

# **The Shepherd's Psalm as a Near Death Experience**

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Yahweh shepherds my soul,  
therefore I shall not become as nothing;  
for he has granted me repose in verdant pastures  
and he has led me forth beside tranquil waters.  
He restored to me my very life,  
and he led me along safe pathways  
because I trusted to his Name.  
Even when I passed through the dark valley  
I feared no evil thing  
because you were with me.  
Your royal sceptre and rod reassured me.  
You laid a feast for me  
in the very presence of my deathly enemy.  
You anointed my head with oil;  
my cup of gladness overflowed  
I am convinced that goodness and mercy will watch over me  
all the days of my life,  
and I shall return to the house of the Lord forever

Psalm 23 was called by Spurgeon “the pearl of Psalms” and A. Cohen (1) has said it is a “precious gem” which “has dried many tears”. Representing the best-known and best-loved of all the Psalms, it has held a special place in the hearts and affections of countless people throughout the centuries. The familiar figure of the Divine Shepherd watching over his flock and leading them by the still waters and through the dark valley to their heavenly home, continues to bring hope and

comfort to the troubled and bereaved. The pastoral imagery makes its own emotional, almost sentimental appeal, despite the realities of our modern, highly urbanised, technically dominated society.

A.A. Anderson (2) accepts the affection in which it is held, but also points out that “its interpretation is by no means certain. The oriental imagery found in this well-loved poem makes it difficult to separate facts from verbal images”. There are three main word-pictures: (1) The caring Shepherd; (2) Yahweh as Guide; and (3) Yahweh as Host at the Great Feast. Although it is often called “The Shepherd Psalm”, (3) there is no direct reference to “flock” or “sheep”. The whole theme revolves around the term “Shepherd” which colours references to “verdant pastures”, “still waters”, “rod” and “staff” and guidance through the “valley of the shadow (of death)”. Just how to interpret the Psalm is not easy as “the available evidence is far from unambiguous”. (4) The abundance of poetical expression “makes it difficult to state precisely, point by point,” says Artur Weister, (5) “what has to be regarded as a mere figure of speech and what can be accepted as actual fact, since both of them, image and fact, often blend into the poetical, allegorical style of the Psalm”.

It is to be noted that Rabbis traditionally gave Psalm 23 an allegorical interpretation, suggesting it represented the hope of deliverance from Exile, guidance through the wilderness (as in Exodus), and a return to worship in the restored Temple, the timeless centre of spiritual life and national hope – the true home of Israel.

On the other hand, as Mitchell Dahood (6) suggests, the Psalmist places his faith in Yahweh as his Guide, who will lead him “to the eternal bliss of Paradise”. He further adds that the “green pastures” and “still waters” are “descriptions of the Elysian Fields”. John H. Eaton (7) summarises this theme of Dahood as “a pleasant

pasturage to a heavenly abode, a transcendental eternal life in the Elysian Fields”, the land of the blest, for “water forms an essential element in the description of the Elysian Fields” (8)

Of sacred fountains, and Elysian groves,

And vales of bliss. (9)

Elysium was the abode of the blessed in Greek mythology: hence the Elysian Fields, the Paradise or Happy Land of the Greek poets. (10) Dahood admits that the use of this term “Elysian Fields” may seem out of place in a Semitic context, “but the images which such a phrase elicits are sufficiently close to Semitic ideas of the future life to justify its use in a work on the Psalms”. (11) All of which represents expressions of “confidence that eternal life awaits the Psalmist”. (12)

Although there are obvious dangers in pressing this analogy if, indeed, the Psalmist is referring, not to some earthly pastures of life, but is using the pastoral theme to describe the abundant joys and delights of the heavenly vistas, then we are presented with a quite different panorama. In fact, the whole Psalm can be interpreted in terms of the journey of the soul after death; of one who has returned from death to relate both what he has viewed and what he has heard. We have seen that there are Near-Death experiencers who claim that the experience has been so wonderful that they have not only lost their fear of death, but have discovered new meaning for life and for daily living. There are those who aver that whatever death may bring, there is no need for the undue anxiety; God has provided for all their needs and he will offer guidance along a safe and known way. All these elements are present in the Psalm itself (if not always in the same order): “I shall not want... He restores my soul”, for “his name” (i.e., God) can be trusted.

