Psalm 23

POEM TEXT

1 The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want.
2 He maketh me to lie down in green pastures: he leadeth me beside the still waters.
3 He restoreth my soul: he leadeth me in the paths of righteousness for his name's sake.
4 Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil: for thou art with me; thy rod and thy staff they comfort me.
5 Thou preparest a table before me in the presence of mine enemies: thou anointest my head with oil; my cup runneth over.
6 Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life: and I will dwell in the house of the Lord for ever.

SUMMARY

God is the herdsman who cares for me, his sheep; I will never lack anything under his protection.

He gives me rest in green fields, and leads me alongside quiet streams.

He rejuvenates my spirit: he teaches me how to be a good person and, in doing so, to honor him.

Yes, even when I go through the worst and most frightening times, I won't be afraid of anything: for you, God, are with me, and your protective shepherd's crooks reassure me.

You, God, lay out a feast for me even when I'm surrounded by those who hate me; you bless my forehead with sacred oils; my cup overflows with blessings.

Without doubt, goodness and kindness will be with me my whole life long, and I will live in God's house forever.

THEMES

FAITH IN GOD'S POWER AND PROTECTION

Psalm 23 is a song of gratitude to a loving God in a painful world. In this ancient poem, a speaker asserts their faith in God as their protector, the "shepherd" who both guides and blesses them. To this speaker, God's goodness means that they have nothing to fear: whatever happens to them, God will be with them. God, this poem suggests, is a benevolent source of deep consolation, even when the world seems menacing and terrible.

The world, the speaker suggests, is a place full of trials and difficulties. Everyone, at one point or another, must walk through "the valley of the shadow of death" (that is, confront deep grief and suffering), and "enemies" are all around.

But the speaker feels the presence of God even in the midst of these trials. God, to this speaker, is a "shepherd," a gentle, watchful protector who's present even when the speaker feels lost in "shadow." God's company doesn't take *away* suffering, it just means that the speaker doesn't have to *fear* it: like a a sheep, the speaker can trust their "shepherd" to look after them, and to lead them on the "paths of righteousness" to a good and virtuous life. God's presence is as nourishing and calming as "green pastures" and "still waters."

The speaker's faith in God doesn't just provide protection and reassurance, but a sense of blessings beyond what the speaker could hope for. Right in the middle of the speaker's "enemies," God "preparest a table" for the speaker and "anointest" the speaker with sacred oil, making their life feel abundant and sacred even in difficulty. God's goodness, the speaker says, is so bountiful that their "cup runneth over": they overflow with love and wonder. The presence of God can make even life in "the presence of [...] enemies" feel holy.

The joy of faith, this psalm suggests, is not that it makes life easy, but that it allows the faithful to endure pain calmly, knowing that an infinitely good God watches over them. God's presence is not just consoling, but transformative, allowing the speaker to feel safe, loved, and abundantly fulfilled even in the midst of suffering.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-6

LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

LINE 1

The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want.

Psalm 23, a hymn from the biblical Book of Psalms, begins with one of the most enduring metaphors in world literature. To the ancient writer of this hymn of faith and praise, God is not a stern and distant king, but a humble, gentle shepherd. By implication, the speaker is a sheep, one of the "flock" of humanity.

This line is so famous and familiar that at first it might be hard

to see how strange it is. Perhaps the best way to see it fresh is to think a little harder about the words "Lord" and "shepherd."

The connotations of "Lord" are all to do with power and authority: a lord is a noble person, the master of his domain. But when this psalm was originally written in Hebrew (likely sometime between 500 and 100 BCE), the word translated as "Lord" here was in fact the Tetragrammaton—that is, the sequence of four Hebrew letters sometimes given as YHWH or Yahweh in English. This solemn and holy name was God's answer when the prophet Moses asked God what he was called: it's a word that suggests a direct and awesome encounter with the creator of the universe.

Shepherding, in contrast, was the humblest of jobs. When this psalm was written, shepherds would spend most of their time living out in the open with their sheep, protecting them from predators. And shepherding was one of the most common ways for the people of the ancient Middle East to make their living. To say the Lord was your shepherd would have been rather like saying the Lord is your accountant or your construction worker or your grocery clerk.

In other words, this metaphor—the first in a poem that will be built almost entirely out of metaphors—unites the transcendent with the everyday. If the Lord is a shepherd, he's as down-to-earth as you can get. And he's protective. As the speaker goes on to say, with the Lord as their shepherd, they "shall not want"—they won't lack anything. The speaker's almighty God, in other words, is a daily protective, nourishing presence, a caretaker.

