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Fact and Image in the Shepherd Psalm

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THIS TWO-PART STUDY OF THE MUCH-READ SHEPHERD PSALM OFFERS A FRESH literal interpretation of the psalm and points to possible theological applications today that take their cue from Luther's interpretation of the psalm.

INTRODUCTION

Because of Psalm 23's highly poetic character, it is often difficult to distinguish fact from image in its six verses. The poem's imagery may well move a perplexed reader to ask, "Who ever heard of sheep drinking out of a cup? Did the adoring sheep find their way into the temple?" Luther was even moved to observe very bluntly that David did not eat grass. On the other hand, by blending image and fact the reader may also be able to find a highly transcendent viewpoint in this psalm: the meadows and waters of verse 2 may be understood as pictures of the Elysian Fields, the no-lack, no-want of verse 1 may be applied to both the present and the future life, the word "lead" may be regarded as a technical term for the author's translation to heaven, and the house of Yahweh in verse 6 may be interpreted as signifying the eternal abode of God.

In view of such a combination of fact and image, the following interpretation of the psalm will be divided into two portions. In the first part the psalm will be interpreted literally, from the standpoint of the sheep and its attitude toward the shepherd. No theological comment will be offered. Such an interpretation will be

suggested as the literal meaning of the psalm. Thereafter, with special deference to Luther, the second part of the interpretation will proceed to theological application. It will then become evident that Luther's comments are not to be rejected as antiquated but are to be applied theologically after the text has been interpreted according to its literal historical meaning. Because of the "then and now" dichotomy of many statements in the Bible and because the understanding of what a text meant in Biblical days and of what a text means today are often basically different, the two-pronged explanation of the Shepherd Psalm will be presented as a sample or specimen of the way in which many Biblical texts must be treated. Thus some light may be thrown on the perplexing problem of the literal and figurative interpretation of Scripture.

LITERAL INTERPRETATION

The shepherd image is used quite often in the Old Testament to describe the relationship between Yahweh and His covenant people as a group (for example, Is. 40:11; Ezek. 34:10; Ps. 80:1). The author of Psalm 23 could well have heard one of

these songs in the community service and then been moved by it to adapt the image of the shepherd to his own faith as an individual. In appropriating the shepherd image, however, he may also have added other pictures in the composition of his poem. It has been pointed out that the shepherd image may be limited to verses 1-2, whereas in verses 3-4 Yahweh is pictured as a guide and finally in verses 5 to 6 is presented as a host. But several scholars and, interestingly enough, a number of shepherds have argued that the single metaphor of the shepherd has been used throughout the psalm. While such a view is contingent on a figurative interpretation of the word "table" in verse 5, it has a justifiable appeal and will therefore be given preference in the comments that follow. In verses 1-2 the shepherd is presented as providing a noon siesta for his flock at a verdant watering place. In verses 3-4 the shepherd guides the flock from one pasture to another, always finding the right path. In verses 5-6 the shepherd prepares the ground inside the sheepfold for the bedding down of the flock at nightfall. Thus the shepherd-sheep relationship is preserved throughout the psalm, but it is described in three different situations.

In verses 1-3a the flock is pictured as having been on the move since dawn. Its members are exhausted, hungry, and thirsty. At high noon the sheep are led by the shepherd to a refreshing oasis. The verdant grasses and the stayed waters are just what the empty stomachs and the parched lips of the sheep need. Their critical condition calls for a new hold on life, and that is just what the shepherd gives them at this "party." From the sheep's

standpoint the statement "he restores my soul" means that the shepherd actually restores the sheep to life; he revives it when the sheep is at the point of expiring from the rigors of midday out in the steppe.

In verse 3 the statement "he leads me" indicates that the quiet siesta is over, that the sheep are again on the move, and that they look to their shepherd for guidance. He in turn leads them on paths that will be for their good. He knows what the objectives will be for the day. He knows what to seek and what to avoid. Above all, he knows that his name "shepherd" obliges him to do a faithful job as guide and leader of his flock. The sheep also know that the paths in late afternoon may lead through dark gorges and canyons, where dangers from predatory beasts abound. But even in the face of attending shadows and coming nightfall, the sheep have no fear because of the shepherd's reassuring presence. In his belt he carries a short-handled rod with a chunk of metal or rock attached to its end. He uses this club for close hand-to-hand combat when members of his flock are attacked. In addition, he carries in his hand a long shepherd's staff, which serves as a good walking stick and also enables him to reach out and speed up the slower sheep who fall behind the flock.

In verse 5 the sheep have reached the enclosure, or the sheepfold, in which they are going to spend the night. Even today in the Near East the "table" in a nomadic environment lacks any kind of legs; it consists simply of a thick carpet or mattress around which the guests recline. The preparation of such a "grass table" at which the sheep can recline calls for removal of noxious weeds, thorns, and thistles that could be harmful to the sheep. Suspicious stones

need to be overturned because they may be covering nests of scorpions. Large holes or dens must be carefully checked to make sure that no wolves or hyenas are waiting to prey on the flock at night. When the bedding ground has been prepared, the shepherd makes his flock line up at the entrance to the sheepfold. The sheep then pass single file through the narrow entry, where each is subjected to close examination by the shepherd.

Close beside him the shepherd has a crock and a cup, the former containing a concoction of olive oil and cedar tar, the latter filled with a refreshing drink made of honey, wine, and lemon juice. When the shepherd finds a bruised or wounded sheep, he applies the medicinal oil to bleeding knees, mouths, or ears. When he notices that a sheep is especially weak from fatigue and thirst, he uses his medicinal "cocktail in a cup" to give the sheep a refreshing "bedtime snack." Under such considerate and restorative care the sheep bed down for the night with few cares or concerns. The danger of predatory beasts poses no threat, for all that the sheep considers as it closes its eyes for the night is the goodness and kindness of the shepherd that it will enjoy throughout its lifetime. Thus, the house of the shepherd, whether at the refreshing noontime oasis or on the secure grazing ground en route or in the sheepfold itself, is a desirable place to be under any circumstance.

