

The Lord is my Shepherd in Suffering

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ABSTRACT

Although Ps 23 can be called a psalm of trust, its purpose is to impart comfort in concrete life. In times of sorrow and crisis, this psalm has struck home. The article starts by reading Ps 23 as composition, then turns to the reception history, and finally shows the resonance of this psalm in two contemporary poems. A network of metaphors is built around the shepherd motif. The motif of the shepherd is a central metaphor in this psalm. This motif is also found elsewhere in the OT. The shepherd takes care of his flock. This shepherd is identified as Yahweh. In the structure of Ps 23, v. 4b is the axis, as it is demonstrated by its occurrence precisely in the middle of the psalm. "You are with me." This confession is the heartbeat of the psalm. The second part of v. 4b indicates that the presence of Yahweh is a protective presence. Yahweh is not only the shepherd, but also the host who prepares a table before his guest. Yahweh also anoints the poet's head with oil before the commencement of the meal. The poet's cup overflows. Goodness and love will follow him. All the days of his life, he will experience the presence and protection of Yahweh. In the following part, the reception history of Psalm 23 is elucidated. The echoes of Ps 23 can be heard in two of my poems that were written in Afrikaans and superbly translated into English by the renowned translator, poet and novelist, Leon de Kock.

KEYWORDS: Psalm 23, Orientation, Interpretation, Structure, Reception history, Resonance in poetry

A ORIENTATION

Although Ps 23 can be called a psalm of trust,¹ its purpose is to impart comfort in concrete situations of life. One of the functions of the psalm is to inspire the

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¹ Hermann Gunkel, *Die Psalmen* (HAT II.2; 4th ed.; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1926), 98; Hans-Joachim Kraus, *Psalmen 1–59* (vol. 1 of *Psalmen*; 5th ed.; BKAT 15.1; Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag, 1978), 336; Alfons Deissler, *Ps 1–41* (vol. 1 of *Die Psalmen*; 3rd ed.; Düsseldorf: Patmos Verlag, 1966), 92; Erich Zenger, "Psalmen," in *Psalm 1–50* (vol. 1 of *Die Psalmen*; eds. F. L. Hossfeld and E. Zenger; Würzburg: Echter Verlag, 1993), 152; Hans-Winfried Jüngling, "Psalmen 1–41," in *Internationaal Commentaar op de Bijbel* (vol. 1; eds. E. Eynikel, E. Noort, T. Baarda and A. Denaux; 2nd ed.; Kampen: Kok, 2001), 800; Niek A. Schuman, *Drama*

reader/listener with courage in times of trouble. Trust serves to counterbalance temptation, just as the "paths of righteousness" (v. 3b) are the counter image of the "valley of the shadow" (v. 4a).² This explains why the psalm has elicited such varying shades of emotion and reflection over the centuries. These range from comfort, nostalgia or alienation, to vexation or possibly even ridicule. A poem like Ps 23 allows the poet to express his deepest feelings of sorrow, anger or joy.

The Lord is my shepherd." Five winged words with an immeasurable range. According to Adler,³ the psalm belongs to the basic texts of religious world literature. Holladay calls the psalm "an American secular icon."⁴

Orators, painters, poets and musicians have been inspired by these winged words.⁵

In times of sorrow and crisis, this psalm has struck home. The shocking assassination of Yitzhak Rabin comes to mind. Rabin, the then prime minister of Israel, had been accompanying Shimon Peres to conclude peace arrangements with the Palestinians and their leader, Yasser Arafat. Millions of viewers all over the world sat glued to the television. They observed the procession of world leaders, the funeral rites, the speeches – and they realised that there would be no new beginning.

When they reached the final part of the valedictory rites the world leaders remained behind, along with many others. Only Leah Rabin, her children and closest relatives accompanied the coffin to the grave. A few set prayers and psalms were read and sung. Psalm 23 was one of the psalms, along with Ps 91.⁶

After the devastating terror of 11 September 2001, President George Bush quoted Ps 23:4, "Even though I walk through a valley dark as death, I fear no evil . . ." Those words echo in the corners and crannies of the heaped rubble of the smoking towers, the tomb of thousands.⁷

van Crisis en Hoop: De Psalmen: Gedicht, Gebundeld en Gebeden (Zoetermeer: Meineima, 2008), 29.