LINE 2

> *He maketh me to lie down in green pastures: he leadeth me beside the still waters.*

The second verse of Psalm 23 builds on the extended metaphor of God-as-shepherd. Here, the speaker uses images of beautiful fields to suggest the spiritual nourishment they get from God's protective presence in their lives.

These fields are full of everything a sheep likes: green grass to eat and to rest in, and fresh water to drink. The metaphorical suggestion here is that God provides his followers with spiritual rest and refreshment.

- Here, again, it's worth remembering that this poem was written in the ancient Middle East, where the landscape was often far from green and watery. God's benevolence must feel to the speaker like an internal oasis, a lush respite from the harsh rocky countryside of the external world.

The imagery here makes that point even clearer. The fields aren't just "pastures," but "green pastures," fresh springy fields. And the waters are "still"—an image that's visual and auditory at once, suggesting deep, quiet pools. There's something both tranquil and fertile about this landscape; God, to this speaker, provides peace and new life at once.

Readers might notice here that the English translation uses old-fashioned language, saying "maketh" and "leadeth" rather than "makes" and "leads." That's because this translation was written in the 17th century: it comes from the famous King James Version, one of the most influential and famous English translations of the Bible. See the Context section for a lot more about that.

LINE 3

> *He restoreth my soul: he leadeth me in the paths of righteousness for his name's sake.*

The speaker reflects more deeply on their experience of God using a technique that shapes not just this psalm, but the whole psalmic tradition: parallelism. Remember, this psalm comes from a long sequence of psalms, probably composed by many different authors over the course of centuries. Parallelism is one of the devices that makes this vast and ancient body of ancient literature feel cohesive.

At first glance, this verse seems a touch more literal than the previous one. It begins by straightforwardly describing what God does: "He restoreth my soul." Then it returns to metaphor, imagining that God leads the speaker "in the paths of righteousness," down the road to moral goodness—a road that brings glory to God's name.

Take a look at how this verse sits alongside the previous one—and take special note of the caesurae and anaphora here:

> He maketh me to lie down in green pastures: || he leadeth me beside the still waters.
> He restoreth my soul: || he leadeth me in the paths of righteousness for his name's sake.

These two verses are constructed in just the same way: each links two ideas that begin in the same way, with the word "he" and a verb. This mirroring suggests that the two verses might actually reflect *each other*, providing two different interpretations of the same central feeling.

To spell that idea out a little further: lying down in "green pastures" might be an image of what it means to have one's soul "restore[d]." And being led "beside the still waters" might be another way of looking at being led "in the paths of righteousness": perhaps both these paths feel tranquil and refreshing. (The repetition of the word "leadeth" here makes that interpretation feel even more plausible.) Through parallelism, the speaker presents their faith as both a respite and a journey at once: God keeps them rested and protected and leads them onward at exactly the same time.

This kind of parallelism is a common feature of the psalms. It's a way for the speaker to give a fuller picture of their relationship

with an infinite and almighty God—a pretty difficult thing to put into words! By looking at the same idea from different literal and metaphorical angles, the speaker starts to create a three-dimensional image of how their faith feels to them.

LINE 4

> *Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil: for thou art with me; thy rod and thy staff they comfort me.*

Verse 4 begins with a famous, mysterious metaphor: the "valley of the shadow of death." Even walking through this dark and ominous valley, the speaker says, they won't be afraid: they know God is with them even in the worst danger.

In the original Hebrew, the words given here as the "valley of the shadow of death" translate to something more like "the darkest valley." But the 17th-century translators' poetic reading is evocative. The metaphor of the "valley of the shadow of death" suggests a real low point of grief and despair. That "shadow" makes it feel like the sunlight of life just isn't getting through to the poor wanderer who travels through that "valley"—a journey that everyone endures at one time or another.

If the speaker isn't afraid in this terrible valley, it's because they know that God is with them. In fact, they feel God so close to them that they can address him directly, calling him "thou." The apostrophe here underlines the speaker's point: God is *always* there, right next to anyone who cares to speak to him.

The translators' use of "thou" makes the speaker's intimacy with God feel even stronger. Though it sounds fancy to the modern ear, "thou" was once an *informal* way of saying "you," comparable to "tu" in modern Romance languages like French, Italian, and Spanish—a word one uses to address people one knows well. The speaker feels able to speak to God not just as an almighty protector, but as a friend or a beloved.

