

Following the “Tracks of Righteousness” of Psalm 23*

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ABSTRACT

This article argues that possible connections between Ps 23 and Proverbs have been overlooked to a large extent. It is well-known that the author of the psalm has appropriated the image of Yahweh as a shepherd of his people (used in connection with the exodus and also at the return from exile) and applied it to his personal relationship with Yahweh. But the psalm also describes the life of the individual worshipper as a journey and this metaphor seems to have important connections with Proverbs and wisdom psalms. It is argued that the expression “tracks of righteousness” possibly displays a direct link to Prov 2:9 and 4:11 and that this could imply that the author of Ps 23 fused the metaphor of Yahweh as a shepherd (and as a host) with that of Yahweh as a guide on the road of life so that the suppliant is portrayed as a righteous person.

Keywords: Psalm 23, road metaphor, tracks of righteousness, Proverbs, wisdom.

A INTRODUCTION

Psalm 23 is the most familiar and most loved psalm in the Psalter.¹ This distinction conversely renders it a difficult psalm to interpret, since the reader easily assumes transparency of all the data in the text. An expression such as “he leads me in the tracks of righteousness for the sake of his name” (Ps 23:3) is inadvertently accepted by many interpreters as being simply one of the things a shepherd would do, while it probably transcends the limits of the pastoral metaphor and constitutes a reference to Yahweh’s guidance of the believer on the road of life.

It is argued in this paper that this expression represents an instance of a separate metaphor, namely that of life as a journey on a road and that this road metaphor with its reference to “tracks of righteousness” points to links with Proverbs and a number of (wisdom) psalms. Not only does the word מעגל (denoting a “track, path, or road”) establish a connection with Proverbs and

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¹ According to, inter alia, Walter Brueggemann and William Bellinger, *Psalms* (NCBC; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 122.

with Ps 17:5; other aspects of this metaphoric complex have possibly also been imprinted on Ps 23, since the poet speaks of Yahweh “guiding” (נחה *hip’il*) him, but also of “going” (הלך) into a dangerous valley, of things that will “follow after” him (רדף) during his whole life (כל ימי חיי), and eventually of “returning” (שוב) to the house of Yahweh “in length of days” (לארך ימים). The author of the psalm (or an editor), it will be argued, has succeeded brilliantly in fusing the metaphor of Yahweh as a shepherd who *leads* his *sheep* with that of a wisdom teacher who *guides* his *student*. The paper consequently proposes to offer arguments to show that Ps 23 should be interpreted as containing a mosaic of intertextual connections, not only to the Torah and prophetic texts, but also to wisdom texts such as Proverbs and wisdom psalms, something which does have important implications for its interpretation.

B THE TEXT AND STRUCTURAL ARRANGEMENT OF PSALM 23

		מְזִמּוֹר לְדָוִד	¹ A psalm of David.
I	A	1 יְהוָה רֹעִי לֹא אֶחְסָר:	Yahweh is my shepherd, I shall not lack.
		2a בְּנֵאֲוֹת דְּשֵׁא יִרְבִּיעֲנִי	² In grazing places of green grass, he lets me lie down.
		b עַל־מֵי מְנַחֹת יְנַהֲלֵנִי:	Along waters of resting places, he gently leads me.
		3a נַפְשִׁי יִשׁוּבֵב	³ He restores my life;
		b יְנַחֲנֵי בְּמַעְגְּלֵי־צֶדֶק לְמַעַן שְׁמוֹ:	he guides me in the tracks of righteousness for the sake of his name.
B	4a	גַּם כִּי־אֵלֶּךְ בְּגִיא צַלְמוֹת לֹא־ אִירָא רָע	⁴ Even if I go into the valley of deathly shadow, I will not fear evil,
		b כִּי־אִתָּךְ עִמָּדִי	for you are with me,
		c שִׁבְטֶךָ וּמִשְׁעַנְתֶּךָ הֵמָּה יְנַחֲמֵנִי:	your rod and your staff, they comfort me.
II	C	5a תַּעֲרֹךְ לִפְנֵי שְׁלֹחַן	⁵ You lay a table before me
		b נֶגְדַ צַרְרֵי	in the presence of my opponents;
		c דִּשְׁנָתָ בַשֶּׁמֶן רֹאשִׁי בּוֹסִי רוּיָה:	you anoint my head with oil, my cup is overflowing.
D	6a	אֲדַ טוֹב וְחֶסֶד יִרְדְּפוּנִי כָּל־ יְמֵי חַיִּי	⁶ Only goodness and faithfulness will follow after me all the days of my life,
		b וְשׁוּבְתִי בְּבֵית־יְהוָה לְאָרְךָ יָמִים:	and I will return/live ² in the house of Yahweh in length of days.

² The form וְשׁוּבְתִי is vocalized in BHS as a waw consecutive plus *qal* perfect 3 masculine singular of שׁוּב. This should then be translated as: “and I will return.” According to Erich Zenger, “Psalm 23, bleibende Lebensgemeinschaft mit JHWH,” *Psalm 1-50* (vol. 1 of *Die Psalmen*; ed. Frank-Lothar Hossfeld and Erich Zenger;

The psalmist uses two parallel images (Yahweh as a shepherd and a host) to highlight Yahweh’s comprehensive *care* for the needs of the individual worshipper (“I shall not lack,” v. 1). By doing this, he formulates a declaration of his unconditional trust in Yahweh (“I will not fear,” v. 4). The two images dominate the psalm,³ dividing it into two stanzas of unequal length but similar content:⁴ Yahweh as shepherd is described in stanza I (1-4),⁵ and Yahweh as host in stanza II (5-6). Each stanza has two strophes, one which speaks *about* Yahweh (A and D), and one which *addresses* him directly (B and C). This cre-

