

Some Notes on Psalm 23 -- Temple Micah Study Group, 11/19/19

Virginia Spatz, songeveryday.org, songeveryday@gmail.com

-- Flipping usual presentation, beginning with notes on sources --

The Jerusalem Commentary favors plain-sense (*peshat*) analysis, but the readings here seem far more literal than usual -- even in the "Conclusion" section, which often provides a wider read, including midrash and general background, for each psalm. This particularly *pshat*-ish commentary, with an almost grudging acknowledgement of wider reading, has, in the end, I think, its own poetry:

...[Verses 3-4] suggest that the lamb and the shepherd are metaphors. The expression, "for His name's sake," intimates that the shepherd is not human being, and the statement addressed by the lamb to the shepherd indicates that the lamb represents a human being endowed with the power of speech.

In the last two verses (5-6), the metaphor changes as the psalmist likens himself to a guest in the house of his host. He regards himself as someone who is being maintained at God's table. He means to say that the entire world belongs to God, and that human beings are but strangers and sojourners, guests who enjoy the beneficence of God. But this analogy also expresses the psalmists's feeling that God is especially close to him....enemies are unable to do anything to him, not even to disturb his pleasure and peace....

...Some commentators understand the psalmist's words in the literal sense, that he is asking to be able to make frequent visits to the Temple, or even to be one of the attendants working in the Temple so that he can be there at all times. But it is clear that even if the expressions in this psalm were originally meant to be understood in that way, in the context of the Book of Psalms they have a much wider meaning, as was explained above. -- Amos Hakham, *Jerusalem Commentary to the Psalms*

Hebro (Raphael Ohr Chaim Fulcher) was born to African-American Orthodox Jewish parents in Crown Heights Brooklyn. He also lived formative years in North Carolina, St. Louis, and Israel. He says:

I imagine [King David's] music had rhythm and spirit. Put on a Hip-Hop instrumental and read Psalms. It will blow your mind. I personally believe he was the greatest rapper of all time. No disrespect at all, but I don't think it sounded much like the typical 'Jewish' music we hear today in the orthodox world. I want to bring his poetry back to life. -- for more, visit <http://www.hebromusic.com> (Note that "Hebro" without the "music" is an unrelated site organized by gay men.)

Reb Zalman (Meshullam Zalman Schachter-Shalomi ["Shalomi" added in mid-life], 1924-2014) was born in what is now Ukraine, raised in Vienna and interned in Vichy France before coming to the U.S. in 1941. Ordained in the Lubavitch community, he and Shlomo Carlebach became popular messengers for Chabad on college campuses. After discovering the "sacramental value of lysergic acid" in 1962, Zalman left Chabad for "hippy life," becoming an early teacher of Jewish meditation and what is now known as "Jewish Renewal." He co-founded Aleph: Alliance for Jewish Renewal and, later in life, "Holy Rascals" elder wisdom and activism. -- for more, visit <https://kolaleph.org/2014/07/03/reb-zalman-1924-2014/>

These three, along with most other sources chosen this month are provided by male (and cis-het) teachers, and ones who at least had their start in an orthodox world.

I considered additional sources, for the sake of variety, but decided against that.

I do want to acknowledge, however, that this month's sources -- even in their diversity -- are limited in some ways.

-- Some vocabulary-based notes --

roeh; shepherd (noun)

יהוה רעי -- 23:1

Gen 48:15) ...האלהים הרעה אתי --
...the God **who hath been my shepherd** all my
life long unto this day...

Ps. 95:7) ונחנו עם מרעיתו, וצאן ידו
we are **the people of His pasture**, and the flock of
His hand

Ps. 80:2) רעה ישראל, האזינה -- נהג בצאן יוסף
Give ear, O **Shepherd** of Israel, You that leads
Joseph like a flock

Ezek 34:8) ולא דרשו רעי את צאני
neither did **My shepherds** search for My sheep

Reb Zalman points out that "ro-i, רעי, my shepherd" is related to the word "rei-i, רעי, my friend."