² Bernd Janowski, *Konfliktgespräche MIT Gott: Eine Anthropologie der Psalmen* (Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag, 2003), 307.

³ Gerhard Adler, "Du füllst mir den Becher, Psalm 23 in 75 europäischen Sprachen," *CG*53/45 (2001): 381–382.

⁴ William L. Holladay, *The Psalms through Three Thousand Years: Prayerbook of a Cloud of Witnesses* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993).

⁵ Niek A. Schuman, *Pastorale: Psalm 23 in Bijbel en Liturgie Verwoord en Uitgebeeld* (Zoetermeer: Meineima, 2002), 10.

⁶ Schuman, *Pastorale: Psalm 23*, 15.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 16.

today images wail for voice behind the eyes
planes as bombs stuffed with shrapnel of soft bodies
then the fire inferno—flowers from skyscrapers
human flares like falling angels from the highest floor
down, down all along shimmering buildings of glass and steel
fluted in abandoned beauty and fluttering
weightless and willowy and flame—winged to streamline
fleeting reflections in the fugitive language of forgetting
the hellhound of destruction has a red tongue of laughter
who will tell and who will count⁸

We begin by looking at Ps 23 as a composition; we then turn to the reception history and finally study the resonance of Ps 23 in two contemporary poems.

B INTERPRETATION

A network of metaphors is built up around the shepherd motif in Ps 23. There is a notable chiasmic arrangement: vv. 1b–3, confession/witness (He–I); v. 4, a prayer of trust (I–You); v. 5, a prayer of trust (You–I); and v. 6, confession/witness (I–He).⁹ The psalm consists of five strophes, namely vv. 1–4 (three strophes) and vv. 5–6 (two strophes).¹⁰

The title “shepherd,” which is imputed to the reigning king, occurs frequently in the court terminology of the ancient Near East.¹¹ In the prologue to the Codex of Hammurabi, he is described as a shepherd called by Enlil. The Codex also states that the gods instituted the royal office of shepherd and that the gods visited the king.¹²

The motif of the shepherd is found in the Old Testament as well. The title “shepherd” was not assigned to the reigning king as in Egypt and Mesopotamia, however. This title was occasionally imputed to David (2 Sam

⁸ Breyten Breytenbach, *Windcatcher: New & Selected Poems 1964–2006* (London: Harcourt, Inc., 2007), 131.

⁹ Zenger, “Psalmen,” 152; Schuman, *Pastorale: Psalm 23*, 31–33.

¹⁰ Schuman, *Pastorale: Psalm 23*, 31; Cas Vos, *God die groot Digter* (Pretoria: Cordis Trust, 2016), 33–35.

¹¹ Eckart Otto, “Politische Theologie in den Königspsalmen zwischen Ägypten und Assyrien: Die Herrscherlegitimation in den Psalmen 2 und 18 in ihren altorientalischen Kontexten,” in *“Mein Sohn bist du” (Ps 2,7): Studien zu den Königspsalmen* (eds. E. Otto and E. Zenger; SBS 192; Stuttgart: Verlag Katholisches Bibelwerk, 2002), 33–59.

¹² Hans J. Boecker, “Du sollst dem Ochen, der da drischt, das Maul nicht verbinden: Überlegungen zur Wertung der Natur im Alten Testament,” in *Gefährten und Feinde des Menschen: Das Tier in der Lebenswelt des alten Israel* (eds. B. Janowski, U. Neumann-Gorsolke and U. Gleßmer; Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag, 1993), 67–84.