NEchtB; Würzburg: Echter Verlag, 1993), 152, the Masoretes probably vocalised the form in this way in order to actualize the hope of a return to Jerusalem and especially that the temple which was demolished in 70 C.E. will be rebuilt. The Septuagint and Symmachus, however, translated the unpointed form וְשִׁבְתִּי as “and my dwelling will be,” indicating that the form was interpreted as וְשִׁבְתִּי, waw copulative plus *qal* infinitive construct with suffix first person singular. According to Ernst Axel Knauf, this could possibly be attributed to an etymologizing interpretation of צְלִמּוֹת by the LXX translators, which would point to an eschatological hope about Yahweh’s status as host on the other side of death. See Ernst Axel Knauf, “Psalm XXIII 6,” *VT* 51 (2001): 556. See also Bernd Janowski, “Der Gute Hirte: Psalm 23 und das biblische Gottesbild,” *Ex oriente Lux: Studien zur Theologie des Alten Testaments: Festschrift für Rüdiger Lux zum 65. Geburtstag* (ed. Angelika Berlejung and Raik Heckl; Leipzig: Evangelische Verlagsanstalt, 2012), 255. The presence of the verb שׁוּב in v. 3 can be used to argue that the form was intended to be read as a form of שׁוּב (in order to create an instance of inclusion between 3 and 6), but contrary to that, the use of the preposition בְּ with the verb points to the idea of the suppliant “dwelling in” the temple (Knauf, “Psalm XXIII 6,” 556 considers it the marker of the point to which is returned). It is perhaps possible that the author of the psalm intended the form to be ambiguous, hence the presentation of both possibilities in the translation above. This is also the view of Beat Weber, *Die Psalmen 1 bis 72* (vol. 1 of *Werkbuch Psalmen*: Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 2001), 127.

³ This point of view (instead of regarding the shepherd metaphor as extending to the end), is without doubt the opinion of the majority of exegetes. Cf. Willem S. Prinsloo, “Psalm 23: ‘Die Here is my Herder’: Of is Hy ‘my Gids,’ ‘my Gasheer’ of ‘my Vader’?” in *Die lof van my God solank ek lewe: Verklaring van ’n aantal psalms deur Willem S. Prinsloo* (ed. Wim Beuken, et al.; Pretoria: Medpharm Publikasies, 2000), 67.

⁴ As John Goldingay remarks, the rhythm is particularly irregular. See John Goldingay, *Psalms 1-41* (vol. 1 of *Psalms*; BCOT; Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Academic, 2006), 345. The Masoretic accents have been honoured in the division of feet in the representation above.

⁵ The metaphor of a guide, identified by some as spanning vv. 3-4, is eclipsed by a return to the instruments of the shepherd, namely the “rod” and “staff.” The commentary of Briggs and Briggs can be cited as representative of the (minority) view that the psalm is segmented by three images (shepherd 1-3a, guide 3b-4, and host 5-6). Cf. Charles A. Briggs and Emilie G. Briggs, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Book of Psalms* (ICC; vol. 2; Edinburgh: T & T Clark, [1907] 1925), 207. The Masoretic segmentation of poetic lines argues against this.

ates an envelope of the name of Yahweh (strophe A, v. 1 and strophe D, v. 6b) as well as chiasmus between the four strophes.⁶ A parallel is also formed between “grazing places” which is equivalent to “a table” (as sources of food) and “water” which is equivalent to “cup.” *Lying down to rest* in the first stanza corresponds to *sojourning* in or *returning* to the house of Yahweh in the second. To *not lack* (חסר) anything in the first stanza corresponds antithetically to the *abundance* (רויה) mentioned in the second. The danger of “evil” mentioned in strophe B is also echoed in the threat of “opponents” in strophe C,⁷ while the “rod” and “staff” which comfort the suppliant in strophe B can be described as parallel to the assuring “goodness” and “faithfulness” which are said to follow after (possibly even “pursue”) the suppliant in strophe D.⁸ The *restoration* of the life of the suppliant (ישוב) in v. 3 can also be described as corresponding to the *return* (ושבת) of the suppliant to the house of Yahweh during a long life (v. 6ab), so that the *presence of Yahweh with the worshipper* on his journey in the first stanza (עמדי, v. 4) finds an echo in the *presence of the worshipper with Yahweh* in his temple (at the end of the journey) in the second (לפני, v. 5 and בבית־יהוה v. 6). A number of investigators have pointed out the central importance of 4b,⁹ and Janowski regards 4bc (he designates it as 4aβ.b) as the “Sinnachse” (“synapse”) of the psalm, linking its two parts.¹⁰

C THE MOTIFS AND TRADITIONS REFLECTED IN PSALM 23

The textual background which contextualises the psalm is well-known.¹¹ Because there are echoes of so many biblical contexts, there is little doubt that

⁶ Zenger, “Psalm 23,” 152.

⁷ Zenger, “Psalm 23,” 152.

⁸ Zenger, “Psalm 23,” 152.

⁹ Pieter van der Lugt, *Cantos and Strophes in Biblical Hebrew Poetry with Special Reference to the First Book of the Psalter* (OTS; Brill: Leiden, 2006), 252 calls it “the centre of the poem” and “a terse formulation of the central idea of Psalm 23: ‘for you are with me!’”

¹⁰ He describes the first as the “Bildhälfte” (Yahweh as shepherd) and the second as the “Sachhälfte” (Yahweh as host). The particular part of v. 4, he says, is the declaration of trust which forms part of the metaphor of shepherd, but is stylistically linked to the second part, since it begins with the second person address of Yahweh which is continued in v. 5. See Janowski, “Der Gute Hirte,” 256. I doubt whether it is right to ignore the Masoretic punctuation in this way, and would rather put the emphasis on 4b which is the middle stich of the 13 Masoretic feet. Richard J. Clifford, *Psalms 1-72* (AOTC; Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2002), 130 describes 4 as the “middle verse” and the “poem’s turning point.”

¹¹ See, for instance, the perceptive discussion of Zenger, “Psalm 23,” 152-155, who refers to Yahweh as shepherd during the “first” and the “second” exodus. His lead is followed in the discussion in this section. Bernd Janowski has also recently investigated the roots of the motif of the “good shepherd” in the ANE and the HB. He pays special attention to the closing hymn (a song of praise to the divine shepherd) from

the psalm reflects influence from a number or most of those texts, rather than those texts being dependent on Ps 23.¹² It definitely seems that the author of Ps 23 had knowledge of or access to most of those contexts, and that he made use of them as a canvas to paint on, while he also possibly *alluded* to some of them on purpose. This background is found mainly in the description of Yahweh as shepherd of his people during the *exodus* from Egypt (Exod 15:13;¹³ see the reflection of this also in Ps 77:21 and 78:52-53) when Yahweh cared for his people like a shepherd does for his sheep until they safely entered into the Promised Land. It also reflects the prophetic promises of the *return* from exile and Yahweh’s renewed care for his people, once again like a shepherd for his sheep on their envisaged return journey (e.g. Jer 50:19, Isa 40:11, 49:8-10¹⁴ and Ezek 34:12). The objective of these instances of shepherding by Yahweh was to lead his flock through many dangers to the (safe) grazing fields of the Promised Land.¹⁵ But in contradistinction to these images from the Torah and the Prophets, Ps 23 appropriates the image of Yahweh as shepherd in a *personal* relationship of trust.¹⁶ During the exodus, Yahweh cared for his people

the Egyptian “Instruction addressed to King Merikare”; later Egyptian poems from the period of personal piety in Egypt (19th and 20th dynasties); and (in the HB) texts like Exod 3:7-15, Ezek 34:11-16, Ps 5:4, 9-11 and Prov 4:10-12 as contexts which help to understand the description of Yahweh as “good shepherd” in Ps 23. See Janowski, “Der Gute Hirte,” 248-252.