The affirmation: "He restores my soul" (v. 2) is important. This is generally taken to mean spiritual refreshment for the fainting soul. If, however, the Psalmist is referring to the restoration of life itself, then it fits (with a slightly different emphasis) with the comment of T.K. Cheyney: (13) "faintness indicates, in Hebrew phrase, that his 'soul' has 'gone out'". Likewise, the observation of A.A. Anderson (14) is relevant here: "When a man loses his strength or dies, the soul... is said to depart (Gen. 35. 18.), or is poured out (Lam. 1. 11) can be described as the return of the soul or its reviving". However, the word "soul" is really out of place here and does not fit the Hebrew concept of the nature of man. It is his "life" (same Hebrew word) which is restored. So John Hargreaves (15) says: "He restores my life", and J.W. Rogers and J.W. McKay (16) translate the words: "He renews my life". Bearing all this in mind, if the psalmist is partly reminiscing (as we shall see later) and referring to some great death-crisis, then the interference is "He restores my life (from death)"; or, closer to Hebrew, "He causes my life to return". Was he in fact referring to some Near-Death Experience, after his "life" had "gone out", and from which he was allowed to return on the restoration of his life? Or as Cranshaw (17) puts it (slightly amended):

When my wayward breath is flying,

He calls home my [soul] from dying.

Some commentators suggest that most of the verbs in the Psalm, although they are future, "are not to be understood as future, but as presents". (18) But the mood of the Psalmist changes rapidly and the dramatic effect of the narrative moves from present to past, and from past to future, as is typical when someone is describing a crucial emotional experience. So, again, the picture changes quickly: "Yes, even when I walk through the valley of the shadow (of death), I will fear no danger, because you will be with me". It has been argued that "in the valley of the shadow of death" should be amended to "valley of utter darkness", but in either case, the transition of death is intended. (19) W.O.E. Oesterley (20) says "It is not fanciful to

see in what follows the recalling of a peril *through which the Psalmist has passed in days gone by*".

Cheyne (21) links the thought of this verse with the beliefs of the Egyptians who "figured to themselves the departed souls as going through narrow passes and defiles haunted by serpents and monsters" as a prelude to Judgement. Here we find echoes of near-death descriptions of the "dark tunnel" or "gloomy valley" sometimes, as in the story of Drythelm, (22) flanked by gruesome figures and tormented people, to be followed by some form of self-judgement. Many near-death experiences speak of being guided along this darkened vale by a being of light, or by kindly entities who have given them comfort and assurance. So the Psalmist declares: "I will not fear any evil thing, for you will be with me: Your rod and staff [like the club and crook of the shepherd] will reassure me", but here the "rod" and "staff" may represent supernatural guides. They may even be symbols of justice and judgement, or, as Dahood (23) has suggested, "The metaphor may be an adaptation of two attendants accompanying a god or dignitary", because "In Canaanite myth, the gods are often accompanied by two messengers".

Again the scene changes. Yahweh invites the Psalmist, as his special guest, to a triumphant feast. Spreading a "table" (or feasting cloth) before him, Yahweh fêtes him as an honoured guest. Indeed, we have here a figure in some respects anticipating the later concept of the heavenly messianic feast, where the faithful would be honoured and their loyalty to Yahweh vindicated. The righteous, thus triumphing over their enemies, would feast in Paradise with their God, and anointed. In Jewish thought, anointing (24) was a royal and priestly function as well as a mark of respect for a special guest. The Psalmist thus sees himself vindicated before his enemies (25) and the foes of darkness which beset him. They must watch helplessly as his divine host showers blessings upon him. Now his cup of happiness is full to overflowing for he has reached the place of continuing joy in the presence of his God, "and I shall dwell in the house of Yahweh for ever".

Significantly, the suggested Hebrew text here reads: "*I shall return* [and dwell] in the house of Yahweh for ever". It was the use of this word "return" which possibly suggested to Rabbinical scholars that the writer indicated here a return from Exile to the worship of the rebuilt Temple, but the context does not really support this view.