5:2; 7:7; 24:17). It was regularly used when leaders were accused of neglecting their duties (Ezek 34:4 et seq.).¹³

In many passages in the Old Testament, Yahweh is represented as the shepherd of his people (cf. Ps 80:2; Isa 40:11; 63:14; Jer 23:3; Ezek 34:10; see also Pss 74:1; 79:13 and Hos 4:16).¹⁴ In Ps 23, where the shepherd motif plays a key role in the metaphorical dynamics of the psalm, the metaphor is personified – "my shepherd."¹⁵ The shepherd metaphor occurs in the first strophe. The nominal sentence, "The Lord is my shepherd" (v. 1) not only introduces the following stiches where the shepherd motif is developed, but probably also serves as a title and a summary of the central theme of the psalm.¹⁶

The sentence is presented in the form of a confession.¹⁷ The abundance provided by the shepherd (v. 1) is further described in vv. 2–4 as Yahweh's care for his flock. The statement, "I shall not be in want" is further developed in vv. 5–6.¹⁸ The Name, Yahweh, is placed first in this nominal sentence construction to emphasise the subject.

In this beautifully crafted Psalm, the name Yahweh is placed not only at the beginning of the sentence but also at the end (v. 6b). The divine form of address therefore occurs twice in the psalm and forms a frame for the psalm.¹⁹ This *inclusio* is reinforced by the alliterative pattern of "I shall not be in want" (v. 1) and "I will dwell in the house" (v. 6b), as well as the first person verbal forms "I am in want" (v. 1) and "I will dwell" (v. 6b).²⁰

The shepherd motif is carried through in the phrase "I shall not be in want" and throws light on the introductory statement "The Lord is my

¹³ Boecker, "Du sollst dem Ochen," 88.

¹⁴ Bernd Janowski and Klaus Scholtissek, "Gottesbilder," in *Handbuch theologischer Grundbegriffe zum Alten und Neuen Testament* (eds. A. Berlejung and C. Frevel; Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 2006), 229–230.

¹⁵ Cf. Klaus Seybold, *Poetik der Psalmen* (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 2003), 207–208; Vos, *God die groot Digter*, 34–35.

¹⁶ Cf. Siegfried Mittmann, "Aufbau und Einheit des Danklieds Psalm 23," *ZTK* 77 (1980): 7; Patrick D. Miller, *Interpreting the Psalms* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1986), 113; Schuman, *Pastorale: Psalm 23*, 32.

¹⁷ Nico A. van Uchelen, *Psalmen I* (Nijkerk: Callenbach, 1971), 160; Klaus Seybold, *Die Psalmen* (HAT 1.15; Tübingen: Mohr–Siebeck, 1996), 101.

¹⁸ Schuman, *Pastorale: Psalm 23*, 32.

¹⁹ Charles O'Connor, "The Structure of Psalm 23," *LS* 10/3 (1984): 206–230; Hermann Spieckermann, *Heilsgegenwart: Eine Theologie der Psalmen* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1989), 274.

²⁰ Willem S. Prinsloo, *Die Psalms Leef!* (Pretoria: N.G. Kerkboekhandel, 1991), 34.

shepherd.” In the first stanza (lines 1–4) we are told that the poet will not lack food, security or happiness.²¹

Palestine is semi-desert country and green pastures and water are seldom seen. The only green vegetation is usually found growing around the springs. The flock is therefore dependent on a good shepherd, who knows where to find green pastures and water to which he can lead them. There the flock would also find shelter from the merciless midday sun.²²

A good shepherd leads his flock in the right paths, so that they do not stray or get lost. The phrases “green pastures” and “still waters” reflect the abundance that the shepherd can offer the flock in his care.²³ In the context of the shepherd motif and within the *inclusio* the expression in v. 3a implies that Yahweh is a source of renewed strength when the poet is exhausted by life.

Verse 3b makes it clear that the shepherd leads the poet in the right paths, so that he can reach his destination.²⁴ This implies that there are wrong turns and dangerous paths that the poet could have chosen instead.²⁵ However, the shepherd knows all the right paths along which to lead his flock. Among the mountains of Judah there are deep, dangerous and dark cliffs containing numerous caves, the hiding place of robbers and predators. The poet uses these images to convey that Yahweh, the shepherd, is there in the “valley of the shadow of death” along with his flock, in the moments of greatest danger.²⁶

Yahweh leads the poet on the right paths, but this does not imply that the poet is guided to do righteous deeds.²⁷ Instead, it refers to the poet’s delight in walking alongside Yahweh, who preserves him, cares for him and makes provision for his salvation.²⁸ The paths do not lead the poet to wrong turnings or to disaster, but to salvation.²⁹ Yahweh leads the poet in the right paths “for his Name’s sake,” which points to justice and truth (Exod 34:6 et seq.).³⁰

In the structure of Ps 23, v. 4b is the axis, as is demonstrated by its occurrence precisely in the middle of the psalm.³¹ Verse 4b is a confirmation of the statement in v. 4a and also presages what can be expected in the remainder

²¹ Schuman, *Pastorale: Psalm 23*, 46.

