imagery reminds me of springtime as a preschooler, living in an area surrounded by desert, where the tall, soft grass sprang up and I would lie down contentedly in its softness.
3. Habits of sheep verify this. The shepherd grazes the sheep early in the morning (3 or 4 a.m.) till the sun is getting hot, and then leads them to a place where they can comfortably lie down in the shade. The sheep *do not eat lying down!* The verse is not speaking of sheep eating (although this may

be secondarily implied). Rather the focus is upon their place of comfort *after* their eating, as they are chewing their cud (ruminating) in a place of pleasant fresh soft grass. If I were preaching this psalm, I would make application to today, where God “causes us to lie down” sometimes, and invites us to “ruminate” over His word.

Verse 2b: David writes, “**He leads me beside the still waters**” (lit. “waters of rest/quietness [*menuk-hot*]”). Modern shepherders inform us that sheep do not like turbulent waters; with their heavy wool they might easily drown, and they are poor swimmers. So David describes how the good shepherd leads the sheep by still waters; the shepherd, if necessary, dams up the fast-flowing stream to provide calm waters where the sheep can drink.

The verb *nahal* “lead” (in the Piel stem) does not connote force, but has the idea of gentle leading, drawing with bands of friendship and love, as in Isaiah 40:11: “He shall gently lead those who are with young.”

Verse 3a: He restores my soul. Literally, “He causes my *nepshesh* [soul/life] to return.” The shepherd “revives the soul/life” of the sheep by rubbing their nose and ears. Modern Basque shepherders relate how they go to each sheep sometime during the day, and the sheep rubs his leg or nibbles at the shepherd’s ear, or rubs his face against his cheek. It is a picture of the affectionate connection and acts of reassurance and encouragement of the shepherd with his sheep.

Verse 3b: “He leads me in the paths of righteousness for His name’s sake.” Note especially the Hebrew word for “paths.” I always envisaged the shepherd leading the sheep through the steep and narrow mountain paths. But the word for “path” here is *ma’gal*, which refers to wide “wagon tracks,” a broad path. They are “righteous” (or “straight”) paths. The shepherd knows that sheep have poor eyesight, and no sense of direction. So when possible he leads them not in narrow paths, but wagon tracks, a broad, straight path for them to follow easily.

The phrase “for his name’s sake” indicates that the shepherd’s very name (reputation) is at stake as a good shepherd in making sure that the sheep are safe.

Verse 4a: “Yes, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil.” The Hebrew

word *tsalmavet* is sometimes translated as “deep darkness,” but I prefer the more literal meaning “shadow of death.” Archaeologists and biblical geographers have suggested that this phrase refers to a specific place in Palestine called “the Valley of Death.” It has been identified with the Wadi Qilt that runs through the Wilderness of Judea from Jerusalem to Jericho. The gorge is some 15 miles long in total, and I have hiked (and camped) with my son through the entire wadi. The narrowest part is about five miles long, with cliffs reaching some 1,500 feet on each side, and space to walk at the bottom of only 10–12 feet in many places. (There was a murder in this torrent valley the week before I walked it; it truly is a “valley of death”). There are many caves, where in David’s day the wolves and other predators could hide. At the end of the wadi, as it opened out, my son and I came upon a whole flock of sheep, lying down in the pleasant grass shaded under the tall cliffs. The meaning of this verse came together in a powerful way!

Verse 4b: “For you are with me. Your rod and your staff, they comfort me.” Passing through the deep valley of death, in the midst of many dangers, the sheep does not fear, because of the presence of the shepherd. The clause “you are with me” connotes the intimacy between sheep and shepherd. The “rod” (*shebet*) usually refers to a rod used to punish the enemies. It was probably about 2–3 feet long like the Basque shepherd’s rod today, and used to protect the sheep from wolves and other predators. The “staff” (*mish’enet*) was the eight-foot long shepherd’s staff with a crook at the end, which could be used to rescue sheep if they fell into ravines or other hard-to-reach places of danger. The shepherd was prepared to take care of the sheep in any emergency.

Verse 5: “You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies; You anoint my head with oil; My cup runs over.” The “table in the presence of the enemies” perhaps alludes to the shepherd’s clearing the ground of poisonous plants, and preparing a place for them to eat, protected from the “enemies”—lurking wolves and lions and bears.

The sheepfold had a big earthen jar of olive oil and a large stone jar of water. As the sheep come into the sheepfold in the evening, the shepherd dips his hand into the jar of oil, and puts ointment on the sheep’s head

for healing and soothing. He draws out cupfuls of water from the pottery jar of cool water, for the sheep to sink his nose down clear to the eyes if fevered, and drink till refreshed. One by one the shepherd cares individually for the needs of the sheep.

Verse 6: “Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me All the days of my life; And I will dwell in the house of the LORD forever.” The Hebrew word for “follow” is *radaph*, which actually means “pursue.” Some have suggested that “Goodness” and “Mercy” refer to the two shepherd dogs which herd (“pursue”) the sheep. And the sheep will dwell in the house (“presence”) of the divine shepherd forever (lit. “for length of days”).

The Deeper Theological (Typological) Meaning of the Psalm

We commonly make application of this psalm to our lives as the sheep, under the protective care of the divine Shepherd. But I suggest there is a deeper import to this psalm that has often been overlooked.