People...always think of God in a tight-assed way...But when you're driving a car and you're talking to God, at that point, it's 'My buddy,' you know...

-- "Psalm 23 explained by Rabbi Zalman Schachter-Shalomi,"
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8z_1dING_uI

lo-echsar; I lack nothing, I shall not want, (I'm good?)

לא אֶחְסַר -- 23:1

Many note the difficulty of capturing the power of the seven or eight syllables here: "*Ha-shem ro-i lo-ech-sar*" (one additional for 'A-do-nai'). Compactness of Hebrew, especially in contrast to King James Version's wordiness, is a major theme for Alter, for example, in his translations and commentaries. And Hebrew's compactness seems particularly pronounced -- and hard to capture in English -- in this psalm.

"I'm good" -- which stands in for everything from "no thank you, I do not care for more cake right now" to "knock yourself out, but there is no way I'm joining in that ill-advised endeavor" -- is a phrase that ordinarily grates seriously on my nerves. But it might actually work here.

Hebro, meanwhile, offers a different take: "Lo Echsar, ready to go/Im ready to start"

-- V. Spatz

deshe; herbage, tender green grass

בנאות דשא -- 23:2

דָּשַׁן verb: to be moist, sappy.

Gen 1:11-12 ויאמר אלהים, תדשא הארץ דשא... ותוצא הארץ דשא
And God said: 'Let the earth **put forth grass...**' And the earth **brought forth grass...**

R. Eliezer says: From where is it derived that the world was created in the month of Tishrei? As it is stated: And God said: 'Let the earth **put forth grass...**' Which is the month in which the **earth brings forth grass** and the trees are full of ripe fruit? You must say that this is Tishrei. R. Yehoshua says: From where is it derived that the world was created in the month of Nisan? As it is stated: And the earth **brought forth grass...** Which is the month in which the earth is **full of grass** and the trees begin to bring forth fruit? You must say that this is Nisan.

-- B. Talmud Rosh Hashanah 11a, Davidson translation

-- definition and citations from Jastrow Talmud/Biblical Dictionary (can be found on Sefaria.org)

yarbizeini; be stretched out, cause to lie down

23:2 -- יִרְבִּיצֵנִי , בְּנֵאוֹת דָּשָׁא

Robert Alter:

The verb used here, *hirbits*, is a specialized one for making animals lie down; hence the sheep-shepherd metaphor is carefully sustained.

Reb Zalman :

He makes me sprawl on green pastures...I'm going flat on the ground, aaaahhh, like this -- I'm a sheep, remember. -- Ps. 23 video

m'nuchot; quiet, still, restful

23:2 -- עַל-מִי מְנַחֹת

He leads me close to still and quiet waters (not fast-flowing waters, from which the lamb is afraid to drink, lest it be swept away in the current). -- Hakham, *Jerusalem Commentary*

Alter: quiet waters

Zalman: quiet water, water of quietness

ya'nahaleni; lead, give rest, bring to a watering place
yanheni; lead, guide

23:2 -- עַל-מִי מְנַחֹת יְנַהֲלֵנִי

23:3 -- יְנַחֲנִי בְּמַעְגְּלֵי-צֶדֶק

We find the verb נָהַל, NHL, "to lead," used in connection with young sheep in Isaiah 40:11: "And He shall gently lead [יְנַהֲלֵנִי, *y'nahel*] those that are with young."

The word יְנַחֲנִי, *yanheni* [23:3], has the same meaning as יְנַהֲלֵנִי, *ya'nahaleni*, in the previous verse: "He leads me." We find these two verbs paralleling each other in the Song of the Sea (Ex 15:13): "You in Your lovingkindness have led forth [נָחֵתָּ, *nahita*] the people who You have redeemed. You have guided [נְהַלְתָּ, *nehalta*] them in Your strength to Your holy habitation. See also Ps. 77:21: You led [נָחֵתָּ, *nahita*] Your people like a flock.