²² Zenger, “Psalmen,” 153–154, Vos, *God die groot Digter*, 35.

²³ Miller, *Interpreting the Psalms*, 114.

²⁴ Cas J. A. Vos, *Theopoetry of the Psalms* (London: T&T Clark, 2005), 117–118; Vos, *God die groot Digter*, 35.

²⁵ Seybold, *Die Psalmen*, 102.

²⁶ Schuman, *Pastorale: Psalm 23*, 47; Schuman, *Drama van Crisis en Hoop*, 107.

²⁷ Cf. Van Uchelen, *Psalmen I*, 160.

²⁸ Cf. Schuman, *Pastorale: Psalm 23*, 47.

²⁹ Zenger, “Psalmen,” 154.

³⁰ Seybold, *Die Psalmen*, 102.

³¹ Schuman, *Pastorale: Psalm 23*, 31, 47; Vos, *Theopoetry*, 118.

of the psalm. The first part of this verse is a communication of trust in the presence of Yahweh. His personal presence is emphasised by addressing Him in the second person, and by placing the personal pronoun "You" at the beginning of the construction. The expression "You are with me" can be related to the paternal tradition (Gen 28:20; 31:5). It is an indication of awareness of the presence of God.³²

The second part of v. 4b indicates that the presence of Yahweh is a protective presence. Divergent views have been expressed regarding the meaning of the expression "your rod and your staff." According to Prinsloo,³³ the two words have the same meaning in this context and their juxtaposition is part of the poetic expression. The psalmist uses this technique to describe the all-embracing protection of Yahweh. The "rod" and the "staff" become extensions of Yahweh's actions as a means of describing his presence. Like Seybold,³⁴ Zenger³⁵ and Schuman,³⁶ I see the "staff" as a weapon to protect the flock against predators. The shepherd used his "staff" for support while gathering his flock and leading them.³⁷ In Mesopotamia, the shepherd's staff was a regal symbol. In Egypt, the staff served as a symbol for the deity, or as a symbol of the king's protection.³⁸

Verses 5a and 5b are a continuation of the train of thought begun in the previous verses. The metaphors of the shepherd and the host, both related to the wanderings described in Exodus, are found in Ps 78:19 (et seq., 52 et seq). They are even found in Egyptian texts on the sun god, who is described as the "good shepherd" of the people.³⁹

Verses 5a and 5b are connected; both describe Yahweh's actions by means of second person verb forms. The syntactic structure of the verses is the same, namely, verb + adverbial phrase.⁴⁰

Verse 5b describes the prospect held out to the poet even more clearly than v. 5a. The emphasis is on Yahweh as a host, however.⁴¹ Yahweh is the

³² Seybold, *Die Psalmen*, 102.

³³ Prinsloo, *Die Psalms Leef!* 47.

³⁴ Seybold, *Die Psalmen*, 102.

³⁵ Zenger,

³⁶ Schuman, *Pastorale: Psalm 23*, 47; Vos, *God die groot Digter*, 36.

³⁷ Cf. Van Uchelen, *Psalmen I*; Othmar Keel, *Die Welt der altorientalischen Bildsymbolik und das Alte Testament: Am Beispiel der Psalmen* (5th ed.; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1977), 208; Hans-Winfried Jüngling, "Psalmen 1–41," in *Internationaal Commentaar op de Bijbel* (vol. 1; eds. E. Eynikel, E. Noort, T. Baarda and A. Denaux; 2nd ed.; Kampen: Kok, 2001), 801; Schuman, *Pastorale: Psalm 23*, 47.

³⁸ Boecker, "Du sollst dem Ochen," 87.

