



Coptic Orthodox Diocese of the Southern United States



The Holy Book of Psalms

Psalm 23

Bishop Youssef



Introduction

- This Psalm bears the simple title *A Psalm of David*
- The title confirms that it has been composed by David
- According to many scholars, this psalm is one of the first written by the prophet David, its first part portraying the early stage of his life as a shepherd of sheep
- Its contents clearly relate to the evidences of his history, and with the memories of his early life as a shepherd
- Some suppose that it refers to the time when David had obtained a complete victory over all his enemies



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- And others designate it to be a psalm of David's maturity, but with clear and strong remembrance of his youth as a shepherd
- And some think that the Aramaic Paraphrase applies the psalm to the Hebrew people when delivered from captivity and exile, as a song of triumph on their return to their own land
- Many of David's psalms are full of complaints, but this is full of comforts, and the expressions of delight in God's great goodness and dependence upon Him
- In this Psalm David speaks not in his own person only, but in the name of all believers



Introduction

- For Christ, who is the Shepherd spoken of, is a Shepherd to all believers, who are all the sheep of His pasture, as well as David
- The psalm has always been regarded as one of beauty, comfort, and reassurance
- The Orthodox Jews love this psalm, and the Reformed Jews use it in their worship in their synagogues
- The main subject is the watchful care which God had extended over David, and the consequent assurance which he felt that God would still watch over him, and supply all his need



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- The main idea is his full belief that God would provide for him, and that he would never be left to want
- In Psalm 22 we see a magnificent portrait of the suffering Shepherd; While here in psalm 23, we see a joyful portrait of the rejoicing and satisfied flock
- In Psalm 22 we see the Shepherd hanged on the tree to carry the labors of His people, and to bring them forth through His cross to His glories
- While here, in Psalm 23, we see the Shepherd leading His flock to bring them forth to green pastures; His paradise



Introduction

- Finding in it symbols of the holy and sacramental works of the Lord Christ, the early Christians made it an integral part of the liturgy of baptism
- In the evening of the feast of resurrection, the newly baptized catechumens used to sing it after getting the two sacraments of Baptism and 'Meron', wearing white garments, and holding candles, and joyfully hastening toward the altar of the Lord to partake of the heavenly banquet
- It is Psalm 22 in Agpeya and is prayed in the third hour to commemorate the descend of the Holy Spirit upon the disciples and the hour which our Lord was condemned



Introduction

- The Fathers of the Church saw in Psalm 23 both a prophecy and a summary of the mysteries (sacraments) of a new Christian
- “By this Psalm, Christ teaches the Church that, first of all, you must become a sheep of the Good Shepherd: the catechetical instruction guides you to the pastures and fountains of doctrine. Then you must be buried with Him into death by baptism. But this is not death, but a shadow and image of death. Then He prepares the mystical table. Then He anoints you with the oil of the Spirit. And finally He presents the wine that gladdens the heart of man and produces that sober inebriation characteristic of the true Christian” (St. Gregory of Nyssa)



Introduction

Psalm Outline

- The Lord as Shepherd 23:1-4
- The Lord as Host 23:5-6



The Lord as Shepherd 23:1-4

- Under a metaphor borrowed from scenes of pastoral life, with which David was familiar, he describes God's providential care in providing nourishment, guidance, protection, and abundance
- *The LORD is my shepherd*, Summarizes the message of the whole Psalm
- It declares, *The LORD is my shepherd* and thus acknowledges God as the one who protects and guides
- It is a familiar idea throughout the Bible that the Lord is a Shepherd to His people



The Lord as Shepherd 23:1-4

- The idea begins as early as the Book of Genesis, where Moses called the LORD *the Shepherd, the Stone of Israel* (Genesis 49:24) and, also in (Genesis 48:15; Psalm 80:1; Isaiah 40:11)
- Christ's relation to His people is often represented by the figure of a shepherd (John 10:14; Hebrews 13:20; 1 Peter 2:25; 5:4)
- It is important to recognize, however, that “shepherd” signifies more than someone who shepherd sheep
- Shepherd was a royal metaphor in the ancient East
- Therefore, to call God shepherd is to acknowledge God as one who rules over one’s life, to surrender to the will to God



The Lord as Shepherd 23:1-4

- David knew this in a personal sense; *is my shepherd*
- It wasn't just that the Lord was a shepherd for others in a theoretical sense; He was a real, personal *shepherd* for David himself
- Overwhelmingly, the idea behind God's role as *shepherd* is of loving care and concern
- St. Augustine says, "The Church speaks to Christ: "The Lord feedeth me, and I shall lack nothing" . The Lord Jesus Christ is my Shepherd, "and I shall lack nothing."