That sense of God as a close friend links back to God's humble, down-to-earth role as a shepherd. The speaker returns to that extended metaphor at the end of this verse, drawing on the "comfort" of God's "rod" and "staff." These shepherding tools, used to guide sheep in the right direction (and to whack any menacing predators that might be skulking around), suggest that part of the speaker's faith is a feeling that they're not just being protected, but *steered* by God. Even when they're walking through the dark, they feel that God won't let them go astray.

LINE 5

> *Thou preparest a table before me in the presence of mine enemies: thou anointest my head with oil; my cup runneth over.*

The speaker introduces a whole new extended metaphor for God. Here, God is no longer a shepherd, but a bountiful host.

In this context, to be a host doesn't just mean to pop a few corks and put out some snacks. Hosting, in the ancient Middle East (and to this day in many cultures), was a sacred task: hosts were meant to follow a solemn moral code, sheltering and shielding their guests at all costs. (The biblical story of Lot, in which Lot is prepared to sacrifice his own family to a mob in order to protect two strangers who appear at his door, is just one vivid example.) When God "preparest a table" for the speaker among their "enemies," there's the sense that he's not just nourishing the speaker with a banquet, but keeping them safe under his roof.

The sacredness of God's hospitality also appears in the metaphor of God "anoint[ing]" the speaker's head with oil. In this ancient ritual (again, one still practiced in many contexts today, from baptisms to coronations), a special person is marked on the forehead with a blessed ointment. This ceremony suggests that this person is somehow *chosen*. Perhaps the clearest biblical example is that of the Messiah himself: the word "Christ" literally means "the anointed one." In anointing the speaker, God makes it clear that the speaker is wanted, loved, and singled out—precious to him.

This holy banquet fills the speaker up to overflowing with joy, gratitude, love, and blessings: "My cup runneth over," the speaker says, in another famous metaphor. Here, the speaker *is* that cup, so overwhelmed by God's goodness that they can't even contain it all. Besides suggesting that the speaker feels more than fulfilled by God's care, overflowing is a common metaphor for the feeling of being poetically inspired. Perhaps this psalm itself is wine spilled from the speaker's overrunning cup.

LINE 6

> *Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life: and I will dwell in the house of the Lord for ever.*

Psalm 23 concludes with a firm declaration of faith. The speaker is unshakable in their conviction that God will always protect, guide, and nourish them, like a shepherd and a host at once. That conviction appears in the very first word of verse 6: "Surely." God's goodness, this verse insists, is eternal, and the speaker will always live in God's metaphorical "house."

That house builds on the extended metaphor of the host, but it also suggests a familial closeness. Living in God's "house," the speaker might be not just God's guest, but his child. Either way, there's a feeling that in God, the speaker is forever spiritually at home, even when they might appear to be lost and wandering in the external world.

Here at the end of the psalm, take a look back at the way punctuation has worked throughout. Every single verse uses at least one strong caesura, and often two; every single verse comes to a conclusion with a firm end stop. This punctuation isn't present in the Hebrew texts, but it does mark an authentic pattern of thought in the original: each of these verses groups several different images together, juxtaposing them through

emphatic pauses. The final effect is something like a kaleidoscope. Each verse describes God's goodness, but shifts the frame just a little, examining that goodness from a new angle. To even begin to talk about God, this rhythm suggests, one has to be ready to see him in myriad ways at once: he's too huge, too complex, to reduce to a few simple words.

But God, to the speaker, is also as close as a friend, as kindly as a host, as humble as a shepherd. The combination of down-to-earth metaphors and an awestruck, ever-evolving perspective suggests that this speaker's faith is both a daily comfort and a transcendent wonder.

POETIC DEVICES

APOSTROPHE

The speaker in Psalm 23 uses apostrophe to evoke their intimate relationship with God.

In verses 4 and 5, the speaker speaks to God with tremendous faith and trust. Even in the "valley of the shadow of death"—times of danger and fear—the speaker isn't afraid, because "thou art with me." That is, this speaker feels that God is always there, even in the worst of times. Addressing God directly here, the speaker evokes exactly the closeness they're describing: they don't need to go find God to speak to him, he's already right there.

In verse 5, the speaker's address to God turns from an expression of faith to an expression of praise. Here, the speaker speaks to God about the great and unlikely good God has done for them, laying out a feast for them even when they're surrounded by "enemies" and blessing them with holy oil. God, of course, could be expected to already know that he's done this for the speaker; the speaker's direct apostrophe suggests that the *speaker* gets something out of thanking God for his good works, delighting in thinking over all the blessings that God has given them.

In the 17th-century English translation we're working with here, the speaker doesn't just address God directly, but calls him "thou." This is the English equivalent of the word "tu" in Romance languages like French or Italian—that is, it's an especially intimate way of saying "you," the word you'd use in talking to someone you know and love. Both the psalm's apostrophe and that apostrophe's flavor suggest that the speaker's relationship with God isn't just close, but tender.