Scholars have recognized that in the inspired compositional strategy of the arrangement of the psalms in the Psalter, psalms with similar import were often placed together in thematic clusters. A careful study of Psalm 22 shows that this is a Messianic psalm, indicated as such within the psalm as it moves typologically beyond the experience of David to that of the New David. The psalm is cited repeatedly by Jesus and the Gospel writers depicting Jesus’ experience on the cross. It starts with “My God, My God, why have you forsaken me?” and ends with “It is done!”⁸

But Psalm 22 is not isolated in the book of Psalms. It is part of a trilogy in the Psalter. Psalm 24 is a royal entrance liturgy, and is also ultimately a Messianic Psalm, pointing to Jesus’ ascension and entrance into Heaven, amid the antiphonal shout of the angels: “Lift up your heads, O ye gates, and the King of Glory shall come in! Who is this king of glory? The Lord of hosts, he is the king of glory.”⁹

Sandwiched between the Psalm of the Cross and the Psalm of the Crown, is Psalm 23. I suggest this psalm is not just a nice “comforter” for God’s people.

Note it well: *the Shepherd’s psalm was sung by a sheep (or lamb)!* “The

Lord is my shepherd.” On the deepest level, I suggest, this sheep is none other than the Lamb of God that takes away the sin of the world. He trusts His Father, the Shepherd. The Messianic import of this psalm is indicated not only by its compositional placement in the book of Psalms between two other messianic psalms, but also by its literary structure highlighting key Messianic terminology. This psalm has an intricate chiasmic structure:

A. Presence: With God (v. 1)

B. Provisions: Needs supplied (eat and drink) (vv. 2–3a)

C. Paths: **Righteousness** (v. 3b)

C'. Paths: **Shadow of Death** (v. 4)

B'. Provisions: Needs supplied (eat and drink) (v. 5)

A'. Presence: With God (v. 6).¹⁰

The heart of the psalm, the climactic central verses of its carefully crafted chiasmic structure, describes the two major experiences of the

Lamb: (1) “He leads me in the paths of righteousness” and (2) “though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death.” Ultimately, only the Lamb of God was both the Righteous One (fully innocent/blameless) and the one who passed through the shadow of death (as the sacrificial Paschal Lamb).

Psalm 22 is the Psalm of the Cross. Psalm 24 is the Psalm of the Crown. Psalm 23 is the Psalm of the Paschal Lamb! And, according to the ending of the psalm, He will ultimately “live forever” in the “house of the Lord,” the heavenly sanctuary.

Only in the light of this Messianic interpretation of the Psalm can we in the deepest way “follow His steps” as God’s sheep (1 Peter 2:21, 25). The Messianic dimension gives greater import to its practical application to our lives. If Psalm 23 is about the Lamb of God trusting in His Shepherd, then it has even more precious relevance for us who are to follow in His steps. We can walk in the steps of the

Lamb of God, and like Him, trust in the Shepherd, in the paths of righteousness, and even in the valley of the shadow of death.

Conclusion

The hermeneutical principles found in Scripture free us as exegetes to plumb the depths of the Shepherd Psalm, following the clues of the contents and the contexts. In the 23rd psalm, we are invited to “Behold the Lamb of God” and, then, walking in His steps, to “Follow the Shepherd!”



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Endnotes

¹ See Richard M. Davidson, “Interpreting Scripture: An Hermeneutical ‘Decalogue,’” *JATS* 4/2 (1993): 95–114.

² James J. Londis, *God’s Finger Wrote Freedom* (Washington DC: Review and Herald, 1978).

³ This paper was originally presented as Part II of a two-part study of the biblical foundations of hermeneutics, with illustrations taken from Psalm 23, given at the Seventh-day Adventist Theological Seminary Faculty Symposium on Hermeneutics, Cancun, Mexico, May 3, 2016. Part I was prepared and presented by Felix Cortez, and consists of a historical survey of various allegorical, critical, and post-modern interpretations of Psalm 23, all of which in some way devalue or misconstrue the literal interpretation of the Psalm.

⁴ For a recent scholarly presentation of evidence supporting the Davidic authorship of the psalms introduced by the superscription *mizmor le david*, see Jerome L. Skinner, “The Historical Superscriptions of the Davidic Psalms: An Exegetical, Intertextual, and Methodological Analysis,” PhD dissertation, Andrews University, 2016.

⁵ For biblical warrant for each of these hermeneutical steps, arising from Scripture itself, see Davidson, “Hermeneutical ‘Decalogue,’” 101–114.

⁶ See, e.g., James K. Wallace, *The Basque Shepherd and the Shepherd Psalm* (Vancouver: Graphos Press, 1956, 1970, 1977); W. Phillip Keller, *A Shepherd Looks at Psalm 23* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1970, 1989).

⁷ For the meaning of Hebrew words referred to throughout this article, see the standard Hebrew lexicons, BDB and *HALOT*.

⁸ See Richard M. Davidson, “New Testament Use of the Old Testament,” *JATS* 5/1 (1994): 23–26.

⁹ See Hans LaRondelle, *Deliverance in the Psalms: Messages of Hope Today* (Berrien Springs, MI: First Impression, 1983), 106–114.

¹⁰ For this basic structure, and crucial insights into the Messianic character of the psalm, I am indebted to one of my students, Kevin Neidhardt, who wrote on this psalm for one of my seminary classes many years ago.



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