³⁹ Zenger, "Psalmen," 155; Schuman, *Pastorale: Psalm 23*, 42, 48.

⁴⁰ Prinsloo, *Die Psalms Leef!*, 37.

subject of the verbs in these verses. The result is that the emphasis falls on Yahweh's actions. The expression "You prepare a table before me" refers to Yahweh's extension of hospitality to the psalmist. The meal typifies Yahweh as the protector and provider.⁴²

Yahweh prepares the meal "in the presence of my enemies," who can merely look on helplessly.⁴³ The tension that is evident in v. 4a becomes marked again. The poet was obviously in danger of one kind or another and therefore required Yahweh's protection and pastoral care. Verse 5a sketches Yahweh's negative actions against the enemies and v. 5b describes Yahweh's gracious attitude towards the poet,⁴⁴ "You anoint my head with oil." Being anointed with oil by the host before the commencement of a meal is an exceptional honour⁴⁵ and no possible danger could prevent Yahweh from giving his guest his blessing. The oil represents happiness and plentitude.⁴⁶ This happiness endures even if the enemies cast a shadow over the poet, as long as Yahweh is the host. Towards the end of v. 5b, the theme reaches a climax, "my cup overflows." Wine and an overflowing cup are symbols of plenty and enjoyment.

Lines 6ab are the climax of the psalm. They are a development of the ideas expressed in the previous verses. In 6ab, Yahweh is no longer the subject, as in the previous verses. Yahweh is no longer directly addressed as in vv. 4b–5b; instead, the poet speaks of Him in the third person (v. 6b).⁴⁷ The particle that introduces v. 6a may be translated as "surely/yes." This emphasises the validation in the last verses of the ideas contained in the earlier verses. Verses 6a and 6b both end with synonymous adverbial clauses; they both emphasize Yahweh's constant protection. In v. 6a, we encounter the words "goodness" and "love," which will literally "follow" the poet. The verb "follow" usually has negative connotations. It is often used in the context of being pursued by enemies. In v. 6a, the poet is not being followed by enemies, but by "goodness and love." These words refer to the concrete goodness and love of Yahweh. His protective nature is highlighted. The conclusion reached in v. 6a and the end of v. 6b indicates that the love and protection of Yahweh are everlasting. Verse 6b is a development of the previous verse. The poet wants to return to the "house of the Lord."⁴⁸ The expression "house of the Lord" is a technical term that refers to the temple. It does not mean that the poet was a priest or a Levite or

⁴¹ Zenger, "Psalmen," 155; Vos, *Theopoetry*, 119.

⁴² Zenger, "Psalmen," 155.

⁴³ Schuman, *Pastorale: Psalm 23*, 48–49; Vos, *God die groot Digter*, 37.

⁴⁴ Prinsloo, *Die Psalms Leef!*, 37.

⁴⁵ Zenger, "Psalmen," 155; Schuman, *Pastorale: Psalm 23*, 48.

⁴⁶ Van Uchelen, *Psalmen 1*, 161.

⁴⁷ Prinsloo, *Die Psalms Leef!*, 38.

⁴⁸ Schuman, *Pastorale: Psalm 23*, 27–28, 49; Jörg Jeremias, *Theologie des Alten Testaments* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2017), 396.

that he literally lived in the temple.⁴⁹ The meaning of this expression is the deep and everlasting communion with Yahweh, the enduring experience of his presence and protection and the enjoyment at his table.⁵⁰ It is possible that the expression "all the days of my life" could refer to a life beyond the grave.⁵¹ This expression sums up the contents of the entire psalm and relates to the beginning of the psalm where Yahweh is described as the shepherd.

C RECEPTION HISTORY

The writers of the Old Testament were creative in their choice of words and images that represent God. He is a king. He is a father who cares for his children. He is also a shepherd who tends his flock. The metaphors of Ps 23 resonate in the New Testament. The parable of the feeding of the five thousand contains a number of references to Ps 23 (Mark 6:30–44; Matt 14:13–21; Luke 9:10–17; John 6:1–14). Just as the Lord is the shepherd of his people, Jesus is the shepherd who cares for his flock. With an allusion to Ps 23, Jesus provides rest and refreshment for weary people (Ps 23:5) and provides such an abundant meal for the disciples that they find it difficult to gather up the remains (Mark 6:43).