Where Apostrophe appears in the poem:

- **Line 4:** "thou art with me; thy rod and thy staff they comfort me."
- **Line 5:** "Thou preparest a table before me in the presence of mine enemies: thou anointest my head with oil;"

CAESURA

The caesurae in Psalm 23 give the poem its stately pace and draw attention to its characteristic use of parallelism. (For more on that, see the Parallelism entry.)

In studying Psalm 23, it's important to remember that this version is a translation. In the original Hebrew, there wasn't any punctuation; there were spaces and clear divisions, but no colons and semicolons. The punctuation that the 17th-century English translators use to mark caesurae here is a way of communicating the divisions between *thoughts* in the original.

That said, when one reads this psalm in English, the caesurae give it a distinctly slow, grand sound. Listen to the caesura in the famous first verse:

> The Lord is my shepherd; || I shall not want.

That strong semicolon asks readers to take a substantial pause here, a deep breath. It also prepares them to pay attention to the next thought, which will be different, but connected to the first.

The verses of the psalms tend to work in tandem: each new clause reflects on the last, examining the same idea in a different way. Here, for instance, the idea of not "want[ing]" (or lacking anything) should be understood to be a consequence of God's benevolent shepherding. (Lots more about this kind of parallel thought in the Parallelism section.) Taking a big pause in the middle of the verse allows readers to let these two ideas sink in individually, and then bring them together.

Take a look at how that works in verse 5:

> Thou preparest a table before me in the presence of mine enemies: || thou anointest my head with oil; || my cup runneth over.

The caesurae here split this verse into images of a feast, a holy ceremony, and an overflowing cup—and then ask readers to think about how those images are connected. There's almost a feeling that the psalm's "camera" is zooming in here as it registers the whole table, the speaker sitting at the table to be anointed, and finally the speaker's brimming cup.

Across the psalm, caesurae both control the flow of ideas and slow the verses down. This isn't a poem to rattle through, the caesurae suggest, but a serious declaration of faith that asks to be digested one image at a time.

Where Caesura appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "shepherd; I"
- **Line 2:** "pastures: he"
- **Line 3:** "soul: he"
- **Line 4:** "evil: for," "me; thy"

- **Line 5:** "enemies: thou," "oil; my"
- **Line 6:** "life: and"

END-STOPPED LINE

Every verse in Psalm 23 ends with a firm period, a solid end-stop that gives each new idea its own space. But, as with caesura and other devices based on punctuation, it's important to remember that the version we're examining here is a translation, and the original Hebrew wasn't punctuated. The end-stops here get at a way the writer of the original text *thought* rather than a way they *wrote*.

Each verse in Psalm 23 examines a different angle on the same basic thought: that God is a benevolent and generous protector. The end-stops mark the divisions between these different angles. For instance, take a look at the way end-stops separate the psalm's two major extended metaphors:

> Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil: for thou art with me; thy rod and thy staff they comfort **me.**
> Thou preparest a table before me in the presence of mine enemies: thou anointest my head with oil; my cup runneth **over.**

Here, the metaphor of God-as-shepherd and the metaphor of God-as-host fall one after the other, each firmly contained by those final periods. But these two separate verses are also shaped the same way, built out of three images each. The end-stops that divide these metaphors don't just ask readers to consider how these two verses are *different*, but how they're the *same*.

Like the psalm's caesurae, end-stops also slow the poem down. Those final periods encourage readers not to scurry right along to the next verse, but to take a reflective second of quiet between each one. Remember, the Psalms were and are sacred hymns—poetic or musical prayers, in other words—and meant to communicate deep and serious truths, ones worth taking a little time over.

Where End-Stopped Line appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "want."
- **Line 2:** "waters."
- **Line 3:** "sake."
- **Line 4:** "me."
- **Line 5:** "over."
- **Line 6:** "ever."

PARALLELISM

Parallelism is one of the most important and prominent devices both in Psalm 23 and in the Book of Psalms more generally. While the psalms were probably composed across centuries and are often very different, most of them use parallel thoughts and language to build their complex ideas. By putting related-but-different ideas and words side by side and structuring them in similar ways, Psalm 23 asks its readers to consider God from many angles, getting a three-dimensional picture of faith.

There are two flavors of parallelism here: parallelism *within* verses, and parallelism *between* verses. Within verses, a second idea is often shaped the same way as the first. For instance, take a look at verse 3:

> **He restoreth** my soul: **he leadeth** me in the paths of righteousness for his name's sake.