-- Hakham, *Jerusalem Commentary*

b'ma-aglei; circles, circuits, paths

23:3 -- יְנַחֲנִי בְּמַעְגְּלֵי-צֶדֶק

He leads me in the circuitous path of righteousness....you be right, I'll be right. And the word *tzedek* means like a scale [gesturing balancing of pans on scale], and it says in the Bible, "*tzedek, tzedek tirdof*, righteousness, righteousness, you shall pursue" -- remember that sentence? -- ...It should be righteous for you; it should be righteous for me. For the sake of his name. Meaning that God gets a good reputation when both of them are right, when it's a win-win.

-- Zalman Psalm 23 video

just circuits. *Ma'gal* means both a circle and a path. The psalm may be using this phrase as if to say that G0d leads us to travel "in circles" of righteous people — among the just. It could also refer to our "life cycle," implying that G0d guides us life-long among the righteous. Last, it could be suggesting that these circles/cycles go into death and beyond.

-- *Siddur Eitz Chayim* (see note, p.8)

pathways of justice. With this phrase verse, the speaker glides from the sheep metaphor to speaking of himself in human terms.

-- Alter commentary

tzalmavet; death-shadow, extreme danger

גַּם כִּי-אֶלֶךְ בְּגִיאַ צַלְמוֹת -- 23:4

King James Version (1611) uses "valley of the shadow of death." A few others (last two with notes):

Yea, though I walk through the **valley of the shadow of death** -- JPS 1917

Though I walk through a **valley of deepest darkness** -- JPS 1985

Even if I go through the **deepest darkness** -- Good News (American Bible Society) 1992

Also -- when I walk in a **valley of death-shade** -- Young's Literal (Berean Study Materials) 2013

Though I walk in the vale of death's shadow -- Alter 2007

"to cut through proliferation of syllables in the King James...better approximate compactness of the Hebrew"

And when I walk through the valley, overshadowed by death -- Greenberg 2010

aiming for "prayable" text with "multi-layered texture of the Hebrew"

Nine more Tanakh uses, translated as "deep darkness," "deep shadow," or "shadow of death":

1) Isaiah 9:2

יִשְׁבֵּי בְּאֶרֶץ צַלְמוֹת אֹר נְגִיהַ

2) Amos 5:8

וְהַפֶּךְ לַבִּקְרָה צַלְמוֹת וַיּוֹם לַיְלָה

3-9) Job 10:22 -- כִּמוֹ אֶפֶל צַלְמוֹת וְלֹא סֻדְרִים

Job 12:22 -- וַיֵּצֵא לְאוֹר צַלְמוֹת

Job 16:16-- וְעַל עַפְעָפֵי צַלְמוֹת

Job 24:17 -- בִּקְרָה לְמוֹ צַלְמוֹת

Job 24:17 -- כִּי-יִכְיֹר, בְּלֵהוֹת צַלְמוֹת

Job 34:22 -- חֹשֶׁךְ וְאִין צַלְמוֹת לְהַסְתֵּר שָׁם

Job 38:17-- מוֹת וְשַׁעֲרֵי צַלְמוֹת תִּרְאֶה

Sometimes a shepherd leads his flock through a ravine lined by steep cliffs that block out the light of day. The word צַלְמוֹת, *tzalmavet*, means "darkness" (Rashi following *Dunash* [(920-990)]). * This is also the meaning of the parallel root in Arabic.**

*The word should have been vocalized as צַלְמוֹת, *tzalmut*, following the pattern of מַלְכוּת, *malkhut*. The vocalization was changed to צַלְמוֹת, *tzalmavet*, either because it was interpreted to mean צֶל-מָוֶת, *tsel-mavet*, "the shadow of death," or because the pronunciation of the word changed, [like alternative pronunciations] of the place called *Hatzarmavet* [or] *Hatzr'mut*.