Jesus is a shepherd to whom the wellbeing of his sheep is very dear. In Matthew, there is a moving text that tells us a great deal about Jesus's pastoral care, "Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light" (Matt 11:28–30).

A shepherd with a tender heart will not rest before he has found a lost sheep. Jesus is a shepherd of this kind. His heart cannot be at rest before he has found His lost sheep. The writer of the fourth gospel has combined various images and concepts into the well-known metaphor of the good shepherd. "The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep... I know my sheep and my sheep know me..." (John 10:10–18).⁵²

In the early centuries after the death of Christ, a large number of exegetic works and commentaries appeared from the ranks of Judaism—the *midrashim*.⁵³ This method of exposition of texts is applied in the Qumran scrolls and certain parts of the New Testament. Biblical texts were placed side

⁴⁹ Prinsloo, *Die Psalms Leefl*, 48.

⁵⁰ Zenger, "Psalmen," 156; Vos, *Theopoetry*, 120.

⁵¹ Zenger, "Psalmen," 156.

⁵² Jan G. van der Watt, *Family of the King: Dynamics of Metaphor in the Gospel of John* (Leiden: Brill, 2000), 54–92.

⁵³ Folker Siegert, "Hellenistic Jewish Midrash," in *Antiquity* vol. 1/1 of *Hebrew Bible/Old Testament: The History of Its Interpretation* (ed. M. Sæbø; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1996), 195–196.

by side, so that the interpretation of one word threw light on the interpretation of the next. It was a playful, yet frequently profound method, whereby the text was strung together like beads, with each bead supplying a specific perspective on the truth.⁵⁴

The majority of the psalms (143) contain a similar midrash, the *Midrash Tehillim*. This was an early mediaeval collection of expositions and homilies, some of which were created in the same period as the early Christian writings. It is not a continuous, verse-by-verse commentary on the psalms, but rather a series of typical maxims by means of which the rabbis cast light on other texts and themes.⁵⁵

One of the collections of midrashim on Ps 23 explicitly mentions David's flight from Saul. The valley of the shadow of death in Ps 23:4 is the desert of Ziph where Saul pursued David (1 Sam 23:14–28). The enemies mentioned in Ps 23:5 are Doeg the Edomite (1 Sam 22:9–23) or Ahithophel, David's adviser (2 Sam 15:31; 16:15–23). According to these exegetes, the "I" is the historical David.⁵⁶

In other collections, the rabbis relate the "I" to the religious community of Israel. With reference to Ps 23:5 (the anointing of the head), exegetes mention the "messiah-king, who is anointed with the oil of salvation" (David). These Biblical texts are used to remind us of the exodus from Egypt and the exile. The comfort of which Ps 23:4 speaks is linked to an exhortation to comfort in Isa 40:1. In the same context (exile, journey through the desert) we can understand comfort in terms of the Torah and its admonitions.⁵⁷ The midrash of Ps 23 places the psalm directly and indirectly in the context of the covenant relationship, "I am your God, you are my people." In this context, we can refer to Exod 20:2; Jer 31:9 and Ezek 34:31.⁵⁸

Both the Talmud and the Aramaic translation (Targum) link Ps 23:5 to the journey through the desert. The rabbis regarded Ps 23:5 ("You prepare a table before me") as a reference to the manna with which Yahweh fed his people in the desert, so that they lacked nothing.

⁵⁴ Johann Maier, "The Bible and Qumran," in *Antiquity* vol. 1/1 of *Hebrew Bible/Old Testament: The History of Its Interpretation* (ed. M. Sæbø; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1996), 108–120; Christoph Dohmen, *Die Bibel und ihre Auslegung* (München: C.H. Beck, 1998), 53–55; Schuman, *Pastorale: Psalm 23*, 63–64; Gerard A. M. Rouwhorst, "Kerkvaders en Rabbijnen Lezen Psalm 23," in *Letter en Feest: In Gesprek met Niek Schuman over Bijbel en Liturgie* (eds. M. Barnard, G. Heitink and H. Leene; Zoetermeer: Meinema, 2004), 143–155.