Here, the speaker uses not just parallelism, but anaphora, starting the two clauses here with the same word: "he." In both of these instances, that "he" comes before a verb: "restoreth" and "leadeth" (or "restores" and "leads," in modern English). There's a subtle suggestion here that this restoration and guidance are two ways of looking at the same thing: maybe following "the paths of righteousness" is exactly what restores and refreshes the speaker's soul.

But there's also a bigger parallelism here, one that takes in verses 2 *and* 3:

> **He maketh** me to lie down in green pastures: **he leadeth** me beside the still waters.
> **He restoreth** my soul: **he leadeth** me in the paths of righteousness for his name's sake.

These similarly structured verses, examined closely, seem to be different ways of seeing the same spiritual process. The speaker's rest and nourishment in those metaphorical "green pastures" in verse 2 connects with the "restor[ation]" that falls in the same place in verse 3. And the parallel between the two instances of "leadeth" is even clearer: being led "beside the still waters" must be as calming as walking the "path of righteousness."

Both parallel *language* and parallel *thoughts* give this psalm its richness, creating a kaleidoscopic perspective in which everything seems connected and patterned. Perhaps that reflects the deep connectedness the speaker feels in their relationship with God.

Where Parallelism appears in the poem:

- **Line 2:** "He maketh," "he leadeth"
- **Line 3:** "He restoreth," "he leadeth"
- **Line 5:** "Thou preparest," "thou anointest"

METAPHOR

If one took the metaphors out of Psalm 23, there'd be hardly

anything left: every single verse is built on rich figurative language. All this metaphor helps the speaker to evoke something it's pretty difficult to put in literal terms: their intimate relationship with an infinite God.

(In this section, we'll be looking at the poem's individual moments of metaphor; for a deeper reading of the major extended metaphors of God-as-shepherd and God-as-host, see the Extended Metaphor entry.)

The smaller metaphors of this psalm build on its extended metaphors, digging deeper into the ideas that God is a shepherd or a host. In the psalm's first four verses, where the speaker explores the shepherd idea, most of the metaphors deal with the landscapes in which one might find a shepherd and his flock:

- The shepherd God leads his metaphorical sheep, the speaker, to "green pastures" and "still waters": in other words, to *spiritual* nourishment and rest.
- All that green wetness might even have suggested a paradise like the Garden of Eden to the original writer of this psalm, who lived in a dry, hot, rocky Middle Eastern landscape.

God also guides the speaker down the "paths of righteousness":

- The "path" is a common metaphor for life itself; if God takes the speaker down the paths of "righteousness," he's teaching them to lead a good and virtuous life.

But God is also there even when the spiritual landscape isn't so refreshing. One of this psalm's most famous metaphors is "the valley of the shadow of death"—an evocative image of the times when life's "path" feels dark, treacherous, frightening, and painful. (Note, though, that this image comes from the poem's 17th-century translators, who took a few liberties with the original Hebrew; a more literal translation might be a plain old "dark valley," or even the "darkest valley." See the Resources section for more on that.)

- Even in this terrible emotional place, God's shepherding tools, his "rod" and "staff," give the speaker "comfort." The rod and staff, long sticks used to guide sheep, here suggest God's guidance and protection, the way he might help the speaker to stay on track through their sufferings.

In verse 5, the overarching metaphor changes. Here, God is not a shepherd, but a generous host:

- The metaphorical "table" he prepares for the speaker suggests the nourishment of faith, an inner feast.
- The "oil" he anoints the speaker with is a reference to an ancient religious ceremony (still practiced in various forms) in which a special person—for instance, a king, an honored guest, or a new convert to a religion—has their forehead marked with sacred oils. (The anointed person might even be the Messiah himself: the word "Christ" literally means "anointed one.") Here, the metaphor suggests that the speaker feels *chosen* by God, marked out as God's own.

And when, in another famous image, the speaker's "cup runneth over," the metaphor vividly evokes the feeling of being so full of joy and gratitude that one can't even hold it all:

- God, this metaphor suggests, is so good that there's no way for the speaker to *contain* how good he is: his benevolence is infinite.

Finally, in the psalm's last metaphor, the speaker expresses their confidence that they will "dwell in the house of the Lord for ever":

- That sheltering "house of the Lord" sums up all the protection and comfort the previous metaphors have evoked: under God's metaphorical sheltering roof, the speaker is *at home*, experiencing the security, comfort, nourishment, and protection of faith.