¹² It is also possible to see development from almost all those other contexts to the use of the motifs in Ps 23, e.g. the application of the metaphor of Yahweh as a shepherd of his *people* in the Pentateuch and the prophetic books to that of Yahweh as the shepherd of an *individual* in Psalm 23. So also Zenger, “Psalm 23,” 152.

¹³ “You have led (נחה) in your steadfast love (חסד) the people whom you have redeemed; you have guided them (נהל) *pi’el* by your strength to your holy dwelling place (נוה).”

¹⁴ It promises that the flock will not hunger or thirst, since the shepherd who has pity on them, will guide (נהל) *pi’el* them by “springs of water.”

¹⁵ The word נוה used in Ex 3:13 and Jer 50:19 can refer either to a “grazing place” or a “settlement.” In a number of texts it obviously was used to refer to the Promised Land, e.g. Jer 50:19 and Ps 79:7.

¹⁶ This is the view of Zenger, “Psalm 23,” 152, who uses these allusions to argue for a post-exilic origin of Ps 23. He identifies the circle of people around the poet as the post-exilic “*Armenfrömmigkeit*” (piety of the poor people) on the basis of the self-awareness which is also exhibited in its related text, Ps 16 within the composition Pss 15-24 (originally without Ps 19). Janowski, “Psalm 23,” also emphasises the aspect of personal piety in Ps 23 in contradistinction to the usual representation of a god or king as a shepherd of a “flock” of people (p. 256). Beat Weber, *Werkbuch Psalmen I*, 127 considers it possible that the psalm describes the personal piety of an individual, but thinks it could just as well be a national “royal psalm,” thus an earthly king’s address to the heavenly king, speaking on behalf of the people (p. 128). Pronounced reflection also of post-exilic texts in Ps 23 and its consequential dating after the exile make this improbable. It is true, on the other hand, that it could be appropriated by a leader of

and made sure that they did *not lack* (לא חסר) anything (Deut 2:7 and Neh 9:21). The pastures (נאות) where the shepherd leads his sheep according to Ps 23, thus reminds the reader of the “holy settlement” (נוה קדש) which Yahweh wanted to give to his people in the Promised Land (Exod 15:13) and also wanted to give again after the exile (cf. נוה in Jer 23:3; נוה־צדק in 31:23; and נוה טוב as well as רבץ in Ezek 34:14-15). The “water” (מים) recalls the provision of water during the exodus mentioned in Exod 15:22-27, 17:1-7, Num 20:1-13 and also Ps 78:20, 105:41 and 107:33-35. The watering places at the time of the exodus, however, were marked by rebellion and grumbling so that Yahweh threatened the people that they would *not enter* into his place of “rest” (מנוחה) (Ps 95:11), but Ps 23 speaks of complete rest (מנוחות, “resting places,” plural) for the individual worshipper¹⁷ and later on of a “return” or “sojourn” in the temple. The “guiding” (נחה) is also a technical term from the time of the Exodus: It is used in Exod 13:17, 21 and 15:13. Drought and the shadow of death (צלמות) were part of the horrors of the exodus (cf. Jer 2:6). But in contrast to that, Yahweh would free his people from the darkness (חשך) of the exile (Isa 9:1, 49:9). It thus seems that the psalmist was not only aware of these “shepherd” contexts, but that he made contrapuntal use of some of them to emphasise his own theological disposition in contradistinction to that of the implied forefathers. Like the Israelites at the exodus and the Jews at the return from exile, the poet is busy with a journey, but his is the journey of life.¹⁸

The image of a host caring for his guest found in stanza II of Ps 23 is also linked to the exodus from Egypt via Ps 78 (ערך שלחן, 78:19-20 and 52-53). But the confidence of the suppliant again stands in contrast to the attitude of the Israelites who doubted whether Yahweh could *spread a table* and provide bread and meat in the wilderness (according to Ps 78:19-20). There seems to be a literary connection between Ps 23 and Ps 78, but in this instance it is quite possi-

the Second Temple period or the community as a whole in any period. See John Goldingay, *Psalms 1*, 345. He includes “a king” as one possibility.

¹⁷ Zenger, “Psalm 23,” 154. This is another instance where one can detect a purposeful allusion to an existing biblical text, since the author of Ps 23 would want to contrast his own relationship with Yahweh with that of the generation of the exodus.

¹⁸ Zephaniah 3:13-15, which describes the time of prosperity and peace after the return from exile, also seems related to Ps 23. It is promised there that the remnant of Israel will do no injustice and speak no lies, but will graze (רעה) and *lie down* (רבץ), and no one will make them afraid (Zeph 3:13). It is significant that Zeph 3:15 then goes on to assure the listeners that the King of Israel, Yahweh, is in the *midst* (קרוב) of his people, and that they will therefore never again *fear evil* (לא ירא רע), cf. Ps 23:4. These conspicuous similarities with Ps 23 make a strong case for a possible connection between Ps 23 and Zeph 3, although it is also possible that in this regard Zeph 3 was influenced by Ps 23. Another post-exilic text which compares the return from exile to the time of the exodus is Mic 7:14. The prophet asks Yahweh to “shepherd” (רעה) the “flock of his inheritance” with his *staff* (שבט), a word which reminds one of the “staff” (שבט) of Yahweh which comforts the suppliant in Ps 23:4.

