



## Psalm 23 and the Fear of Stagnant Waters

By James H. Charlesworth

Effective teaching demands more than a passion for and mastery over a specific area of scholarship. Now, unlike thirty years ago, engaging dialogue with students requires rhetorical skills and most notably a perception of the pre-understanding of those who are present in the class and listening from their own perspectives. The present reflections are focused on those whom we teach, because they have changed so markedly in the last thirty years.

In the sixties, the students in my classes at Duke University challenged us professors and initially categorized us with the "establishment," a pejorative term then. They became far more attentive when they learned how anti-establishment my colleagues and I were. In the late seventies and the eighties, the mood of students had shifted depressingly. During the Viet Nam War, students were preoccupied with the fear of death and the challenge of Romans 13:1, because of a judgment that our country was engaged in an immoral war. One decade later, they boldly requested a guaranteed "A" so that they could be accepted by a distinguished medical school, law school, business school, or doctoral program.

Since 1984, when I accepted the chair at Princeton Theological Seminary, my students intermittently have shown ambivalence towards academics. One reviewer of my classes rejected my hope for students to be able to speak with authority; he (or she) rejected my teaching because of the belief that all of us have only one authority. I was disturbed by how much I had failed to communicate. Had I misperceived how my words would be interpreted?

Running through my almost forty years of teaching, in Durham and Princeton (as well as abroad especially in Jerusalem), is something rather disturbing. I have witnessed a cavalier treatment of tradition and a boldness to reject, by caricaturing, the sacred text. I will briefly focus now on a totally different interpretation of Psalm 23 than that offered by James Moffett, who called this masterpiece "the Mater's Psalm" (the Mother's Psalm, according to my mother, Jean, who heard him in the thirties at Drew Seminary).

For over two millennia virtually all who heard the Twenty-third Psalm cherished it as a high point in revealed scripture. The most polished jewel in the crown of the Psalter was "David's Psalm," the Twenty-third Psalm. In my early youth, under the tutelage of my grandfather (Rev. Dr. Thomas Charlesworth) and my father (Rev. Professor Arthur Charlesworth) I memorized this psalm. I felt that "the Lord" was like a loving shepherd who protected, comforted, and nourished those of us who followed him like faithful sheep. Like many others in divinity school, I memorized the poem in Hebrew.

As will become pellucidly clear, my experience is not identical with many of my former students. After agreeing to write this essay I mentioned the Twenty-third Psalm to my driver. On the way to the Philadelphia airport he handed, and then loaned, me a copy of H. S. Kushner's *The Lord is My Shepherd: Healing Wisdom of the Twenty-Third Psalm* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2003). Kushner is well known to all of us; he is the author of *When Bad Things Happen to Good People* which became a best seller in 1981. I have decided to interleaf his comments among comments of students who expressed a horror at the words in this psalm—an experience that has caused me to appreciate "audience criticism" and the task of clarifying not only the philology and sociology of the original text but also the problems today with the sociology of language and

knowledge. Along with many professors and teachers, I have learned something remarkable over the past few decades. Familiar words and phrases may be so misunderstood that communication may masquerade as disinformation.

### **"The Lord is my shepherd."**

Reflecting on these words from the familiar rendering of Psalm 23 in the KJV, I prepared some reflections on metaphors and spiritual nourishment. My presentation was interrupted, indeed shattered, by a student's assessment of sheep and a shepherd. One person in class blurted out that the psalm was offensive. Other students joined her and rejected as disgusting any suggestion that we should be like dumb sheep that blindly follow a master. Rather insightfully, they pointed out that the analogy between sheep and humans is distortionistic and offensive. I agreed that humans must not be portrayed as if they are stupid sheep that periodically walk off a precipice in a constant dependence on the creature in front of them.

Clearly, shepherds are often portrayed as thieves. I can understand that image, since a Bedouin shepherd on a horse stole my camera and bag from the back of a Mercedes that had been parked at the foot of the Hyrcanium.

What can be offered to avoid such misperceptions of the metaphors used by an ancient poet? Of little import is the fact that no sheep is mentioned in this psalm; the opening compares the Lord to a shepherd and that implies we are sheep.

We can point to the context: the shepherd is one who allows us to say that we no longer have any needs or wants (23:1). We might contextualize the imagery by discussing "the Shepherd's Creed," Jacob's summary of twenty years of shepherding under Laban (Gen 31:38-40), and by citing the Fourth Evangelist's portrayal of Jesus as the good shepherd who "lays down his life for the sheep" (Jn 10:11).

### **"He maketh me to lie down in green pastures."**

In focusing on this verse, I experienced a moment when I was surprised by how much I had misperceived my students' sensitivity and perceptions. More than one student rejected any "Lord" who forced them to do anything, such as making them lie down. One aggressive student interjected that this "shepherd" is simply a bully who forces one to lie down, and not on a bed but in a pasture that may be pockmarked by dung. Such students would not be impressed by Kushner's comment that to "lie down in green pastures is to live in God's world" (p. 43).

A solution would be a translation that is sensitive to the complexities of the Hebrew verb and the negative connotations implied by "maketh me to lie down." The Hiphael imperfect form of the verb used here means not only "cause to lie down"; it also signifies "allow to lie down." Perhaps the following translation is better: "He alloweth me to lie down in grassy meadows."

