

Code words in the 23rd Psalm, LeGrand Baker

Twenty-Third Psalm

The 23rd Psalm is very short, but remarkably complete:

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

Its surface text is almost universally acknowledged to be one of the most beautiful poems ever written. Its sub-text is awesome. The sub-text is not hidden, it is only not apparent to those who do not know the language. It is a short play, divided into three acts: 1) the pre-mortal existence; 2) “the valley of the shadow of death;” and 3) “I shall dwell in the house of the Lord forever.”

Act One

The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want.

Almost all of the accounts we have of fore-ordinations contain the principles and promises expressed in these words. The Lord is in charge. It is he who gives instructions and foreordains one to a specific task; he and his Father make enabling covenants regarding the fulfillment of those tasks; and it is by his sustaining power that one is enabled to perform one’s task and keep one’s covenants – “The Lord is my shepherd” – the one whom I shall follow.

The second part, “I shall not want,” is the same assurance as Paul’s, which was also set in the context of the covenants of the pre-mortal world: “ye were sealed with that holy Spirit of promise, which is the earnest of our inheritance until the redemption of the purchased possession.” (Ephesians 1)

Jeremiah is a good example.

Then the Lord put forth his hand, and touched my mouth. And the Lord said unto me, Behold, I have put my words in thy mouth. See, I have this day set thee over the nations. (Jeremiah 1:9-10)

Not everyone is set over the nations, but everyone is given an equivalent guarantee of success – and perhaps an equivalent guarantee of “easy” success. King Zedekiah didn’t like Jeremiah and caused him to be lowered into a pit of mire up to his neck. He was left to stand there until he was exhausted, when it was expected he would simply sink into the morass and drown in the mud. (Jeremiah ch. 38:5-6) Someone pulled him out and he didn’t die then, but it is reported he was later taken to Egypt and murdered there. The point is, he wasn’t drowned in the mud, but lived to fulfill his mission. The Lord hadn’t promised his assignment would be a piece of cake, only that he could not be prevented from doing it.

2 He maketh me to lie down in green pastures

There are two likely meanings here which easily merge into one. The first meaning is explained by Nephi as a declaration of the Saviour’s ultimate kingship.

v. 25 And he gathereth his children from the four quarters of the earth; and he numbereth his sheep, and they know him; and there shall be one fold and one shepherd; and he shall feed his sheep, and in him they shall find pasture.

v. 26 And because of the righteousness of his people, Satan has no power; wherefore, he cannot be loosed for the space of many years; for he hath no power over the hearts of the people, for they dwell in righteousness, and the Holy One of Israel reigneth. (1 Ne. 22:21-31)

The second probable meaning is deduced from what follows:

he leadeth me beside the still waters.

The waters of life are moving, living, tranquil waters.¹ They give life as rain, rivulets, and great rivers, but they are never stagnant and never salty. Nephi wrote that the waters of life and the fruit of the tree of life represent the love of God. If that was so in Nephi’s day, it would have been so in Adam and David’s as well. The symbolism of the tree and waters of life are fundamental to the Feast of Tabernacles drama. In the 23rd Psalm we do not have a tree that sustains life because the symbolism is of sheep, rather than of people. So in conjunction with the waters of life we have “green pastures” instead.²

He restoreth my soul.

In section 88 of the Doctrine and Covenants, when the Lord was explaining resurrection and exaltation, he used the word “soul,” and in that context defined it as the body and spirit of man. (D&C 88:15) But elsewhere – almost everywhere else – in the scriptures the “soul” is the spirit which animates one’s physical body and gives it life.³ It seems that both ideas are the same, and

1 James Strong’s *Exhaustive Concordance of the Bible*. #4496: peaceful, quiet, rest.

2 Please note my earlier comment that in Israelite tradition the most frequent symbol of the tree of life is the Olive tree. However grape vines, palm trees, and an ear of wheat were also used as symbols of the tree of life. One finds this in: Ad de Vries in *Dictionary of Symbols and Imagery* (London, North-Holland, 1974), 474.