The Masoretic Text (26) clearly has "return to the house of Yahweh". Suggestions by many prominent scholars that it should mean "dwell in the house of Yahweh" are influenced by the conviction that it *should* mean daily worship in the restored Temple, or its heavenly equivalent. But this means changing *shubh*, "return", to *yashabh*, "dwell", a rather pedantic preference, although it only requires a small change in vowels etc. It is true that most commentators give "I will return" as a real alternative, but, as C.J. Ellicott (27) has pointed out, "As the text stands it must be translated 'I will return...'. Furthermore, "house of Yahweh" signifies "God's earthly temple. So the Psalmist "looks forward to eternal happiness in God's celestial abode". (29)

Bearing in mind the points already raised, it may be relevant to conclude that the Psalmist based his anticipation of the journey to Paradise on his experience of a *previous* visit to the celestial realms, during which his life was restored to him and he was sent back to continue his life here. Interpreting it in this way, the whole Psalm reflects the effect of this "visit" upon him and his expectation for what dying will hold for him as he is led through the "dark tunnel" into the bright borderland of the heavenly realms. He is confident of guidance, of protection and of a place at the divine table. So he will *return* to dwell for ever "for length of days") with the Lord. (30)

However, if this was a result of a near-death experience, it is relevant to ask: when did it occur? and, who is the Psalmist?

Although communal and national aspects have been read into the Psalm, it is clearly intensely personal and individual. The Psalmist refers to Yahweh as "*my Shepherd*". Although God is widely referred to as the "Shepherd of Israel", the connotation "*my Shepherd*" appears nowhere else in the Psalms. Further to this, the Psalm is "very probably royal", as Steven Croft (31) suggests. "There are several signs that this is a royal Psalm", he says, for "there is evidence of royal style ('*my shepherd*, v. 1); of a special relationship between Yahweh and the Psalmist; of a banquet for a king in the presence of his enemies, signifying victory and, most significantly, an anointing with oil".

The traditional view is that David was the author of many of the Psalms and so we have the introductory words in the Scriptures, "of David: A Psalm"; or "a prayer of David"; or just "of David". The designation "of David", and so on, may mean "on behalf of David" or "for David", that is, for the use of a Davidic king. So A.A. Anderson (32) suggests the most likely explanation is that "in the majority of Psalms we should render our phrase 'belonging to David', i.e. to the Davidic collection of songs". Be that as it may, he also says there is no reason to doubt that David actually composed certain Psalms and songs, but it is well-nigh impossible to say which of them, if any, were preserved in the Psalter, (33) for the strong tradition of his authorship of at least some of them is an exceedingly ancient one. They may have been basic stratum which could reasonably be attributed to David himself. There are certain Psalms which are so personal and so true to his life and times as to carry the mark of David himself, or one of his line. This is particularly true of songs of thanksgiving for deliverance. Just to suggest that where the possessive pronoun is used, then the Psalmist as king is speaking on behalf of the whole nation, or that Psalms of deliverance are purely part of the cultus of the nation, does not therefore nullify the possibility that behind a number of them there lies an individual entity; a personal recollection of an actual escape from death and

all this entailed in the mind of the writer. In the case of Psalm 23, as indicated by John H. Eaton, (34)"We may thus say that the traditional feeling that the Psalm is indeed appropriate for David the shepherd-king is not baseless", although he goes on to say "only it is the office of the king rather than a personal history that is decisive". However, as pointed out earlier, it has all the marks of a personal recital in poetic form of a near-death experience which includes a vivid description of heavenly vistas, the dark journey, judgement, reception and return. If it is, therefore, a royal song of thanksgiving, and this individual is David, the question still remains: Thanksgiving for what?

Songs of thanksgiving for deliverance from death are to be found in several of the Psalms, some of which are regarded as royal and associated with David. In Psalms 18, the "my" element is pronounced: "O Lord my strength, my stronghold, my fortress, my champion, my God, my rock..." (vv. 1,2). Dahood (35) calls it "a royal song attributed to David, and there is no internal evidence militating against such an attribution", so it can also "be described as an individual Psalm of thanksgiving". (36) The Psalmist (37) "tells the story of his deliverance. He had sunk into the mouth of death, overwhelmed by the waters at the entrance to Sheol. But Yahweh had heard his prayer. ... So he had drawn his king up from the great waters, and saved him from his enemies, the death-powers". Some think that "to be saved from my enemies" means to be saved from death. It is also to be noted in this connexion that "'To die' means to go down to Sheol or the Pit" (38) and, as Cheyne (39) says: "Death is a synonym for Sheol (the city of the dead), which was placed underneath the sea" (Cp. Job 26.5; Jonah 2, 3, 5, 6). The same, almost identical words are to be found in 2 Samuel 22, "the song David sang unto the Lord", as a song of deliverance out of the hand of his enemies, and out of the hand of Saul (although "Saul" is regarded as an interpolation). (40) Although there are scholars who suggest it has been worked over later by many hands, there is enough Davidic substance in it to support the view that it originated in the Davidic period as a personal song of thanksgiving. Although obviously couched in metaphorical language, the perils of death are realistic, and miraculous deliverance lies at the heart of the Psalm. That David was constantly in great danger for his life is quite