⁵⁵ Schuman, *Pastorale: Psalm 23*, 64.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 64.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 64.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 65–66.

The Jews and the non-Jews who acknowledged Jesus of Nazareth as Israel's Messiah were responsible for the Christianisation of the psalms. Certain verses, parts of verses or whole psalms are associated with Christ. The psalms were read, recited and sung with a messianic flavour. Christians associated not only their own voices but also the voice of Christ with the "I" in the laments.⁵⁹

The Messianic interpretation of Ps 23 bears a relation to the baptismal liturgy and the communion service. In the fourth and fifth centuries, in the baptismal catechism, every verse of Ps 23 was related to Christ and to those meeting Christ through baptism.⁶⁰ The "green pastures" are the empowering words of the Holy Writ, as embodied in the baptismal catechism. The "still waters" refer to the baptismal water. The "paths of righteousness" evoke associations with the baptismal catechism, more specifically, with the ethical principles of conduct linked to this catechism. The well-known preacher and ascetic Chrysostom⁶¹ related the psalm to the special "way" of virginity and abstinence during widowhood and marriage. The "valley of the shadow of death" was also linked to the way of the Christ child. The "table" of Ps 23 is the communion table. Satan looks on sadly while the table is being prepared for those who are to be baptised.

According to Chrysostom, the "enemies" represent earthly temptations and pleasures, as well as veneration of the "old" self, but now the enemies simply look on from the side-lines. Those who gather round the table are anointed with holy oil. This is associated with the *chrisma* (anointing) in the catechism. In the patristic interpretation, both an actual and a future meaning are ascribed to the stay in the "house of the Lord," or the return to his house. The reference is first to the closeness of the Lord in our personal lives, but especially to Holy Communion. The second reference is to the everlasting abode in the house of the Father.⁶²

Psalm 23 also influenced the reformers, Luther and Calvin. According to Luther, the image of the shepherd is an allegory of surpassing beauty. The "green pastures" are a reference to the liberating Word of God. The staff of the shepherd is the Word of God, which can, if necessary, serve to discipline us (the Commandments). The "staff" represents the Word, the faith and the promises on which we can rely. Luther regards the shepherd as none other than

⁵⁹ Christiana Reemts, *Schriftauslegung: Die Psalmen bei den Kirchenvätern* (NSKAT 33/6; Stuttgart: Katholisches Bibelwerk, 2000), 12–13, 16–20; Niek A. Schuman, "De Psalmen," in *De Weg van de Liturgie: Tradities, Achtergronden, Praktijk* (eds. P. Oskamp and N. A. Schuman; Zoetermeer: Meinema, 1998), 165–173; Schuman, *Pastorale: Psalm 23*, 67.

⁶⁰ Schuman, *Pastorale: Psalm 23*, 72.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 75.

⁶² *Ibid.*, 72–77.

Christ himself, "our dear Lord." Luther also refers to the temptations referred to in the psalm. Inward doubt and outward hostility are set off against the comfort offered by the Word and at the communion table.⁶³

Calvin relates Ps 23 to the historical David. In his opinion, David wrote it as a hymn of thanksgiving during his reign. The images imply David's confession that, in comparison to the Lord, he is no better than a sheep. Calvin explains the phrase "shadow of death" (Ps 23:4) as a reference to the dark caves of the wild beasts that inspired such deadly fear. Notably, Calvin saw no association with baptism. He did not relate Ps 23:5 to Holy Communion either but discussed the abundant blessings and the tables laden with food, while at the same time cautioning people to practise moderation. According to Calvin, the phrase "dwell in the house of the Lord" refers to life in heaven, that is, "higher than all earthly joys."⁶⁴

D RESONANCE IN POETRY

The prolific literature of the ancient world is an inexhaustible source of material for poetry. Our literature is replete with the echoes of Ps 23. I have supplied two examples of my poems that were written in Afrikaans and superbly translated into English by the renowned translator, poet and novelist, Leon de Kock.