**Some scholars suggest that the word should have been vocalized with a *holam*, צַלְמוֹת, *tzalmot*. following the pattern of בְּלֵהוֹת, *balhot* (see Job 24:17), and they maintain that the vocalization was changed from *tzalmot* to *tzalmavet* by way of analogy from מוֹת, *mot*, "death," to מָוֶת, *mavet*.

-- Commentary and footnotes from Hakham, *The Jerusalem Commentary*

From another period of Jewish history, this Talmudic passage reads the "shadow of death" literally inside of a completely different set of assumptions:

R. Isaac said: What is meant by the verse, *Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for Thou art with me?* (Ps. 23:4) This refers to him who sleeps in the shadow of a single palm-tree or in the shadow of the moon. Now in respect to the shadow of a single palm-tree this holds good only where the shadow of the neighboring [tree] does not fall upon it; but if the shadow of the neighboring tree falls upon it, it does not matter.

[The passage goes on to explain that deadly demons inhabit single palm-trees and some other trees -- "This is the general rule: Whatever has many branches, its shade is harmful" -- but the collective shade of multiple such trees is safe; shadows caused by moonlight are also explored in this passage.]

-- Babylonian Talmud Pesachim 111a, Soncino translation

[Rabbi Israel Friedman of Ruzhyn (1796-1850)] interprets these words differently with this unique and alternate punctuation: *Though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death I fear not. What is evil is that You are with me.*

This is truly an example of rare and sublime spiritual sensitivity.

"I can manage all the evil that engulfs me. What troubles me, what I find evil, is that You are with me."

Few are capable of feeling empathy for the Divine. But Rabbi Israel was.

He achieved this exquisite spiritual insight through his ordeal in the Czar's prison. Through his insight, those of us of lesser faith gained access to the teaching that not only does God accompany us to the places of our suffering, but He suffers along with us. He feels our pain. Amazingly, we can also feel His.

-- R. Dr. Tzvi Hersh Weinreb, *The Koren Tehillim* (Jerusalem: Koren Publishers, 2015)

Now as I walk through the valley of the shadow of death

Gam Ki elech b'getzalmavet

Take a deep breath

And let the melody steady me

I'll be leaving doubt behind

I keep the truth ahead of me

Ready as I'll ever be

Ki Atah Imadi

I gotta dig deep

seeking the peace inside of me

And when I find it

Gotta find a way to stay reminded

I'm blinded, wish there was a way I could rewind it

I know it takes a lot of work

But I don't mind it

Bind it, chronicle time and keep rhymin

I read the task of old and get lifted, gifted

To come into this world try to fix it

There's nothing to it but to do it

you and me

So Daveed wrote a piece sing psalm 23

Cuz we, been on a mission over centuries

Every soul a piece of the puzzle

Gotta add my piece

-- from "Gam Ki Elech," Hebro
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=smi8eHbCsRE>
[punctuation, spelling as posted]

gam ki elech b'gay tzalmavet

lo lo lo ira rah

lo lo lo lo lo ira rah

ki atah imadi

-- entire lyrics of Shlomo Carlebach's "Gam Ki Elech" (3:49 long)

R'vayah; saturation, fullness

23:5 -- כּוֹסֵי רוּיָה

Klein's Dictionary notes that *r'vayah* only occurs twice in the Bible: here and Ps. 66:12.

Psalm 66:12 -- הִרְכַּבְתָּ אֲנוֹשׁ, לְרֹאשֵׁנוּ: בְּאֵנוּ-בְּאֵשׁ וּבַמַּיִם; וַתּוֹצִיאֵנוּ, לְרוּיָה

JPS 1917: ...we went through fire and through water; but Thou didst bring us out **unto abundance**

JPS 1985: ...we have endured fire and water, and You have brought us through **to prosperity**

Alter (2007): ...We came into fire and water -- and You brought us out **to great ease**

In Ps. 23:5, we have:

JPS 1917 (& KJV): my cup **runneth over**

JPS 1985: my drink is **abundant**

Alter (2007): my cup **overflows**

Of BibleHub.com's 29 translations we see:

- the cup "**runneth/runs over**" 11 times (including KJV, JPS 1917); "is running over" once
- the cup "is **full!**" (Young's Literal) or "completely full" (NET Bible)
 - variant: "You welcome me as an honored guest and fill my cup to the brim" (Good News)
- the cup "**overflows**" nine times, plus
 - "overflows with blessings" (New Living Translation)
 - "overflows as if it were alive" (Aramaic Bible in Plain English)**
 - and the combination: "you fill my cup until it overflows" (Contemporary English)
- wine-related outliers:
 - Brenton Septuagint (1851): thy cup cheers me like the best *wine*. [italics in original]
 - Douay-Rheims (Catholic Study Bible): my chalice which inebriateth me, how goodly is it!

** ??“Alive”?? The Targum uses "רויחא", *r'vicha*, meaning "widen, relieve, increase," also "inspire," and "possessed by spirits." Brown-Driver-Briggs says the word is related to רוח, *ruach*, in Hebrew, which can mean, as in English, "breath" and "spirit." ??

In the Zalman video, the filmmaker asks about juxtaposition of "cup running over" and the anointing oil:

Zalman: **The cup never runs over.** That's King James' mistake...

Filmmaker: Then let's stay with King James...It's so nice!

Zalman: No....the cup doesn't run over. It's satisfying. It's **quenching**.

dishanta; become fat, anoint as symbol of festivity and joy

23:5-- דִּשְׁנָתָּ בְּשֶׁמֶן רֹאשִׁי

The verb here, *dishen*, is not the one that is used for anointment, and its associations are sensual rather than sacramental. Etymologically, it means something like "to make luxuriant."

-- Alter commentary

Many others point out that the verb here is not the same as מָשַׁח, as in Mashiach/Messiah and used when anointing Aaron (Lev 8:12). However, in Reb Zalman's video on Psalm 23, he says: "Everything to do with oil on the head has something to do with messiahship." (Zalman's gestures suggest that he does not find the idea of hair oil particularly pleasurable -- a position which might be disputed by people of Middle Eastern and African descent, who consider oils essential to hair care)

"Prepare a table" as Eldering Practice

תַּעֲרֹךְ לְפָנַי, שְׁלֹחַן -- נִגְצְרֵי 23:5

A spiritual eldery practice for this part of the verse:

What we have been doing with it is an eldery...We invite the people, the SOB's who did us wrong. In an imaginary banquet, this guy -- you know, who did me in -- ...because of that, look what I gained! So, there's all kinds of people who gave you trouble, and if you can call them in and say, "Hey, thank you," or, if you would say -- as the Dalai Lama keeps saying -- "you difficult teacher, thank you," right?

-- Zalman Psalm 23 video

B'veit-YHVH; in God's House

וְשִׁבְתִּי בְּבַיִת יְהוָה, לְאֶרֶךְ יָמִים -- 23:6

What does it mean to live in God's house? This psalm describes it so beautifully. Living in God's house means that, on some fundamental level, we place our lives like sheep in the hands of a shepherd. That means we have the faith that, no matter what happens, our basic needs will be met -- that God has given us the resources to take care of ourselves. Living in God's house means trusting that God is with us at all times, including when we are in danger; so while we should not seek out danger, we need not live in fear. Living in God's house means rejoicing in God's blessings even when our enemies are all around us. Living in God's house means that we see the cup neither as half-empty nor as half-full, but rather as overflowing. Living in God's house means looking over our shoulder, and being surrounded by blessings, not curses. Wow! Can you imagine a more amazing gift than being able to live in God's house. And the choice to do so is up to us.

-- Joseph Rosenstein, *Siddur Eit Ratzon*

-- Some musical notes --

Liturgical tune

Rabbi David Shneyer, who composes liturgical music himself, says that tunes people think are "traditional" or even ancient are often about 5-10 years older than they are. The tune many of us know for Psalm 23 may be one of these. I discovered in researching for this month that the tune used -- at Temple Micah and every other congregation I've visited, across movements -- was composed in 1946.