clear from the Biblical records, and sickness almost to death was a constant threat to the living (Cp. Psalm 30. See also Psalm 40, "brought up from the muddy 'Pit'"; and Psalm 116, the cords of death and the grip of Sheol).

Through the symbolism of these Psalms there runs a vivid reality. The king's testimony of praise to Yahweh "centres on what Yahweh has done for him personally. Sometimes there is a story of deliverance to tell, in form at least referring to a particular occasion. He was in mortal danger, he cried to Yahweh, and was heard and saved". (41) So in Psalm 23, "the king's passage through the 'valley of the shadow of death' is like the symbolic experience of death in Psalm 22 (cp. 44.20. ... the qualification of 'death' in its full sense as the ultimate horror and foe of mankind is in place; that is, it is not just the superlative) 'very deep shadow'. ... The king was brought in symbol to that dreadful chasm where death's 'shadow' or domination was spread. But Yahweh was stronger than the grim Shepherd of the dead (Psalm 49.15). He brought back the ebbing soul of his king". (42) So we may assert again that behind the symbolism lie vivid recollections of death and return, although when and where cannot be ascertained.

Such recollections seem to run through the whole of Psalm 23, as we have suggested. Moreover, it reveals a remarkable sophistication on the part of the Psalmist. His concept of death, the after-life, and the happiness of the celestial sphere carries a calmness and assurance which is absent from the deliverance passages of other Psalms. It is as if the Psalmist has had time to reflect on what has happened to him and come to terms with the prospect of Sheol and the Pit. Indeed, the Psalm, if truly Davidic, is centuries ahead of its time. Current belief held that the dead went down to Sheol to be cut off from Yahweh and forgotten for ever. Existence in Sheol was thought of as pale, dim, shadowy, and less than real. That of Psalm 23 is full of cosmic, panoramic beauty where a fuller life is to be realised in God and where eternity overflows with goodness. Perhaps only one who has "seen" it and returned, could have written of it so.

## References

1. A. Cohen, *The Psalms*, Soncino Press, p. 67.
2. A.A. Anderson, *Psalms 1, 1-72*, New Century Bible, Oliphants, 1972, p. 195.
3. The Hebrew term for "shepherd" also means "companion", "friend."  
*Yahweh as Shepherd*: Gen 48.15; 49.24; Psalm 30.2; Ezek 34.11-14; Is 49.9-10; Mic 7.14; John 10.10.  
*Yahweh as Shepherd of Israel*: Ps. 28.9; 74.1; 77.20; 78.52; 79.13;80.1;100.3; Is. 40.11; Jer. 23.3; Ezek. 34.11-16; Hos. 4.8; Mic. 7.14; Zech. 9.16.  
In Psalm 23 the Psalmist "speaks of Yahweh as his personal Shepherd", Othmar Keel, *The Symbolism of the Biblical World*, SPCK, 1978.
4. A. Anderson, p. 195.
5. A. Weiser, *The Psalms*; O.T. Library, SCM, 1962, p. 227.
6. Mitchell Dahood, *Psalms 1, 1-50*, The Anchor Bible, Doubleday, New York, 1979, p. 145. "Green Pastures", lit., "waters of rest", "waters of resting places", like oases in the desert. Verses 2-3 are "descriptions of the Elysian Fields that closely resemble the one given in Psalm 36. 9-10", Dahood, pp. 145/146. So also, "your meadow" in Psalm 5.9 "relates to the theme of the Elysian Fields" in Ps. 36. 9-10; Dahood, p. 33.
7. John H. Eaton, *Kingship and the Psalms*, Studies in Biblical Theology, 2nd Series, SCM, 1976, p. 38.
8. M. Dahood, p. 146.
9. A. Kenside, *Pleasures of Imagination*, 1744.
10. Brewer's *Dictionary of Phrase & Fable*, Cassell, 1954, p. 330.
11. M. Dahood, p. xxxvi, footnote.