ble that the author of Ps 78 picked up the motif of Yahweh as host from Ps 23 and used it to criticize the generation of the exodus.¹⁹ On the other hand, Ps 23 possibly also harks back to the time of the patriarchs. The author creates a contrast between himself and the patriarch Jacob by picking up one word from the tradition. Right in the middle of Ps 23 he states “for you are with me (עמדי).”²⁰ This reminds the observant reader of Jacob’s conditional acceptance of Yahweh’s promise of protection in Gen 28:20-21, “If God will be *with me* . . . (עמדי)” and of his acknowledgement later in Gen 31:5, “. . . the God of my father has been *with me* (עמדי).”²¹ This preposition also highlights the metaphor of life as a journey *with* Yahweh in Ps 23.²²

From such similarities and differences with texts in the Pentateuch, the Prophets and the Psalter which refer to Jacob, the exodus or the return from exile, it is clear that the author of Ps 23 had the intention of reminding the reader of various familiar contexts which he then used to create an image of Yahweh’s proficient care for him as individual worshipper and to emphasise his trusting relationship with Yahweh in contrast to some of the previous generations. The dark background of Israel’s failure to trust in Yahweh on their journey and their history of rebellion which threatened the “rest” (מנוחה/מנוחות)²³ which Yahweh promised to give to them in the land highlight the positive description of the individual worshipper’s enjoyment of these privileges in a personal relationship with Yahweh.

One consequence of the author’s application of these images from the traditions about the patriarch Jacob, the exodus and the return from exile to his own life is that the description of his experience assumes the quality of a journey. Similar to Jacob in his flight from and return to the Promised Land, the Israelites in the wilderness, and the *Golah* en route to Jerusalem, the psalmist’s journey includes being “led” and “guided” (נהל *pi’el* as well as נחה *qal* and *hip’il*) by Yahweh between places of nourishment, “going” (הלך) through dangerous places (צלמות), being aware of Yahweh’s presence (עמדי) at

¹⁹ Ps 78 uses both images, that of Yahweh as host (vv. 19-29) and Yahweh as shepherd (vv. 52-54). Ps 23, however, does not specifically refer to Yahweh as host at the exodus like Ps 78, but rather to him as host in the temple. It therefore seems possible that Ps 78 adopted the motif of Yahweh as host from Ps 23 and applied it to the exodus tradition. Both psalms display wisdom influence, and the “prepared table” is also a pronounced wisdom motif in Prov 9:2 (ערכה שלחנה).

²⁰ It is the middle stich of nine which serves as the nexus between what precedes and what follows. Cf. Prinsloo, “Psalm 23,” 71.

²¹ So also Cas J. A. Vos, *Theopoetry of the Psalms* (Pretoria: Protea Book House, 2005), 118. The importance of this expression is highlighted by Jacob’s pronouncement in Gen 35:3.

²² Cf. the use of דרך and הלך in Gen 28:20 and 35:3.

²³ Cf. Deut 12:9, “you have not as yet come to the rest and to the inheritance that Yahweh your God is giving you.”

all times, being pursued (רדף) on his journey,²⁴ and arriving in Yahweh’s holy abode (נוה/נאוה). It also ends (like that of the people of Israel) in the Promised Land, but more explicitly in its centre, in the temple, where the suppliant will be accorded nourishment and protection as an honoured guest with the privilege of “returning” (שוב) there often or even “residing” (ישב) there permanently according to some textual traditions.²⁵

There is one particular aspect of the psalmist’s personal journey, however, which does not have a parallel in the journeys of the Israelites. He describes namely how he is “guided” (נחה *hip’il*) by Yahweh “in tracks of righteousness.” This calls to mind another metaphor, one that is found predominantly in Proverbs and wisdom psalms, namely the metaphor of the life of a student of wisdom or of a believer as a journey under the guidance of respectively the teacher of wisdom or of Yahweh as the teacher of his “way” or “truth” or “will.” In addition to Yahweh’s “leading” (נחה *qal*) and “guiding” (נהל *pi’el*) his people in the wilderness (Exod 15:13), the expressions “he guides me” and “in the tracks of righteousness” together call to mind the “guiding” (נחה both *qal* and *hip’il*, but also the *hip’il* of דרך) of the student of wisdom by the wisdom teacher in Prov 4:11 (דרך *hip’il* with מעגלים)²⁶ and by wisdom itself in Prov 6:22²⁷ and of the pious by Yahweh on the road of life in texts such as Ps 5:9,²⁸ 25:4-5;²⁹ 27:11,³⁰ 31:4,³¹ 43:3,³² 73:24,³³ 139:24,³⁴ and

²⁴ In the case of Israel, the Egyptians (e.g. Exod 14:4) and the Amorites (Deut 1:44) “pursued” them, while they were told in turn to “pursue” (only) justice (צדק צד תרדף) in Deut 16:20.

²⁵ Bernd Janowski, “Der Gute Hirte,” 256 also speaks of the “fortschreitende Bewegung” in the psalm, which comes to rest at its end. The voice of Mark S. Smith, “Setting and Rhetoric in Psalm 23,” *JSOT* 41 (1988): 61-66 may be added to this view. He says that “The poem describes a journey which culminates in arrival at the temple.” He, however, infers from this that Ps 23 is a psalm of pilgrimage.

²⁶ “I have taught (ירה *hip’il*) you the way of wisdom; I have led (דרך *hip’il*) you in the tracks of uprightness (במעגלי-ישר).”

²⁷ “When you walk, they (the father’s commandment and the mother’s teaching) will guide (נחה *hip’il*) you; when you lie down, they will watch over you; and when you awake, they will talk with you.” This promise was evidently modelled on the metaphor of keeping the Torah in Deuteronomy. Cf. Deut 6:7, but also 8:6, 10:12, 11:19, 11:28, etcetera. See on the connection between Prov 6:22 and Deut 6:4-9 Gregor Reichenbach, *Gültige Verbindungen: Eine Untersuchung zur kanonischen Bedeutung der innerbiblischen Traditionsbezüge in Sprüche 1 bis 9* (ABG 37; Leipzig: Evangelische Verlagsanstalt, 2011), 160-161.

²⁸ “Lead (נחה *qal*) me, Yahweh, in your righteousness because of my enemies; make your way straight before me.”

²⁹ “Make known to me, Yahweh, your ways; teach me your paths. Lead (דרך *hip’il*) me in your truth and teach me, for you are the God of my salvation; for you I wait all the day long.”