### **"He leadeth me beside the still waters."**

How often do we miscast our students' sensitivity and perceptions? In raising this question I recall a student's interpretation of verse 2a. When I came to this verse, the Lord "leads me beside still waters," I observed that one person had become very agitated. Before I could ask, "why?," or point out that the Hebrew words translated "still waters" meant "restful" or "quiet" waters, and that these waters were calm and refreshing, I heard these words: "Well, I guess the Lord wants to kill me. Still waters are stagnant and polluted waters." The individual had certainly seen polluted slicks of contaminated water on North Carolina farms. The 1611 translators had chosen to translate the Hebrew as "still waters." This image fails now to evoke images of clear, bubbling creeks that bring health and refreshment from summer's heat.

How can we avoid such misinterpretations? How can we represent the original Hebrew so that it is not perceived to denote death or the waters disturbed by demons (as at Hammat Tiberias)? How can one bring out that the poet is not thinking about the roaring Jordan, the powerful waters of Dan, or the deadly onrush of a wadi during the rainy season? How can we convey that the author is imagining a place of soothing, refreshing, and peaceful waters as at Caesarea Philippi and Ein Gedi? Some insight is provided by Kushner's words: "When the psalmist praises God for leading him beside the still waters, he is not only thanking God for providing him with refreshing water to quench his thirst. He is thanking God for keeping the waters still, keeping them manageable and less threatening" (pp. 53-54).

The answer seems simple. We can avoid the potentially pejorative "still" and translate the verse as follows: "He leadeth me beside calming waters."

**"Thou preparest a table before me in the presence of mine enemies."**

A formerly shy student told me that she rejected the poem as moronic. She asked me to consider the imagery of a powerful male who prepares a table full of food in the presence of many enemies. She claimed that this action would make one defenseless, as one would be preoccupied by the inviting foods, and even arouse the enemies who are apparently numerous. Others raised an objection that now appears in Kushner's little book: "there is something abrupt and unsettling about this line that seems at first glance to reek of spite and taking pleasure in the discomfiture of others" (p. 125).

With Kushner, I would want to avoid translating the psalm with words that would imply something like "the aroma of mean spiritedness" (p. 126). The Hebrew word translated "in the presence of" clearly means "in front of," "in sight of," and "before." It also means "opposite." How do we translate this verse so as to re-present the poet's vision? Attending only to the Hebrew syntax fails to provide a satisfying answer. It is conceivable that the poet is conveying the paradigmatic differences between the way enemies prepare before us and how God prepares for us. Thus, God is unlike our best friends who may seem "enemies" as they fail to hear our cries for help in times of emotional crises. The Hebrew implies that God prepares "a table before me *in contrast to the people around me*, and to whom I turned for emotional nourishment, only to be disappointed" (Kushner, p. 133). Our students would like that thought evoked by Psalm 23.

**"Thou anointest my head with oil."**

Now encouraged by the free exchange of ideas in the classroom, several students blurted out that they did not want any male to pour oil on their heads. The biblical metaphor has become lost to many readers. It can be recovered by explaining that the poet is not thinking about "smearing." He has chosen a very symbolic verb: to anoint. That denotes the recognition and celebration of an elevated status. In the Bible anointing was primarily reserved for kings, but also for priests and occasionally for a prophet. The poet is eager to point out that each of us is worthy of being anointed and recognized as special, as one created in the image of the divine (*imago dei*). My son told me that because my nickname for him was "champ," he was able later in life, especially in college, to feel special, especially in times of defeat and self-doubt. That is what the psalmist seeks to convey to those who are in need (23:1). The same thought was meant by Jesus when he claimed that each of us receives God's attention, even by the counting of the hairs of our head (Mt 10:30 and Lk 12:7; contrast 4QDa-b 16-19).

**"My cup runneth over."**

This once attractive rendering also caused a rejection, but it was more subdued. Students pointed out that the words conjured up the image of a person who was so inattentive and insensitive that he quickly and absentmindedly filled a cup so that it "runneth over." Many began to ponder such

questions as this one: 'Who would want to dwell in the house of the Lord for such abuses for a day, let alone for ever?'

The imagery of a cup running over is of a cup that is full of what we need. The symbolic language is intended to convey gratitude. We can pick up our cup and drink from it, because we are alive. And life is God's gift to us. I am reminded of the day I went into St. Petersburg with my grandfather so he could pay his electric bill. He hand delivered the check, and his words remain a paradigm of gratitude: "During my youth we did not have electricity. I want you to know how grateful I am for this gift of light in my home." As those in the fishing boat in Jaws needed a "bigger boat," so we need a bigger cup in which to preserve God's abundant, and overflowing, gifts, because "goodness and mercy pursue" us all the days of our life.

Clearly, we can no longer assume that our students have been nurtured in homes, synagogues, and churches, as most of us who are professors. The "best-loved" and "best-known" psalm contains metaphors and images that fail to speak to many in our classes, especially in their first biblical classes. We may have lost some of our potentially best students by not providing a forum in which they could freely express their opinions. Most citizens of our western culture are blind to the language of symbolism. Education and erudition is no longer admired as it was formerly. Symbolism too often falls on ears deafened by noise pollution or on minds that are hostile to what our grandparents deemed traditional and sacred.

How can or should we teach such masterpieces as the Twenty-third Psalm? First, we must openly engage our students and seek to appreciate their own perceptions and understandings. Second, we can more attentively recognize words and images that have lost the meaning they had in 1611 and find metaphors that convey the original intent of poets. Third, we should add to our philological explorations into the text other skills and methods, especially devoting an equal amount of time seeking to discern the context of those who are still listening to us. Then, perhaps, the overflowing cup might include the possibility of hearing poetic language afresh, with students who are teaching us to comprehend what is being communicated.

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