12. Ibid., p. 33: "He will lead me into green pastures". Cp. Ps. 139. 24, "Lead me to the eternal assembly".
13. T.K. Cheyney, *The Book of Psalms*, Kegan Paul, Trench & Co., 1888, p. 67. Cp. Ps. 30.3, "restored me to life".
14. A. Anderson, p. 171.
15. John Hargreaves, *A Guide to the Psalms*, T.E.F. Guide 6, SPCK, 1973, p. 41.
16. J.W. Rogers and J.W. McKay, *Psalms 1-50*, CUP, 1947, p. 106.
17. See Cheyney, p. 67.
18. See C.J. Ellicott, *An Old Testament Commentary for English Readers*, Cassell.
19. *Zalmawet* may be a compound of *zelem*, "shadow" and *maweth*, "death"; so, "darkness of death" or even "valley of deep darkness" (like death). Cheyney (p. 68) translates it: "Should I even walk in a ravine of Hades' gloom": "The Psalmist may be alluding to the dread moments preceding the judgement of the soul".
20. Oesterley, *The Psalms*, SPCK, 1962, p. 184. My italics.
21. Ibid, p. 68.
22. See the Venerable Bede, *A History of the English Church and People*, trans. by Leo Sherley-Price, Penguin, 1956, pp. 284/288.
23. M. Dahood, p. 148. Cp. Psalms 25.21; 43.3; 14.15. Osiris carried a mace, A sceptre was a symbol of kingship in the ancient world, See also v. 6: "goodness and lovingkindness shall follow me" - John Eaton says "a tendency to personify the covenant-graces appears fairly clearly in a number of passages; they take the form of angelic beings commissioned by God to accompany and guard his king", e.g. Ps 23.6; 61.8; 40.2; 57.4ff; 18. 17; *Kingship and the Psalms*. p. 153. He also comments (p. 37): "Also suitable for the king is the picture of him being conducted personally by Yahweh the Shepherd-King, who goes at his side with emblems and weapons of his sovereignty, keeping at bay the forces of death". Cheyney (p. 68) in this connexion indicates that "The pious Egyptian king was escorted by Amen Ra when approaching the tribunal of Osiris".

24. Ointment was a symbol of joy. May here refer to the anointing of the king.
25. The foe or adversary may be death (*moth*), see Psalms 7.6; 13.3; 18.47; 27.12; 31.9; 41.3; 61.4, etc.
26. Oesterley says: "The Masoretic Text, which is the official Hebrew text handed down through ancient Palestinian tradition, presents us with very few variations", *The Psalms*, p. 34. It is that of the Hebrew Bible at the present day.
27. C.J. Ellicott, p. 121.
28. M. Dahood, p. 148. Cheyne (p. 68) gives "I shall return" as an alternative, but thinks it means the Psalmist is in exile.

29. *Ibid.*, p. 149. Cp. Psalm 72.4; 31.2.

30. "Length of days", which is interpreted "forever".

31. Steven J.L. Croft, *The identity of the Individual in the Psalms*, J SOT Press, Sheffield, Supplementary Series 44, 1987, p. 130.

32. A.A. Anderson, p. 45.

33. *Ibid.*, p. 44.

34. John H. Eaton, p. 37.

35. Dahood, p. 104. Verse 3 of Psalm 18 reads: "So shall I be saved from my enemies", and some think it means to be "*saved from death*" (my italics). Cp. v. 6: "in many dangers"; "The king is in deadly peril and verses 4-5 show that he felt himself to be in the very clutches of death". Anderson, p. 156. So also in v. 17, "my strong enenciv" refers to death. Death, "the arch-enemy of the Psalmist", *ibid.*, p. 155. Cp. Ps. 30.3, 4 he is restored to life.

36. A.A.Anderson, p. 153.

37. J.H. Eaton, p. 114.

38. A.A. Anderson, p. 315 (On Ps. 40.2).

39. Cheyne, p.49 (On Ps. 18).

40. It is possible that "Sheol" is meant and not Saul: "deliverance out of the hand of Sheol".

41. John H. Eaton, p. 188.

42. *Ibid.*, p. 38.