3 For examples see: Alma 29:16, 36:15, 40:11, 41:2; Matthew 10:28; 2 Nephi 1:22; D&C

that a “soul” is an intelligence clothed with a body. Whether that body is a spirit, or both spirit and physical, the definition still holds.

The “soul” in the 23rd Psalm is “restored.” But this happens before it falls from the world of light into the world of darkness in the valley of the shadow of death. So this “He restoreth my soul” happened in the pre-mortal spirit world. In that life we could sin, as is evinced by the seriousness with which a third of the hosts of heaven sinned. Then as now, the consequence of sin was uncleanness, and no unclean thing can be in the presence of God.

Our options before we were born into this world seem to have been about as complex as our options are now. The eternal importance of free agency and of the value of experience suggests that if one had the option of choosing some wrong thing at every point along the way, as one has in this life – Well, I, for one, probably made some really stupid choices there, just as I have here. But notwithstanding whatever I did wrong back then, I was born into this mortal world as an innocent baby, pure and clean. I brought no baggage and no sin from my pre-mortal life. I was an innocent baby because the atonement made me innocent. In the Doctrine and Covenants the Lord explains how that was done.

Every spirit of man was innocent in the beginning; and God having redeemed man from the fall, man became again, in their infant state, innocent before God. (D&C 93: 38)

So we were “innocent in the beginning” – that would be when we were born to our heavenly parents as spirits. And we become innocent again, a second time when we are born to our earthly parents. In order for us to become innocent *again*, something had to happen to make us un-innocent after “the beginning.” It’s easy to know what. Free agency is meaningless unless there are real choices. Experience in knowing the difference between correct and incorrect choices is necessary for growth, even though making wrong choices subjects one to the laws of justice. That is what repentance is for, and notwithstanding the wrong choices we made in the pre-mortal spirit world, the atonement made it possible for us to be born into this world as innocent little babies. I don't know if that was what King David had in mind when he wrote, “He restoreth my soul,” but that's what I think when I read it.

he leadeth me in the paths of righteousness for his name's sake.

“Paths of righteousness” are the “way,” the system of steps, ordinances and covenants, through which one must pass in order to return to God. As mentioned above, the word “righteousness” (zedek) identifies the path as the ancient priesthood and temple ordinances and covenants. We have already discussed that, but may I quickly review.

“Righteousness” is a key word which has popped up again and again in our discussion. In English, its root means to be “right,” to be at “right angle” to something, to be square with, plumb with, literally to bring something to the square. The Hebrew word which is translated “righteousness” means the same thing, being altogether just, justified, true, square, but it also has singular and very important priesthood and temple connotations. It is the same word as the name

Zadok, the High Priest in the days of David and Solomon. Throughout the history of Solomon's temple, tradition says, only Zadok and his descendants could hold the office of High Priest, enter the Holy of Holies and officiate in the sacred temple ordinances. So as an adjective, zedek has to do with that kind of priesthood propriety. So "righteousness" does not mean just doing nice things, it means doing appropriate temple things with legitimate priesthood authority, which is the authority of Zadok, Melchizedek, and other High Priests. As one examines the use of the word "righteousness," in the Doctrine and Covenants, it is apparent that the Lord used the word there the same way it is used in the other scriptures, with strong connotations of priesthood propriety. For example the phrase, "robes of righteousness" has a specific and consistent meaning throughout the scriptures. In the phrase "works of righteousness" are the quintessence of obedience. Such works were obedience to correct laws, principles, covenants, ordinances, and rules of clothing. For one to do "works of righteousness," he must do precisely the right thing, in precisely the right way, for precisely the right reason, dressed in precisely the right clothing, in the temple and with precisely the right priesthood authority. Its meaning is fully brought into play in the Beatitudes in the phrase, "Blessed are all they who do hunger and thirst after righteousness...." Alma explains this principle, not only in terms of being unclean, but also in terms of eating the wrong food and drinking the wrong water, in contrast to his frequent mention of the fruit of the tree of life and the waters of life.