The Lord as Shepherd 23:1-4

- And St. Gregory of Nyssa says, “David invites you to be one of the sheep whose Shepherd is Christ and who lack no good thing. The Good Shepherd makes Himself everything for you: pasture, water of rest, food, dwelling place, and the way of righteousness, and He gives you the Comforter, distributing His grace according to your needs”
- Those who belong to Christ “have as their guide not a simple holy man, as Israel had Moses, but the Prince of Shepherds and the Teacher of doctrine, in whom are found all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge” (St. Cyril of Alexandria)



The Lord as Shepherd 23:1-4

- *I shall not want*, Means, All my needs are supplied by the Lord, *my shepherd*
- And also means, “I decide to not desire more than what the Lord, *my shepherd* gives.”
- For He Himself will be my food, drink, clothing, protection, peace, and all my help for a life full of joy
- His grace is sufficient for me, I lack nothing
- *He makes me to lie down* — Not only to feed, but to rest, and enjoy tranquility, peace, and safety; in *green pastures*
- We are so weak that we even need God’s help to enable us to lie down, *He makes me*



The Lord as Shepherd 23:1-4

- The green pastures are not outer blessings, but rather an internal where we enjoy the dwelling of Christ in us, to grant us satisfaction and we will be in no need of anything
- He faithfully guides the sheep to *green pasture* after getting plenty to eat
- The flock are led by the Shepherd to a stream of water, to a fountain flowing with fresh water, to drink and quench their thirst and revive their souls
- Yet the flock cannot go to these fountains of water by themselves but need the leadership of the Shepherd to provide His flock with their needs



The Lord as Shepherd 23:1-4

- The rest of the soul is so hard to attain that nobody ever does reach it except by the power of God
- The shepherd also knew the good places to make his sheep rest
- St. Augustine describes the *green pastures* as “place of fresh pasture, leading me to faith.”
- And by *the still waters* is “the water of baptism, whereby they are refreshed who have lost health and strength”
- St. Cyril of Alexandria teaches that “The place of verdure (green pastures) means the ever-fresh words of Holy Scripture, which nourishes the hearts of believers and gives them spiritual strength.”



The Lord as Shepherd 23:1-4

- After having fed the person who comes to Him in faith with His word, the Lord leads him to the waters of baptism, making him a sheep of His holy flock, whose destiny is only to enter into God's rest
- "He shall feed His flock like a shepherd: He shall gather the lambs with His arm, and carry them in His bosom, and shall gently lead those that are young...they shall not hunger nor thirst; neither shall the heat nor sun smite them...(Isaiah 40:11,49:10) St. Cyril of Alexandria



The Lord as Shepherd 23:1-4

- The tender care of the shepherd described in the previous verse had its intended and expected effect
- David's soul was restored by the figurative *green pastures* and *still waters* the shepherd brought him to
- *restores my soul*, Probably brings me to repentance
- Or, perhaps He restores it to its original purity
- Perhaps David speaks of his own experience
- After having learned of God's ways he strayed from the paths of righteousness and fell into deadly sin



The Lord as Shepherd 23:1-4

- When he forsake his ways; and having done that, He leads him, even more carefully than before, for a second time we have the psalmist's declaration, *He leads me in the paths of righteousness*
- *paths of righteousness*, In straight, and plain, and safe paths, where the sheep is neither hurt, nor weary, nor in danger of wandering
- But what are *the paths of righteousness*, but the righteousness of Christ;...He leads me to Himself, being "The Way"
- This can help anyone, no matter how far he may have strayed from God, in Christ may be converted and return to the way of righteousness and learn to do God's will



The Lord as Shepherd 23:1-4

- By His word He directs me to the right ways of truth, and holiness, and righteousness, and by His Spirit He influences and enables me to choose them, and to continue to walk in them
- *For His name's sake*, For His own glory and the praise of His grace, and not for any merits in men
- God's care towards men are derived from the perfections and goodness of His own nature
- As St. Augustine describe it, "He hath brought me forth in the narrow ways, wherein few walk...not for my merit's sake, but for His Name's sake."