THEOLOGICAL APPLICATION

From the viewpoint of today's interpreter Martin Luther explained Psalm 23 theologically. He designated the word of God as its main theme. According to Luther three different pairs of metaphors were

used for the word of God: the green pastures and the still waters, the rod and the staff, the table and the cup. In his analysis Luther hardly distinguished between fact and image. He proceeded directly to a figurative explanation that had the word of God as its frame of reference.

What the psalmist had said of Yahweh, Luther applied directly to Jesus Christ. He is the only Good Shepherd, the one promised in Ezekiel 34, the one who feeds His followers with no other food than Himself. Spiritually, therefore, the members of His flock lack nothing. In the Gospel they have the green meadows and the quiet waters to nourish and refresh them. That verse 2 refers to spiritual food and drink is shown by the phrase at the beginning of verse 3, "He restores my soul." For Luther this phrase designated the process of conversion, whereby souls that had been slaves under the Law were made joyful and free under the Gospel. This spiritual application to people contrasts sharply with the physical restoration of the sheep that was previously described.

According to Luther's exposition the first two verses of the psalm speak of how the Gospel brings people to faith by converting them. Verses 3-4 then take up the good life into which the Shepherd leads His followers by sanctifying them. What to the sheep had been simply the right path now becomes the narrow path along God's way, the path on which the Shepherd guides His followers from one virtue to another. Here Jesus leads His own, not to reward them for their good behavior, but to demonstrate to them what His title "Shepherd" really means. He is merciful and gracious toward His covenant people. Growth in sanctification — like conversion

—is God's gift of grace and involves no merit on the part of His people.

Luther clearly associated the walk through the dark valley of verse 4 with a Christian's dying. When people face death, they are in the shadow because they do not know whither they are going. But Christians are not afraid, because they walk in faith and think of nothing but the Lord Jesus as death approaches. If their Lord went directly into darkness, should they want to enter directly into light? Christians should not be curious to know what will happen when they die, but should learn to say with Luther's proverb, "I live and don't know how long. I die and don't know when. I go and don't know whither. I'm amazed that I am cheerful." Actually they can be cheerful because in the shepherd's rod and staff they have the protecting and supporting Word of God to accompany them through the shaded portal of death.

With specific reference to the showbread of the Old Testament, Luther saw in the table and the cup of verse 5 the bread and wine of the eucharist, which the Christian receives in remembrance of the suffering of his Lord. Like the ancient poet the New Testament believer is a guest in the house of the Lord, where he is permitted to show forth the Lord's death by partaking of Christ's body and blood. In this application Luther spoke in glowing terms of the warming, enlightening, and comforting effects of the sacrament. In the eucharist grace is lavished so abundantly that the table and the bread make the guests graciously fat, even as the cup and the wine make them graciously drunken. (Only an exegete of Luther's stature could

allow himself such an extravagant metaphor!) Death therefore can have no terror for those who are guests at the table of the Lord. Such enemies as the devil and his evil angels can only be innocuous on-lookers. The oil, too, is a symbol of the full measure of God's grace. It is poured out abundantly over the heads of the guests as that part of their bodies with which they draw near to God and heaven.

The goodness and mercy of God give His followers such comfort and security that they can turn to the future with hope and confidence. With their lives surrounded by the grace and peace of God, they regard the Lord's house as their real home as long as they live. Ultimately the earthly temple will give way to the heavenly temple, where God's people will dwell with Him forever. In line with this explanation Luther summarily attached the Shepherd Psalm to the Third Commandment of the Decalog and to the Second Petition of the Lord's Prayer.

CONCLUSION

What, then, is the denominator in the Shepherd Psalm that blends fact and image, that joins the literal and the figurative, and that ties together the historical and the theological? It is the author's serene faith, which is based not on a shallow optimism but on a realistic appraisal of life. "For You are with me!" That is the essence of trust. Those words are an echo of Yahweh's assurance to Isaac and Jacob, "I will be with you" (Gen. 26:3; 31:3), and of Moses' promise to Joshua, "Yahweh will be with you" (Deut. 31:8). That is the kind of faith that is exemplified in Isaiah's prophecy about Immanuel, "God is with us" (Is. 7:14), and in the refrains

of Psalm 46, "Yahweh of hosts is with us." (46:7, 11)

The poet is certain that God is with him at all stages of his pilgrimage. The lush meadows and the calm waters symbolize the carefree days of his youth, when God provided constant security and ongoing restoration. The renewal of his soul and right leadership are God's present gifts to him, which teach him to view life from the vantage point of his Lord. The fact that God has been his haven and help in every troublesome crisis enables him to look ahead hopefully. Because he has been a guest at God's rich banquet, the Lord's table and cup also assure him of the fullness of salvation that awaits him in the future. This worship experience enables him not only to overcome the hostility of his enemies but also to leap over the years

in faith to his eternal fellowship with God.

What this poet experienced then may readily be translated into the lives of God's people now. They can make this psalm of trust and confidence their own and find strength and peace in communion with their God. They may confess their faith in the four outside verses (1-3 and 6) and may articulate their prayer in the two inside verses (4-5). As the eating of the sacred meal in the sanctuary originally moved the poet to sing Psalm 23, so his poem is admirably suited for contemporary use in connection with celebrations of the holy eucharist. It is especially applicable when people of God face the prospect of death with the calm expression of faith, "I fear no evil, for You are with me!"

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