This NPR podcast relates how Rabbi Ben Zion Shenker (1925-2016) composed a melody for Psalm 23 after he finished the third meal one day in 1946. He recorded it in an album of Chasidic music in 1956. Much later, Cantor Yitzhok Meir Helfgott and violinist Itzhak Perlman recorded it.

NPR podcast -- <https://www.npr.org/2013/10/16/235525531/the-greatest-living-figure-of-chasidic-music>

More on Shenker -- <https://www.milkenarchive.org/artists/view/ben-zion-shenker/>

Perlman/Helfgott video (tune you will recognize) -- <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=X7m8qBgrp4Q>

Gam Ki Elech -- Hebro and Carlebach

Hebro's "Gam Ki Elech" is a hip-hop version of Psalm 23. He mixes Hebrew, themes of the psalm and rap of his own creation. Bio above; visit www.Hebromusic.com [again: without the "music" you'll end up at a different site] for more about the artist and his music. Option to support him by purchasing this or other songs. Here's the free video -- <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=smi8eHbCsRE>

Shlomo and Neshama Carlebach sing Shlomo's tune -- <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lgZMQZ3j3gE>

Shiyr Poets

"You Comfort Me (Psalm 23)" by the Shiyr Poets -- <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sVLFAfCPx68>

Repeating introduction from previous handouts, FYI:

The Netherland-based Shiyr Poets -- Brian Doerksen, Calum Rees, Teresa Trask and Brian Thiessen -- worked together for years to "render the Psalms as sung English poetry." They report using "all the translations available (including Robert Alter's more poetic translation) and seeking counsel from Hebrew scholars." They write:

Choosing not to censor the difficult verses of lament and anger, the SHIYR Poets render each psalm in its entirety, singing in solidarity with all who suffer....Taken as a whole, the Psalms are perhaps the most emotionally healthy comprehensive expression of spirituality ever written. These are songs of desire and desperation...songs that demand justice for the oppressed...songs that honour the innocent praise of children...songs about everyday things like sleep.

-- More Resources, Sources Cited --

"Psalm 23 explained by Rabbi Zalman Schachter-Shalomi," part of a documentary called "Holy Rascals" -- https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8z_1dING_uI -- see also One River Foundation.

Siddur Eit Ratzon: a prayerbook for the morning service of Shabbat and festivals with new translations, commentaries, meditation, and prayers by Joseph G. Rosenstein. (Highland Park, NJ: Shiviti Publications 2003)

Siddur Eitz Chayim, prayerbook of the eponymous congregation in Palo Alto, CA. Available on-line. Psalm 23 (p.65) is translated by AvRam Aryeh with notes (p.170). (2011, revised 2013).

Psalms Translations/Commentaries

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Weinreb, R. Dr. Tzvi Hersh. *Koren Tehillim*. (Jerusalem: Koren Publishers, 2015)

General References

Brown-Driver-Briggs (BDB) is a 1906 lexicon of Aramaic and Hebrew. Available at BibleHub.com.

Jastrow, Marcus. *A Dictionary of the Targumim, the Talmud Bavli and Yerushalmi, and the Midrashic Literature*. [standard Talmud reference] Philadelphia, 1903-ish. Available via Sefaria.org

BibleHub.Com (Christian site): BDB, Strong's Concordance, 29 translations, and other power tools built in.

Mechon-Mamre.org (Jewish site): bare-bones Hebrew/English (JPS 1971) Tanakh text; more resources

Sefaria.org (Jewish site): Jastrow, Talmud, and other tools built in; text of Tanakh with JPS 1985 translation.

Talmud: Soncino translation at Halakhah.com. Adapted Davidson trans., plus original text at Sefaria.org.

See also

Kushner, Harold S. *The Lord is My Shepherd: The Healing Wisdom of the Twenty-Third Psalm*. (Knopf, 2004)