The Lord as Shepherd 23:1-4



- It is called *the valley of the shadow of death*, and not ‘the valley of death’, as the authority of death is no more
- According to St. Augustine *the shadow of death* is to walk in the midst of this life
- This is the first dark note in this beautiful psalm
- Previously David wrote of *green pastures* and *still waters* and *paths of righteousness*
- Yet when following the Lord as shepherd, one may still *walk through the valley of the shadow of death*



The Lord as Shepherd 23:1-4

- David used this powerful phrase to speak of some kind of dark, fearful experience
- *though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, Though I am in risks of death, though in the midst of dangers, deep as a valley, dark as a shadow, and dreadful as death itself, I will fear no evil*
- Neither the evil one Satan, who is the wolf that comes to the flock to kill and to destroy, and the roaring lion that seeks whom he may devour, since the Lord was his shepherd, and on his side



The Lord as Shepherd 23:1-4

- Nor evil men, who kill the body and can do no more
- According to the Church Fathers *valley of the shadow of death* is Baptism
- “It is necessary for you to be buried in death with Him by baptism. But it is not really death, but a shadow and image of death” St. Gregory of Nyssa
- “For we are baptized into the death of Christ, baptism is called the shadow and image of death, in face of which there is no longer anything to fear” St. Cyril of Alexandria



The Lord as Shepherd 23:1-4

- *For You are with me*, The same Protector, the same gracious and merciful God, will be still with him - leading him, guiding his steps, shepherding him, keeping him from evil
- *Your rod and Your staff*, Two words noting the same thing, and both pointing to God's pastoral care over him
- They were instruments used by a shepherd
- The idea is of a strong walking rod, used to gently (as much as possible) guide the sheep and protect them from potential predators



The Lord as Shepherd 23:1-4

- *Your rod and Your staff, they comfort me* May also refer to the outpouring of the Holy Spirit
- “He comforts the believer, or guides him, with the rod and staff (the Shepherd’s crook) of the Spirit, for the One who guides or comforts is the Spirit (the Paraclete – the Greek verb here is “parekalesan”).” St. Gregory of Nyssa
- “Thy discipline, like a rod for a flock of sheep, and like a staff for children of some size, and growing out of the natural into spiritual life, they have not been grievous to me; rather have they comforted me: because Thou art mindful of me.” St. Augustine



The Lord as Host 23:5-6

- The figure is changed; God is now described as the host who bountifully treats the Psalmist at His table, and provides him with a lodging in His own house
- David envisioned the provision and goodness given by the Lord inviting him to a rich *table* prepared for him
- *table* suggests *abundance*; *prepare* suggests *care*; *before me* suggests the personal connection
- The Lord's care and concern doesn't eliminate *the presence of my enemies* but enables the experience of God's goodness and abundance even in their midst



The Lord as Host 23:5-6

- The psalmist probably means that God, who cares for us, seeing our enemy standing against us, He, by Himself, prepares a table for us to eat without haste, confusion, or disturbance; to enjoy without fear from the enemy lying in wait for us....
- One shall have joy as well as safety; he shall be prepared for service as well as protected from destruction
- Being His beloved own, He grants us peace and fulfilment in the midst of the spiritual battle
- In His love He, by Himself, presents the table to us, after washing our feet together with His disciples



The Lord as Host 23:5-6

- The Shepherd who granted His people a victorious exodus, prepared for them a table (of Manna) while on their journey in the wilderness
- Our Lord Jesus Christ grants us the table of His body and blood
- St. Cyril of Jerusalem comments, “What does David mean by this (*“You prepare a table before me ...”*) if not the mystical and spiritual table which God has prepared for us?... And you see that David is speaking of the chalice, over which Christ said after giving thanks, “This is the chalice of my blood”