Where Metaphor appears in the poem:

- Line 1
- Line 2
- Line 3
- Line 4
- Line 5
- Line 6

IMAGERY

The imagery in Psalm 23 complements and enriches the metaphors, making the speaker's inner landscape feel tangible and vivid.

For instance, consider the fields that the "shepherd" God leads the speaker to. These aren't just any old fields, but "green pastures" crisscrossed by streams of "still waters." The greenness evokes a lush, springy landscape—a place for sheep to rest and to eat their fill. And the stillness of the waters suggests not just a refreshing place to drink, but a *quiet* place: if the waters are still, they're deep, calm, and peaceful. Taken together, these little touches of imagery conjure up a whole rich landscape that's nourishing, restorative, and restful; one

can feel the softness of fresh green grass and hear the almost-imperceptible sound of those "still waters."

Elsewhere, things are a little less peaceful. The speaker also visits the "valley of the shadow of death," a metaphor for life's times of trial and suffering. This image is the invention of the 17th-century scholars who translated the Hebrew psalms into English; in the original, the valley is merely described as dark. (See the Resources section for more on that.) But this line has become seriously famous, and for good reason: the image of the "shadow of death" gives readers an unforgettable shiver. Perhaps the reader can remember a time they hiked in a valley and felt a chill as the hills around it shaded them from the sun. If this valley contains the "shadow of death," the light and warmth of life itself can't get through to the speaker as they travel.

One last famous piece of imagery appears in verse 5, when the speaker, rejoicing over God's bounty, cries, "my cup runneth over." Here, there's a tactile image: the reader can perhaps not just see, but *feel* the sides of a goblet running with wine, like a fountain. This final image evokes the deep gratitude, marvel, and joy the speaker finds in God: there's just no way they can hold it all in. Perhaps this psalm itself is a kind of overflowing.

Where Imagery appears in the poem:

- **Line 2:** "He maketh me to lie down in green pastures: he leadeth me beside the still waters"
- **Line 4:** "the valley of the shadow of death"
- **Line 5:** "my cup runneth over"

EXTENDED METAPHOR

The psalm's framework is built from two ancient and important extended metaphors: God as a shepherd, and God as a host. These overarching ideas say a lot about the cultural context the psalm emerged from.

Shepherding was an important way of making a living for the ancient Judaic people who wrote the psalms, but it was also a pretty humble activity. Shepherds were laborers, out in all weathers protecting their sheep. To call God a shepherd is to emphasize a strikingly gentle, down-to-earth side of an almighty world-creator—a gentleness that feels even more pronounced when the speaker imagines God in intimate terms as "my shepherd." The shepherd metaphor gets at one of the poem's biggest ideas: that God is an everyday presence, always there to protect and guide the speaker.

Hosting, meanwhile, was (and in many cultures still is) seen as a sacred duty, an honorable activity with a strict moral code. Hosts were meant to protect and provide for their guests—and guests weren't just the folks one chose to invite over, but anyone who presented themselves at one's house and asked for shelter and comfort. If God is a host, he's not just popping a few corks: he's taking on a holy burden to care for and honor all his people. But there's delight and relish in this metaphor, not just duty. God is a bounteous host, and he fills the speaker's metaphorical "glass" to overflowing with joy and blessings.

Where Extended Metaphor appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "The Lord is my shepherd"
- **Line 2:** "He maketh me to lie down in green pastures: he leadeth me beside the still waters."
- **Line 4:** "thy rod and thy staff they comfort me."
- **Line 5:** "Thou preparest a table before me in the presence of mine enemies: thou anointest my head with oil; my cup runneth over."

VOCABULARY

Shepherd (Line 1) - A person who takes care of a flock of sheep.

Want (Line 1) - To go without; to lack.

Maketh/Leadeth/Restoreth (Line 2, Line 3) - Makes, leads, restores.

Pastures (Line 2) - Fields for livestock to graze in.

Righteousness (Line 3) - Virtue; moral goodness.

Thou/Thy (Line 4, Line 5) - Archaic version of you/your. Despite sounding formal now, these were actually more informal, intimate ways of addressing someone.

Thy Rod and Thy Staff (Line 4) - A "rod" and "staff" are a shepherd's tools, long sticks used to guide sheep (and perhaps to thwack menacing wolves).

Preparest/Anointest (Line 5) - Prepares, anoints.

Mine (Line 5) - My.

Anointest (Line 5) - Anoints—that is, ceremonially rubs with oil, in a form of religious blessing.

Dwell (Line 6) - Live in; inhabit.

FORM, METER, & RHYME

FORM

Psalm 23 is, naturally, a psalm—an ancient hymn of praise taken from a long sequence of such hymns in the Bible.