But behold, an awful death cometh upon the wicked; for they die as to things pertaining to things of righteousness [Note: Alma does not say, "die as to righteousness," he says, "die as to *things* pertaining to *things* of righteousness."]; for they are unclean, and no unclean thing can inherit the kingdom of God; but they are cast out, and consigned to partake of the fruits of their labors or their works, which have been evil; and they drink the dregs of a bitter cup (Alma 40:26).

The "paths of righteousness" in the 23rd Psalm are the way by which one may come unto Christ, but the context is still in act one, which is the pre-mortal existence. Speaking of that, President Joseph Fielding Smith wrote that there were "ordinances" in our pre-mortal life.

During the ages in which we dwelt in the pre-mortal state we not only developed our various characteristics and showed our worthiness and ability, or the lack of it, but we were also where such progress could be observed. It is reasonable to believe that there was a Church organization there. The heavenly beings were living in a perfectly arranged society. Every person knew his place. Priesthood, without any question, had been conferred and the leaders were chosen to officiate. Ordinances pertaining to that pre-existence were required, and the love of God prevailed.⁴

In support of the idea that there was a church organization with enabling ordinances in the pre-mortal spirit world, President Smith quoted Ephesians 1:3-4.⁵ He might also have used I Nephi 20, Isaiah 61:1, D&C 93:21-23, Alma 12-13, Isaiah 6, and lots of others. So there was, in the pleasantness of the world of "green pastures" and "still waters," a clearly defined "way" which King David calls "the paths of righteousness."

4 Joseph Fielding Smith, *The Way to Perfection* (Genealogical Society of Utah, 1949), p.50-1.

5 Joseph Fielding Smith, *The Way to Perfection* (Genealogical Society of Utah, 1949), p.50-1; and also his *Doctrines of Salvation*, Salt Lake City, 1954, Vol. 1, p. 66

for his name's sake.

As mentioned above, “name” is another key word. New covenants are almost always associated with new names. Abram received the “Abrahamic covenant” and his name was changed to Abraham. Jacob made a covenant and the Lord changed his name to Israel. In First Nephi 20, when the people who were called Jacob made a covenant with the Lord, their name was also changed to Israel. In many instances in the scriptures the word “name” can be replaced by “covenant” without changing the meaning of the statement.

The psalm’s “he leadeth me in the paths of righteousness for his name's sake,” is about as straightforward as it can be. “Paths” equal ordinances, “righteousness” is zedek, and name is “covenant.” “He leadeth me in the paths of righteousness for his name's sake” might read, “He leads me through the ordinances of the priesthood for the sake of the covenants we have made together.”

Act 2

*4 Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death,
I will fear no evil: for thou art with me;*

There is not a voice change here, but there is a change in the way the king speaks about God. Throughout act one the king is rehearsing the story of his own past, and God is spoken of as “He.” But when one enters the world of “the valley of the shadow of death,” the psalm becomes a prayer, and God is addressed as “thou.” That prayer is an expression of hope and confidence that God will fulfill his part of the covenant so the king may fulfill his: One’s assignment may be difficult, but in the fulfillment of that assignment, one is never alone.

thy rod and thy staff they comfort me.

As observed above, a rod is a symbol of kingship.⁶ It is the same as the royal scepter which is the branch of the Tree of Life. An ancient tradition says that the rod of Moses was a branch of the tree of life – an interesting idea, since he received its power at the time he saw the burning bush.

Aaron’s staff was a symbol of priesthood authority. When Aaron's authority was challenged, he put his staff in the ground and the next morning it had blossomed. Thereafter that staff was kept in the Ark of the Covenant in the Holy of Holies.

“Comfort” is the same word used in Isaiah 61:1-3 to introduce the coronation sequence: to wash, anoint, clothe, crown, and give a new name. That coronation may be a this-world re-play of the earlier “he leadeth me in the paths of righteousness for his name's sake.”

So what this verse apparently says is, “Even though I am in the darkness of this world, I have no reason to fear, for I am enthroned by the symbols of kingship (rod) and of priesthood (staff).”