143:10.³⁵ Some investigators have proposed that Yahweh as guide should be counted as a separate metaphor, but such guidance is actually only one aspect of the “road of life” metaphor. It is possible, however, that there is a direct link between Ps 23 and some of the texts which refer to Yahweh’s guidance on the road of life.

D THE TRACKS OF RIGHTEOUSNESS LEAD TO WISDOM THINKING

1 The use of מעגל (“tracks”) in Proverbs

What did the poet (or a redactor) of Ps 23 have in mind when he confessed that Yahweh “guides” him “in the tracks of righteousness for the sake of his name” (ינחני במעגלי צדק למען שמו)? According to Zenger, “righteous tracks” do *not* refer to righteous deeds of the petitioner, but to roads on which the petitioner can walk joyfully and protected in the all-encompassing directives for life and wellbeing provided by Yahweh; above all ways which do not lead to wandering and into disaster, but to the fullness of well-being.³⁶ This description is correct and exact, except that it is incorrect in my view to contrast the deeds of the suppliant with the directives of Yahweh. They form two sides of the same coin, and comprehension of the way in which the word מעגל is used in Proverbs, dissolves the tension between them. “Tracks of righteousness” in fact seems to refer precisely to the directives for life Zenger speaks about. The poet confesses in v. 3b that Yahweh “guides” him; helps him, in other words, to follow what is

³⁰ “Teach me your way, Yahweh, and lead (נחה *qal*) me on a level path because of my enemies.”

³¹ “For you are my rock and my fortress; and for your name’s sake you lead (נחה *hip ‘il*) me and guide (נהל *pi ‘el*) me . . .” This verse possibly has a direct link to Exod 15:13.

³² “Send out your light and your truth; let them lead (נחה *hip ‘il*) me; let them bring me to your holy hill and to your dwelling.”

³³ “You guide (נחה *hip ‘il*) me with your counsel, and afterward you will receive me to glory.”

³⁴ “And see if there be any grievous way in me, and lead (נחה *qal*) me in the way everlasting.”

³⁵ “Teach me to do your will, for you are my God! Let your good Spirit lead (נחה *hip ‘il*) me on level ground!”

³⁶ Zenger, “Psalm 23,” 154. German original, “. . . womit nicht gerechte Taten des Beters gemeint sind, sondern Wege, auf denen der Beter in der umfassenden von JHWH gesetzten Lebens- und Heilsordnung glücklich und geschützt wandelt; es sind vor allem Wege, die nicht in die Irre und ins Unglück, sondern zur Fülle des Heils führen. . .” Janowski, “Der Gute Hirte,” 258, has a very similar explanation: “Es geht also um die Normgemässheit und umfassende ‘Richtigkeit’ im Gottes- und Gemeinschaftsverhältnis.” He also points out the parallel with Prov 4:10-12.

called the “good road” in Proverbs,³⁷ thus to live a righteous life, and that the result of this would be to bring honour to the name of Yahweh.³⁸ The purpose of this leading is to avoid straying from the good road into disaster and an early death, as Zenger implies.³⁹ The mention of “righteousness” and of Yahweh’s *name* in any case indicates that the metaphor of a shepherd leading his sheep is transcended or suspended momentarily in this expression.⁴⁰

An investigation of the meanings associated with the word מעגל in Proverbs helps to form a much clearer picture of what the psalmist had in mind. It is a word with particular wisdom associations and has, in Proverbs, strong connections to the metaphor of life as a journey in compliance with *wisdom teaching*. It occurs seven times in Proverbs, out of a total of 16 times in the HB.

³⁷ Cf. the description “every good track” (כל-מעגל-טוב) in Prov 2:9 and its opposite, the “way of evil” (דרך רע) in 2:12; also described as the “ways of darkness” (דרכי חשך) in 2:13; the “way of evil persons” (דרך רעים) and “the path of wicked people” (ארח רשעים) in 4:14.

³⁸ Zenger, “Psalm 23,” 154, interprets the reference to Yahweh’s name as having twofold implications: On the one hand, such action of leading the petitioner would be in accordance with the “Name” = “Being” of Yahweh in history; on the other hand, he wants to reveal his name furthermore also in the life of the petitioner. Peter Craigie sees in this expression another reference to the exodus, since “for the sake of his name” is given as a reason why Yahweh saved his people at the Reed Sea. Cf. Peter C. Craigie, *Psalms 1-50* (WBC 19; 2nd ed. with 2004 supplement by Marvin E. Tate; Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, [1983] 2004), 207.

³⁹ Note the polarity between the two destinations in Prov 2 – of those who follow the “paths of life,” who learn to understand the fear of Yahweh and find the knowledge of God as well as help and protection; and of those who leave the “paths of uprightness” and whose paths are “devious,” leading to death. According to Hans F. Fuhs, *Sprichwörter* (NEchtB, AT; Würzburg: Echter Verlag, 2001), 31, points out that v. 7 equates the one who searches for wisdom with the upright and pious, while v. 8 promises Yahweh’s help to that person to stay on the chosen road and to reach a good destination.

⁴⁰ So also Johannes P. M. van der Ploeg, *Psalms 1 t/m 75* (vol. 1 of *Psalmen*; BOT; Roermond: J.J. Romen & Zonen, 1973), 161. Van der Ploeg considers the image of the host to be abandoned also in v. 6. See Van der Ploeg, *Psalmen 1*, 161. Weiser describes v. 3 as an interpretation of the shepherd image, where God appears as the guide of the wanderer on his paths through life. Cf. Artur Weiser, *The Psalms: A Commentary* (OTL; trans. Herbert Hartwell; London: SCM Press, 1975), 229. The fact that the shepherd image is abandoned is usually glossed over by commentaries, but is noted by a few. See in this regard the remark of Prinsloo, “Psalm 23,” 69. Some exegetes try to force “he restores my soul” into the shepherd metaphor, like Terrien who thinks of a sheep (“ram, ewe, lamb”) as the victim of exhaustion. Cf. Samuel Terrien, *The Psalms: Strophic Structure and Theological Commentary* (ECC; Grand Rapids, Mich.: William B. Eerdmans, 2003), 239. Verse 3b also does not seem to be an echo from the traditions about the exodus or the return from exile like so many other pronouncements in the psalm.