The biblical psalms don't have a standard form: they can be two verses long, or two hundred. None uses a regular meter or rhyme scheme. This extremely famous example is built from six verses of all different lengths. Over the course of these few lines, the speaker accumulates a series of vivid metaphors describing the joy and comfort they find in God, moving from a vision of God as a shepherd caring for his flock to an image of God as a host laying out a sumptuous feast for the faithful.

The word "psalm" derives from a Greek word that means "a song set to harp music." Some traditions have it that the biblical

hero (and noted harpist) King David was both the author and the first performer of these songs. (The historical record, alas, suggests this romantic origin story probably isn't literally true; see the Context section for more on the long and complex history of the psalms.)

This psalm was originally written in Hebrew. Here, we're using the famous King James version, an early and influential English translation of the Bible. (See the Context section for more on that, too!)

METER

Neither the English translation we're looking at here nor the Hebrew original of Psalm 23 use a regular meter. This psalm creates its music, not through a steady rhythm, but through evocative, harmonious language and rich imagery.

(The 17th-century translators of the King James Bible took a few liberties with that imagery, though! For more on the differences between the original Hebrew and this, the best-known English translation, see Rabbi Zalman Schachter-Shalomi's brief talk in the Resources section.)

RHYME SCHEME

Psalm 23, like the rest of the biblical psalms, doesn't use a rhyme scheme—neither in the original Hebrew nor this English translation.

Rather than using related sounds, this psalm, like many of its fellows, uses parallelism to build sequences of related, "rhyming" *thoughts*. Note all the repetitive language here—all that anaphora of "he," for instance, which creates rhythm and music. (See the Parallelism entry under Poetic Devices for more on how this works.)

SPEAKER

All readers know about this speaker is that they're a person who feels a deep connection with God. This anonymous and genderless speaker talks to God directly, and in this translation even addresses him as "thou"—an intimate way of saying "you" (like the French or Italian "tu").

God, to this speaker, is a loving shepherd and a bounteous host, guiding and nourishing the speaker as they make their journey through life. The speaker overflows with awe, wonder, and gratitude at God's benevolence.

In their anonymity and their experience of the world's suffering, this speaker might stand for any person. Everyone, after all, has to go through "the valley of the shadow of death" (that is, a period of darkness, fear, and suffering) at one time or another. To this speaker, the consolation of faith is that one never has to go through that "valley" alone.

SETTING

There's no literal setting in Psalm 23. To the extent that this poem takes place anywhere, it takes place in the soul of the speaker as they explore the pains of life and the consolations of faith.

While the poem doesn't have a literal setting, it certainly has a lush metaphorical one. The speaker imagines God as a shepherd who leads his sheep to exactly the kinds of places sheep like best: verdant fields and quiet streams. The reader can imagine a gorgeous countryside in this image, a peaceful landscape full of rest and refreshment.

But these peaceful fields aren't the only place the speaker finds God. God is also there in "the valley of the shadow of death," a famous and evocative metaphor for the moments of deep and fearful suffering that turn up in any human life. Perhaps the reader can feel the chilliness of that shadow.

Later, the speaker visits another metaphorical place: a banquet table in God's own house. This isn't just any banquet, but a holy one, where God blesses the speaker with precious oils. This sacred feast, overflowing with bounty, is a vivid image of the inner nourishment the speaker finds through their faith.

CONTEXT

LITERARY CONTEXT

The long, influential history of Psalm 23 asks readers to look at the poem in more than one literary context. Here, we'll consider both the context of the psalm itself and the context of the translation we're using.

This psalm is an ancient hymn, probably written somewhere between 500 and 100 BCE, composed by a Hebrew-speaking Jewish author in lands that now belong to Israel and Palestine. It's one of a long series of psalms that appear in the Bible: prayer-songs that praise God, lament over sufferings, and rejoice over victories. Traditionally said to have been composed by the legendary biblical hero King David, the psalms were probably actually written by many anonymous authors over the course of many years. (More on that in the Historical Context section below.)

While the psalms might have been composed over centuries, they clearly influenced each other. For instance, most of them are shaped similarly, using parallelism to build complex layers of image and metaphor.

Psalm 23 was an important and influential psalm even in its own time; the idea of God as a shepherd trickled down through biblical tradition for centuries, all the way to the New Testament Book of John, in which Christ famously calls himself the "good shepherd."

Since then, this psalm has become the most familiar pieces of poetry in the world. Its message of consolation and protection makes it a go-to funeral reading, and references to Psalm 23 turn up absolutely everywhere in literature.