1 Poetical Interpretations of Psalm 23

The Lord is not my shepherd

The Lord is not my shepherd,
I fall short in every way.
He leadeth me to lowlands,
I sweat blood in his presence.
He leadeth me to a desert
where no manna falls
upon the swelling dunes.

Yea, he leadeth me astray
in search of his lost honour.

I crawl down dark depths,
my heart rattles with fear;
Lord, you have withdrawn your hand.
I stare into your back.
You allow me to hang from a cross,
my enemies throw jibes at me.
You receive me like a robber.

⁶³ Ibid., 80.

⁶⁴ Schuman, *Pastorale: Psalm 23*, 81.

I am weighed down with guilt.
 Even if your silence strikes me dumb,
 I shall still call out to you,
 I, your castaway lamb.⁶⁵

The most salient feature of this poem is that it deconstructs the Hebrew poem. The positive statements of the Hebrew poem are expressed in negatives. The poem reveals the Lord's absence as a shepherd. His absence is painfully experienced by the poet. The absence of the Lord is a source of suffering. "I sweat blood" and the future is "a desert." Nevertheless, the poet has to seek "his lost honour" by devious routes. The absence of the Lord as shepherd caused the poet to crawl down "dark depths" and made him afraid. All he could see was the Lord's back. His enemies were casting jibes at him and the Lord was receiving him "like a robber." Despite all the dark experiences that left him dumbstruck, he would continue to call out to the Lord. Even if he was the Lord's castaway lamb, he would continue to call out to Him. This poem is an attempt to describe how modern man wrestles with the Lord. All that remains to him is to continue to call out to the Lord.

The tone of the second poem is entirely different. It reads as follows:

my anima is my shepherd
 my anima is my shepherd, my guardian,
 she maketh me lie down on dead plains,
 leads me beside waters of hatred and unrest.
 she blackens my soul, seduces me
 on wet slopes of wrongful harm.
 her name is bitter upon my lips,
 in the shade of my underworld
 terror is my dark soulmate.
 in my heart with its many, wild chambers
 my brothers and sisters fume:
 pride, greed, lust, wrath,
 gluttony, envy, sloth –
 the seven wonders of my life,
 of all my fugitive days.⁶⁶

This poem reaches into the depths of the unconscious mind. The *anima* and *animus*, in Carl Jung's school of analytical psychology, are the two primary anthropomorphic archetypes of the unconscious mind, as opposed to both the theriomorphic and inferior-function of the shadow archetypes of the Self. The *anima* and *animus* are described by Jung as elements of his theory of the collective unconscious, a domain of the unconscious that transcends the

⁶⁵ Translated into English by Leon de Kock, *Before It Darkens* (Pretoria: Protea Bookhouse, 2011), 21.

⁶⁶ Translated into English by Leon de Kock, Unpublished translation, 2011.

personal psyche. In the unconscious of the male, it finds expression as a feminine inner personality, *anima*; equivalently, in the unconscious of the female it is expressed as a masculine inner personality, *animus*.⁶⁷

In this poem, the *anima* is the female shadow of the man. The subject is human shortcomings (*la condition humaine*). The dark side of human nature leads us to "hatred and unrest." Furthermore, "She blackens my soul, seduces me/on wet slopes of wrongful harm... terror is my soulmate," and the seven sins are "the seven wonders of my life/of all my fugitive days."

How can we free ourselves from this quagmire, from this swamp of suffering? This very person who experiences the seven sins as the seven wonders of his life is persuaded by Ps 23 to confess, "The Lord is my shepherd" and to trust in Him. I shall not want, not even in suffering.

E CONCLUDING REMARK

This article demonstrates how an ancient text can serve as the inspiration for new poems in Afrikaans and English. One of the ways in which the motifs in Ps 23 can lead to the creation of new texts is demonstrated by the rearrangement of the material, resulting in a different reception and experience of the ancient text. The use of new metaphors also changes the way in which the text is received. This gives the English poems their own voice and power.

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⁶⁷ Cf. Carl Jung, *The Psychology of the Unconscious* (Tel Aviv: Dvir Co. Ltd., 1973 [originally 1917]); John A. Sanford, *The Invisible Partners: How the Male and Female in Each of Us Affects Our Relationships* (New York: Paulist Press, 1980).

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