The Lord as Host 23:5-6

- St. Ambrose also says, “Having abandoned the remains of the former error and renewed his youth like that of an eagle, the newly baptized hurriedly approaches the celestial banquet. He arrives, and seeing the altar prepared, he exclaims, ‘Thou hast prepared a table before me...’”
- Despite the dangers about and the *presence of enemies*, David enjoyed the richness of his host’s goodness
- He was refreshed by a *head* anointed *with oil*, his *cup* was over filled
- In the old days, those in grief, used to cover themselves with dust and ashes, (Job 2:12,42:6; 2 Samuel 3:31; Lamentations 2:10)



The Lord as Host 23:5-6

- And in joy, they used to wash up and anoint themselves with oil
- And anointing the guests with oil was a common sign of honor and hospitality (Psalm 92:10; Amos 6:6; Mathew 6:17; Luke 7:38, 46)
- Also in the Holy Bible, anointing was used to designate a person for a significant role
- In the Old Testament, prophets were anointed (1 Kings 19:16)
- Priests were anointed (Exodus 40:13-15)
- Aaron was anointed as High Priest during the journey in the wilderness



The Lord as Host 23:5-6

- Kings were anointed (1 Samuel 10:1,16:3,12-13; 2 Samuel 23:1; 1 Kings 1:39)
- The New Testament speaks of Jesus as anointed (Luke 4:18; John 20:31; Acts 5:42; Hebrews 1:9, etc.)
- His anointing set Him apart for His unique role as prophet, priest, and king
- When the psalmist says that God has anointed his head with oil, he means that God has marked him as special—has set him apart for a significant role



The Lord as Host 23:5-6

- It may also mean the pouring out largely upon him the Spirit of God and His graces
- The anointing which teaches all things, and filling him with spiritual joy and comfort
- In the Sacrament of 'Meron', every believer is anointed as a general priest, to become the possession of God, and to receive God as his own possession and portion
- *My cup runs over*, I not only have what I wish, but I have more; not only all I can hold, but something to spare
- According to St. Augustine, *My cup runs over* means spiritual joy



The Lord as Host 23:5-6

- It is the pouring of the Holy Spirit
- As we read in Acts 2:13-17, *“Others mocking said, “They are full of new wine. But Peter, standing up with the eleven, raised his voice and said to them, “Men of Judea and all who dwell in Jerusalem, let this be known to you, and heed my words. ¹⁵ For these are not drunk, as you suppose, since it is only the third hour of the day. ¹⁶ But this is what was spoken by the prophet Joel: ¹⁷ ‘And it shall come to pass in the last days, says God, That I will pour out of My Spirit on all flesh; Your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, Your young men shall see visions, Your old men shall dream dreams.””*



The Lord as Host 23:5-6

- St. Gregory of Nyssa comments, “Christ, providing the soul with the wine ‘that makes glad the heart of men,’ provokes in it that sober intoxication which elevates the dispositions of the heart from transitory to eternal things...He who has tasted, in fact, this drunkenness trades the temporal for that which has no end and remains in the house of the Lord all the days of his life”
- As God's "*goodness and mercy*" have always followed him in the past, David has no doubt that they will continue to stay with him *All the days of my life*
- For nothing can separate us from the love of God, if we do not separate ourselves from it



The Lord as Host 23:5-6

- Davis is saying, “The divine goodness and mercy having followed me all the days of my life, when that is ended, I shall go to a better world, to dwell in the house of the Lord for ever, the house of my heavenly Father, in which there are many mansions
- The Psalm ends with the calmest assurance that he would enjoy the presence of the Lord *forever* – both in his days on this earth and beyond
- As David says in Psalm 27:4, “*One thing I have desired of the LORD, That will I seek: That I may dwell in the house of the LORD All the days of my life, To behold the beauty of the LORD, And to inquire in His temple.*”



Discussion

- Who is the author of this Psalm? What did the author know about being a shepherd?
- Who is the Shepherd described in this Psalm?
- What kind of hope and strength for tomorrow does the Lord bring to those who follow Him?
- What future promise does this psalm give to those who will follow the Lord?

Discussion



- It seems as though sometimes the rod has to startle the sheep and drive them in a way they had not intended to go. How is this a “comfort” in our lives?
- How do we become God’s sheep?
- In what ways does a “shepherd” provide a good picture of the Lord?