It is thus more “typical” of Proverbs than of any other book.⁴¹ Apart from the three occurrences in 1 Samuel, where it has a completely different denotation,⁴² it is used in the HB almost exclusively in a metaphorical way to refer to human activity as following a certain course or “tracks.”⁴³ In Proverbs it is explained that those who comply with the norms of wisdom teaching are following the “tracks of uprightness” or the “good track”; those who deviate from these norms are “devious in their tracks.” In combination with “righteousness” (צדק) as in Ps 23:3, it would seem to reflect the metaphorical meaning it has in Proverbs, although the norms referred to would not be primarily *wisdom* teaching. The genitives of description used with מעגל in Prov 2:9 and 4:11 are also strongly reminiscent of its use in Ps 23:3. The following table summarises the occurrences of מעגל in Proverbs:

Prov 2:9	“Then you will understand righteousness (צדק) ⁴⁴ and justice (משפט) and equity (מישרים), every good <i>track</i> (כל-מעגל-טוב).”
Prov 2:15	“. . . men whose paths are crooked, and who are devious in their <i>tracks</i> (במעגלותם).”
Prov 2:18	“. . . for her house sinks down to death, and her <i>tracks</i> (מעגלתיה) to the departed.”
Prov 4:11	“I have taught (hip ‘il) you the way of wisdom; I have guided you (hip ‘il) in the <i>tracks</i> of uprightness (במעגלי-ישר).”
Prov 4:26	“Ponder the <i>track</i> (מעגל) of your feet; then all your ways will be sure.”
Prov 5:6	“. . . she does not ponder the path of life; her <i>tracks</i> (מעגלתיה) wander, and she does not know it.”
Prov 5:21	“For a man’s ways are before the eyes of Yahweh, and he ponders all his <i>tracks</i> (מעגלתי).”

The word מעגל forms part of a semantic field of “road” words in Prov 1-9 which are all linked to the metaphor of living life in accordance with the teaching of wisdom or in ignorance or defiance of that teaching.⁴⁵ What is

⁴¹ It occurs in 1 Sam 17:20, 26:5, and 26:7; Ps 17:5, 23:3, 65:11, and 140:5; Prov 2:9, 2:15, 2:18, 4:11, 4:26, 5:6, and 5:21; and Isa 26:7 and 59:8.

⁴² It is consistently used there to refer to a military encampment.

⁴³ Only the one occurrence in Ps 65:11 seems to deviate from this norm. See Walter Dietrich and Samuel Arnet, eds., *Konkise und Aktualisierte Ausgabe des Hebräischen und Aramäischen Lexikons zum Alten Testament (KAHAL)* (Leiden: Brill, 2013), 309.

⁴⁴ According to Janowski, “Der Gute Hirte,” 254, צדקה is a *nomen unitatis*, an instance of justice, while צדק is a *nomen collectivum*, the totality of instances of justice.

⁴⁵ The road metaphor in Prov 1-9 as a way of speaking about people’s conduct and attitude to life in compliance with *wisdom teaching*, is an application of the way Deuteronomy speaks about the way of life in accordance with *Yahweh’s commandments*. The other “road” words in Prov 1-9 are דרך (way), ארה (path), and נתיבה (foot-

striking in this table, is the connection between צדק and מעגל in Prov 2:9, comparable to Ps 23:3; and the use of the plural form in the construct state as a genitive of description in Prov 4:11 (“tracks of uprightness”).⁴⁶ In the latter case it is bound with ישר (“uprightness”), a cognate of “equity” (מישרים) which is found together with צדק and משפט as modifiers in Prov 2:9. “Righteousness,” “justice,” “equity,” and “uprightness” are thus the words with which מעגל is connected syntagmatically in these two verses, and this points to a semantic field of morally good behaviour.⁴⁷ “Tracks of uprightness” forms a parallel to “the way of wisdom” in Prov 4:11, so that it is clear the word מעגל refers to an upright life in accordance with the teaching of wisdom.⁴⁸ From the table above it is also clear that מעגל is not necessarily connected to the morally good since it is also used in other contexts to refer to morally bad behaviour, but it always refers to conduct in terms of a compliance with or ignorance of wisdom teaching in Proverbs. The word צדק is subsumed under the heading “good” (טוב) in Prov 2:9. From the background of these two verses (Prov 2:9 and 4:11) which seem to be combined in the formulation of Ps 23:3, it is clear that the expression מעגלי-צדק probably refers to morally good behaviour in accordance with the directives of Yahweh. If there is a connection between Proverbs and Ps 23:3, the phrase “he guides me in tracks of righteousness for the sake of his name” must then be interpreted as meaning, “he helps me to live a life in accordance with the norms of righteousness for the sake of his name.”

2 Other occurrences of מעגל (“track” or “tracks”)

Because of its proximity to Ps 23, the occurrence of מעגלות in Ps 17:5 could be considered as an important pointer to the way in which מעגלי-צדק in Ps 23:3 should be interpreted. In this verse, it refers to the “tracks” of Yahweh:

path). Cf. the extremely helpful analysis of the metaphoric complex of teaching as a road in Prov 1-9 (and its relationship to the metaphor in Deuteronomy) in Gregor Reichenbach, *Gültige Verbindungen*, 165-189.

⁴⁶ It is this verse, Prov 4:11, which is singled out by Bernard Gosse as providing the most conspicuous parallel (and thus inspiration) for Ps 23:3. He points out the parallel between Yahweh and the wisdom teacher. In Ps 23:3, Yahweh takes over the role of guide which is the prerogative of the wisdom teacher in Proverbs. Cf. Bernard Gosse, *L'influence du livre des Proverbes sur les rédactions bibliques à l'époque Perse* (SupTrans 14; Gabalda: Paris, 2008), 66.

⁴⁷ According to Fuhs, *Sprichwörter*, 32, the construction “each track of the good” combines the concepts righteousness, justice, and equity with the road metaphor, since they describe the way which leads to what is good. The style of life of the evil person is described in vv. 12-15: perverted thought and speech, darkness, evil doing and delight in the perverseness of evil.

⁴⁸ Wisdom herself remarks in Prov 8:20, “I walk in the way of righteousness (בִּאֲרָחַי צְדָקָה), in the paths of justice (בְּתוֹךְ נְתִיבוֹת מִשְׁפָּט).”

My steps have held fast to *your tracks* (במעגלותיך); my feet have not slipped (מוט *nip'al*) (Ps 17:5).