6 James Strong’s *Exhaustive Concordance of the Bible*. #7626: “a stick (for punishing, writing, fighting, ruling, walking, etc.) or (fig) a clan: – correction, dart, rod, sceptre, staff, tribe.”

Thou preparest a table before me.

The table prepared is the temple feast. Its symbolism is much older than the Law of Moses, and it represents something far more important than a temporal meal. A possible example is when Melchizedek met Abraham returning from rescuing Lot. He received tithes from Abraham and brought bread and wine to serve to him. Melchizedek was High Priest of Salem. Not only did he build a temple there, but he also gave the city a new name, Jerusalem, city of peace.⁷

Perhaps the most remarkable example of this feast was with Moses on Mt. Sinai.

Then went up Moses, and Aaron, Nadab, and Abihu, and seventy of the elders of Israel: And they saw the God of Israel: and there was under his feet as it were a paved work of a sapphire stone, and as it were the body of heaven in his clearness. And upon the nobles of the children of Israel he laid not his hand: also they saw God, and did eat and drink (Exodus 24:1-18).

The meal in the 23rd Psalm might also refer to the meat that was taken from the seething pot at the temple in Jerusalem. There the people who offered the sacrifice sat with the priests and ate the meat of the sacrifice. If these are the meals David refers to by the words, “Thou preparest a table before me,” then he is probably talking about symbolically eating in the presence of the Lord – a royal banquet, where Jehovah confirms the rule of the king.⁸

In Third Nephi, after the Saviour came to the temple and gave the lecture (Beatitudes and Sermon on the Mount), the people brought bread and wine and it was multiplied so that it filled all those present (3 Nephi 18:1-12). Then on the following day, Christ himself provided the bread and wine that satisfied an even greater multitude. (3 Nephi 20:5-9) That is the same sequence as the 21st and 22nd days of the New Year festival, and probably the same ceremonial feasts.

Thou anointest my head with oil.

That is a clear reference to the kingship coronation rites.

My cup runneth over.

To have one's cup run over is to have so many blessings that there is not room enough to receive them. That blessing is a logical – even necessary – conclusion to the anointing and the sacred meal.

7 Josephus, the Essential Writings, translated by Paul L. Maier, Grand Rapids, Michigan, 1988, p. 367.

8 In an extended discussion of the question, Barre and Keselman write that “... the banquet scene is properly a royal banquet, where the (divine) overLord reconfirms the rule of his vassal-king...” Michael L. Barre & John S. Kselman, “New exodus covenant in Psalm 23,” in Carol L. Meyers and M. O'Connor, ed., *The Word of the Lord Shall Go Forth, Essays in Honor of David Noel Freedman in Celebration of His Sixtieth Birthday* (Published for the American Schools of Oriental Research by Eisenbrauns, Winona Lake, Indiana 1983), p. 104-106.

Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life

These are the words which constitute the conclusion of Act 2. In English, goodness has to do with how one acts, and mercy has to do with how one judges. Dan Belnap tells me, that the word for mercy in Hebrew is *hesed*, but its meaning is debated. He said that some scholars believe it is the Hebrew equivalent for the New Testament concept of charity – “Eternal lovingkindness.” In his video, *Faith of an Observer*, Hugh Nibley says the law of the gospel is to repent and to forgive⁹ – it's that idea.

Barre and Kselman translate the line as: “Henceforth may only (your) covenant blessings pursue me all the days of my life.”¹⁰ However, Freedman believed that “goodness and mercy” were proper actually name-titles, and probably represented guardian angels who were members of the Council and who had covenanted to come to the earth to assist the king during his lifetime. The quote reads:

The association of the divine virtues...here is distinctive and exceptional. . . . In the background is the mythological picture of the principal deity accompanied by lesser divine beings who . . . will leave their posts in the heavenly court, and accompany the Psalmist throughout his life (1980: 297-98).¹¹

9 Nibley doesn't say where he came up with that idea, but it seems to say it in the first few verses of the Sermon on the Mount. See 3 Nephi 12:21-24. The rest of the sermon goes through the remainder of the sequence, so it is reasonable to suppose that is correct.