The psalms were written in Hebrew, so the version we're looking at here is a translation—and not just any translation, but the King James Version. That is, it comes from the 17th-century King James Bible, an ambitious English Protestant translation that had an incalculable influence on both world religion and literature.

The rich, musical language of the KJV imprinted itself deeply on English speakers, who until then had mostly needed to understand Latin, Greek, and Hebrew if they wanted to read the Bible for themselves. Its literary influence echoes down through the centuries; living authors like Marilynne Robinson still respond to its language.

While the King James Bible's version of Psalm 23 is perhaps the most famous English translation, it's far from the only one. This psalm is beloved in every faith tradition that draws on the Bible, and each of those traditions interprets the poem in its own way.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

The psalms were likely composed starting in the years after the Babylonian Exile, which began when the Babylonian Empire invaded the Kingdom of Judah in 597 BCE and destroyed the great Temple in Jerusalem. The Judeans, who believed that the fallen Temple was the literal house of God, were left to try to reconstruct their Jewish faith in exile or captivity; psalms were one way to make their belief portable.

But in literary and religious tradition, the psalms were said to have been composed by King David, the legendary king of Israel and Judah who rose to the throne after he charmed the former king, Saul, with his beautiful harp playing. The historical record suggests that the psalms were written by many different authors across many hundreds of years, and were first recorded long after the historical model for King David died. But the attribution to the legendary/literary David is an important part of the psalms' legacy, giving them a spice of grandeur and making them part of the sweep of biblical history.

Psalm 23 fits right in with both the historical and legendary context here. Historically, this psalm's expression of hope and faith in times of trouble might have been a balm to a grieving and exiled writer. Legendarily, King David himself was said to have been a shepherd, and so could be said to feel an even more intimate connection with the shepherd-God of this psalm.

The translation we're looking at here itself has a rich and complex historical context. Only a few generations before King James commissioned an English translation of the Bible in 1604, the very idea of such a translation—let alone one sanctioned by an English monarch—was dangerous and heretical. In fact, the first major English translation of parts of the Bible, printed by the scholar William Tyndale in 1526, was so controversial that it played a major part in the Reformation (and got Tyndale burned at the stake as a heretic).

The Reformation was an earthshaking moment in Christianity. It began when thinkers like Martin Luther rejected the authority of the Pope and split away from Catholicism to form Protestantism—so called because Protestants were "protesting" the corruption they perceived in the Roman Catholic Church. A big part of that protest was based on a belief that the word of the Bible was the ultimate authority in Christianity, and should thus be legible to all, not just to an educated class of priests who could read Latin, Hebrew, and Greek.

By the time King James commissioned his translation, Protestantism had gained a firm foothold in England after many years of strife, and several authorized English Bibles had already been printed. A sincere Protestant, James also chose to sponsor a new translation for political reasons, instructing his translators to be sure that the KJV conformed a little more closely to the doctrine of the still-young Church of England than previous versions had. By widely distributing a legible version of the Bible that upheld his Church and his state, James hoped to strengthen his hold on a country still shaken by the bloodshed that followed the early years of the Reformation.

It just so happened that this political move also produced one of the greatest and most influential works of world literature. The KJV's ornate, beautiful language is still the "voice" of the Bible for many English speakers to this day—even those who don't share the beliefs that motivated its creation.

MORE RESOURCES

EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- The Psalm as an Orthodox Chant — Listen to the psalm chanted in a different English translation—and in the vocal tradition of the Greek Orthodox church. (https://youtu.be/BX3QdTmWoxk)
- The Psalm in Hebrew — Listen to the psalm performed as a folk song in the original Hebrew. (https://youtu.be/_drMMyvfrHM)
- The King James Version — Read about the complex history of the King James Bible, the translation from which this famous version of Psalm 23 is taken. (https://www.britannica.com/topic/King-James-Version)
- The History of Psalm 23 — Read about the history of this psalm, including how it fits into the Bible and how it became so widely known. (https://www.bibleodyssey.org/en/passages/main-articles/lord-is-my-shepherd)
- More Translations — Visit the Bible Gateway to read this

psalm in a whole host of different translations and compare and contrast! (https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Psalm%2023&version=KJV)

- The Psalm in Latin — Listen to the psalm performed as a Latin chant in the Catholic tradition. (https://youtu.be/Qs_VsVSMvak)
- The Psalm's Connotations — Watch the scholar Rabbi Zalman Schachter-Shalomi give a witty, funny explanation of the psalm's connotations in its original Hebrew. (https://youtu.be/8z_1dING_uI)

HOW TO CITE

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