Although it is *Yahweh's* tracks that are referred to here, it nevertheless concerns the actions of the suppliant, as the use of “my steps,” “held fast” and “my feet” proves. The suffix is thus used to indicate the *origin* of the “tracks.” It is about the suppliant’s complying with *Yahweh's* instructions for conduct. The previous verse further contextualises Ps 17:5, and it implies that the subject matter is the “works of mankind” and that the “tracks” of *Yahweh* are “the word of his lips”: “With regard to the works of mankind, by the word of your lips I have avoided the ways of the violent.” The “word” of *Yahweh's* “lips” seems to be parallel in meaning to his “tracks,” so that “tracks” probably refer in this case to the commandments of *Yahweh*. Within the bigger context of Pss 15-24, Gianni Barbiero states it unequivocally that the “tracks of righteousness” on which *Yahweh* guides the psalmist in Ps 23:3 are the tracks of his Torah as they are presented in Pss 15, 19 and 24, and also mentioned in Ps 17:5.⁴⁹ Markus Zehnder also describes מעגל in Ps 17:5, because of the connection with v. 4, as “the conduct advised by God.”⁵⁰ In view of the possible links to Proverbs, מעגלים in Ps 23:3 probably has the same connotation.⁵¹

Concerning Ps 23:3, Zehnder writes that the combination of מעגל with צדק would *seem* to refer to some or other aspect of conduct, but that this possibility is ruled out by the fact that there is no mention of the religious or moral conduct of the suppliant in the psalm.⁵² This statement, however, possibly already assumes the conclusion (thus “begs the question”), since v. 3 possibly *does* refer to the moral conduct of the suppliant. In this verse, the poet has fused the image of the shepherd with that of wisdom, or a wisdom teacher, or possibly *Yahweh* guiding someone on the road of life. What the poet is implying is probably that *Yahweh* is leading him to live a life in compliance with *his* ethical norms, the “tracks of righteousness.”

⁴⁹ Gianni Barbiero, *Das erste Psalmenbuch als Einheit, eine synchrone Analyse von Psalm 1-41* (ÖBS 16; Frankfurt am Main: Europäischer Verlag der Wissenschaften, 1999), 309.

⁵⁰ My translation of the German (“von Gott gebotenen Lebenswandel(s)”); cf. Markus Zehnder, *Wegmetaphorik im Alten Testament: Eine semantische Untersuchung der alttestamentlichen und altorientalischen Weg-Lexeme mit besonderer Berücksichtigung ihrer metaphorischen Verwendung* (BZAW 268; Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1999), 416.

⁵¹ Hossfeld describes, in his discussion of Ps 17:5, the expression “your tracks” as an incidence of the path metaphor of wisdom, and refers to Prov 2:9, 15, 18; 4:11, 26; 5:6, 21 and also Ps 15:2, 5 and 23:3. Cf. Frank-Lothar Hossfeld, “Psalm 17: Bittgebet eines Bedrängten Gerechten,” *Psalm 1-50* (vol. 1 of *Die Psalmen*; ed. Frank-Lothar Hossfeld and Erich Zenger; NechtB; Würzburg: Echter Verlag, 1993).

⁵² Zehnder, *Wegmetaphorik*, 417.

The word **מעגל** is used in three other places metaphorically as a reference to the way of life: In Ps 140:6, it refers to life as a road where evil people plan to hurt the suppliant (with a trap, a net, and snares). The word also occurs twice in Isaiah, namely in Isa 26:7 and 59:8. Both these verses seem to have been composed under influence from wisdom texts. This strengthens the notion that the use of the word in Proverbs is significant for interpreting its use in Ps 23:3. The first of these refers to the road of life of the righteous, which is being *made level* or smoothed out by Yahweh.⁵³ The righteous can thus expect to have fewer obstacles on the way of life. Isaiah 59:8 in turn laments the moral collapse of Israelite society, and it seems to contain allusions to Prov 1 and 2:9-15.⁵⁴ The lack of justice (**משפט**) in the paths of the Israelites and the twisted (**עקש** pi'el)⁵⁵ nature of their actions (their “tracks”) simply confirm the metaphoric predominance of **מעגל** as a reference to moral norms which regulate human action. It thus seems that there is a persistent connection between the use of **מעגל** as a reference to the road of life, specific human action during life, and a wisdom context.

E GUIDANCE ON THE ROAD OF LIFE IN PSALM 23

Because the word **מעגלים** (rather than one of the other “road of life” words) is used in Ps 23:3, and because of its connection with **צדק** and the way these two words are used in Prov 2:9,⁵⁶ there seems to be reason to believe that the author intended the expression “he guides me in the tracks of righteousness for the sake of his name” to be understood as a reference to Yahweh’s guidance on the way of life in accordance with his “ethical code” of conduct, in other words, the Torah. This is also the interpretation of Gianni Barbiero, who views the verse within the context of the cycle of Pss 15-24 with its emphasis on compliance with the ethical code of the Torah. In reply to the question about who may dwell in Yahweh’s tent and on his holy mountain,⁵⁷ Ps 15:2 answers “He who walks blamelessly and does what is *right* (**צדק**) and speaks truth in his heart.” There also seems to be good reason to interpret the “guiding” of Yahweh on “tracks” of righteousness as a parallel to “teaching” the road of life. The verb

⁵³ “The path of the righteous is level; you make level the track (**מעגל**) of the righteous” (Isa 26:7). The metaphor of a level or straight road of life is well-known in Proverbs. Cf. Prov 3:6 and 11:5.

⁵⁴ “The way (**דרך**) of peace they do not know, and there is no justice (**משפט**) in their tracks (**במעגלותם**); they have made their roads (**נתיבות**) crooked; no one who treads on them knows peace” (Isa 59:8). The previous verse (Isa 59:7) contains a quote from Prov 1:16, while this verse (Isa 59:8) has various similarities and thus possible connections with Prov 2:9-15.

⁵⁵ Cf. the use of the adjective **עקש** in connection with “paths” in Prov 2:15.

⁵⁶ And, in addition to that, the combination of the plural construct form of the word with **ישר** in Prov 4:11, which is strongly reminiscent of the construction in Ps 23:3.

⁵⁷ Ps 15:1. Note the corresponding questions at the end of the cycle in Ps 24:3, and the possibility of the idea of dwelling in Yahweh’s temple in Ps 23:6.