10 Michael L. Barre & John S. Kselman, “New exodus covenant in Psalm 23,” in Carol L. Meyers and M. O'Connor, ed., *The Word of the Lord Shall Go Forth, Essays in Honor of David Noel Freedman in Celebration of His Sixtieth Birthday* (Published for the American Schools of Oriental Research by Eisenbrauns, Winona Lake, Indiana 1983) , p. 89-100.

11 Michael L. Barre & John S. Kselman, “New exodus covenant in Psalm 23,” in Carol L. Meyers and M. O'Connor, ed., *The Word of the Lord Shall Go Forth, Essays in Honor of David Noel Freedman in Celebration of His Sixtieth Birthday* (Published for the American Schools of Oriental Research by Eisenbrauns, Winona Lake, Indiana 1983) , p. 102. (The parts left out of the quote are explanations of Hebrew words.)

They give as their source: David N. Freedman, “The Twenty-Third Psalm.” Pp. 275-302 in *Pottery, Poetry, and Prophecy.* *Studies in Early Hebrew Poetry.* 1980 [Originally, 1976, pp.139-66 in *Michigan Oriental Studies in Honor of George Cameron.* ed. L. L. Orlin et al. Ann Arbor, MI: Department of Near Eastern Studies, University of Michigan.), p. 297-98.

They also include a footnote (# 18, on p. 117) about guardian angels. It reads: “So also J. H. Eaton, *Kingship and the Psalms.* *Studies in Biblical Theology* 2/32. London: SCM, 1976: 153: “A tendency to personify the covenant-graces appears fairly clearly in a number of passages; they take the form of angelic beings commissioned by God to accompany and guard his king.” In addition to Ps 23: 6, Eaton cites Pss 21: 4; 40: 12; 42: 9; 43: 3; 54: 7; 59: 11; 61: 8; 91: 4. On Pss 40: 12 and 61: 8, see below.”

The full quote from David Noel Freedman, “Twenty - Third Psalm,” in *Pottery, Poetry, and Prophecy, Studies in Early Hebrew Poetry* (Winona Lake, Indiana, Eisenbrauns, 1980), p. 275 -

all the days of my life

If “goodness and mercy” are the blessing the king receives, then the words “all the days of my life” are a promise that God will bless one that he may have sufficient opportunity and resources to fulfill the covenants he made at the Council. If “goodness and mercy” are the characteristics of the king, that he may bless others, then the promise is essentially the same. But there is also another connotation which cannot be ignored: “all the days of my life” sounds very much like “endure to the end”—and that also fits, no matter which way one interprets “goodness and mercy.”

Act 3

and I will dwell in the house of the Lord for ever.

As is frequently the case in the scriptures, act three and the end of act two are represented by the same words. “I shall dwell in the house of the Lord for ever” is the perfect ending for act two. But “forever” lasts longer than this earth life, so that same sentence also stands for all we need wonder about act three.

302, reads as follows:

In Ps. 23, the situation is reversed: the Psalmist will be accompanied by divine goodness and mercy. We may compare this passage with Ps. 43:3, where the divine attributes, “your light and your truth” will guide the poet. In the background is the mythological picture of the principal deity accompanied by lesser divine beings who serve him as retinue and bodyguard. The pre Israelite tradition has been preserved almost intact in Hab. 3:5 where Pestilence (*deber*) and Plague (*res>p*) are described as marching before and behind the Deity. Elsewhere the accompanying figures have been demythologized in the form of divine attributes, as e.g., in Ps. 96:6

Honor and majesty are before him

Strength and beauty are in his sanctuary.

In Ps. 23, there is a further adaptation. The divine virtues will leave their posts in the heavenly court, and accompany the Psalmist throughout his life. There is a hint that something approaching divine honors is being accorded to the Psalmist. Perhaps we have here an early form of the later doctrine of guardian angels.