נחה is used parallel to “teaching” in two psalms,⁵⁸ and Ps 16, which is connected with Ps 23 as its corresponding number in the chiasmic arrangement of Pss 15-24, also confesses that Yahweh “will make known” to the suppliant the “path of life” (ארח חיים, 16:11).

Some interpreters have argued that “tracks of righteousness” simply refer to *safe* tracks,⁵⁹ since the aspects of safekeeping and care are so important in the context of vv. 1-4. In this regard, v. 3a, “He restores my life,” is almost automatically interpreted only as a reference to the shepherd who allows the sheep to lie down and to visit “resting places” in order to restore the vitality and strength of the flock.⁶⁰ But the parallel expression, also constructed with שוב (although it is in the form of a *hip'il* participle)⁶¹ in Ps 19:8,⁶² gives reason to wonder whether more was not meant with this pronouncement. Psalm 19:8a says, “The Torah of Yahweh is perfect, *reviving* (משׁיבת) the *soul*. . .” Is it perhaps possible that the poet intended the phrase to be ambiguous? Not only the metaphor of a shepherd who “revives the strength” of his sheep and who guides them along “*right*” tracks are reflected in Ps 23:3, but on a higher level also the metaphor of Yahweh as the guide of the pious who restores the *spiritual* capacity of his followers,⁶³ and who guides them along the “*righteous*” tracks, in other words, according to the Torah as his moral code of conduct.⁶⁴

It has been pointed out that the “road of life” is hinted at in various verses of the psalm. The psalmist is travelling in the presence of a guide who cares for him, first in the image of a sheep, but in v. 3b and later on clearly also as a human. He says very little about his own effort to keep to the “tracks of

⁵⁸ Ps 25:4-5 and Ps 143:10. Cf. also Prov 4:11.

⁵⁹ Klaus Seybold, *Die Psalmen* (HAT I/15; Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr (Paul Siebeck), 1996), 102 describes the meaning as “right tracks,” since the good shepherd owes it to himself and his name to go on “right tracks” and not on “crooked roads,” illegally or secretly over fields and gardens (my translation of the German). He evidently understands the verse only in terms of the shepherd metaphor. Timothy M. Wills, “A Fresh Look at Psalm 23:3a,” *VT* 37 (1987): 104-106, has a similar interpretation of this phrase as simply meaning that the shepherd gives “shelter” to his sheep (p. 106).

⁶⁰ According to John Goldingay, *Psalms 1*, 350 this phrase sums up the implications of v. 2 and parallels v. 1 in the chiasmic structure of vv. 1-3a. Verse 3b then further complements vv. 1-3a but also anticipates v. 4 in summarising the style of the shepherd’s twofold work (care and protection).

⁶¹ According to Joachim Becker, “Elliptisches hēšîb (næpæš) in Ps 68,23 and 73,10,” *BN* 103 (2000): 43-52, 45, השוב נפש is the equivalent of השוב נפש.

⁶² Thus the centre-piece of the cycle Pss 15-24.

⁶³ According to Brueggemann and Bellinger, *Psalms*, 123, the word “soul” introduces a religious motif that seems alien to the imagery itself.

⁶⁴ Where mention is made of השוב נפש, one would naturally first think of hunger and thirst, but a metaphorical hunger and thirst for God and even for wisdom may also be involved. See the article of Becker, “Elliptisches hēšîb (næpæš),” 46.

righteousness” onto which Yahweh guides him, but he clearly expects to reach his destination, namely the permanent presence of Yahweh in the temple.⁶⁵ One other expression in the psalm does, however, contain a hint about the author’s character. This is found in v. 6, which says, “Only *goodness* (טוב) and faithfulness will *follow after* (רדף *qal*) me all the days of my life.” This verse seems to contain an echo of the teaching of Prov 13:21, “*Calamity* (רעה) *pursues* (רדף *pi’el*) sinners, but *prosperity* (טוב, ‘good’) *rewards* (שלם *pi’el*) righteous people.” It is possible that the psalmist alludes to this verse, ironically combining the “wrong” verb רדף with the subject טוב to heighten the power of the pronouncement.⁶⁶ Prosperity and the covenant love of Yahweh will follow after or pursue the suppliant of Ps 23. In terms of Prov 13:21, he is not one of the “sinners,” but one of the “righteous.”⁶⁷

F CONCLUSION

In addition to the known adaptation the author of Ps 23 made of the image of Yahweh as shepherd of his people at the exodus and at the return from exile in order to describe his personal relationship with Yahweh and to underline his trust in Yahweh, it was shown that the poet possibly also alludes to the patriarch Jacob and to the road of life in Proverbs in order to describe his own life as a journey in the presence of Yahweh. The image of Yahweh as a shepherd who leads the implied author as a sheep, is thus blended with the image of Yahweh as a teacher on the road of life who revives the life of the poet and guides him amidst the dangers of evil to the safety of his temple. Because of the guidance of Yahweh, the poet is granted the privilege of repeatedly returning to (and entering into) the house of Yahweh as an honoured guest, while goodness and mercy (and not calamity as in the case of the wicked according to Proverbs), will pursue him all the days of his life, thereby defining him as one of the group of righteous people.

⁶⁵ Ps 43:3, which asks Yahweh to send his “light” and his “truth” to guide the suppliant to the temple would then form a parallel to this.

⁶⁶ Clifford, *Psalms 1-72*, 131 describes the expression as a reversal of covenant language, since it is sometimes used to describe the pursuit of covenant-breakers by enemies as a covenant curse (cf. Hos 8:1-3). Against the backdrop of Prov 13:21, it seems to be a confirmation of the doctrine of retribution.

⁶⁷ Knowledge of another wisdom text, namely Ps 34:11, helps the reader to understand that the confession that “*only goodness* (אך טוב) (and faithfulness) will follow after” the suppliant in Ps 23:6, forms an inclusion with “I shall *not lack* (חסר)” in Ps 23:1. This is the case because Ps 34:11 promises that those who seek Yahweh, “*lack* (חסר) no *good thing* (כל-טוב).” The possibility of an intertextual link between Ps 23:1 and Ps 34:11 is heightened because the seekers of Yahweh are compared to “young lions,” the antithesis of sheep, in that verse. Note also the command to “pursue” (רדף *qal*) peace in Ps 34:15. The connections can probably be attributed to the work of editors, and this makes it difficult to be certain about the direction of influence.

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