

English Language resources: Bible texts analysis – Psalm 23

A textual analysis of a passage from the King James Bible

The text is the *King James Bible* translation of **Psalms 23:1-6**. The analysis is to show the way in which language has changed over time.

Audience

The original audience of the Psalms was Jewish and pre-Christian, although questions of authorship and date are highly contentious, ranging from 1000 to 500 BC and with several possible authors including the traditional claim of King David.

The *KJB* audience was a Christian society with limited access to the Bible until the *KJB* appeared. The translation maintains ceremony and tradition. It was used in church where the minister would read it aloud for the congregation, but increasingly families and individuals with growing literacy had access to the text. The lexical choices in the *KJB* were intended to suit a wide audience and most of the population would either read or hear the text.

More recently, there have been numerous versions and adaptations of Psalm 23, setting it to music in very diverse styles (from traditional religious settings to heavy metal and hip-hop) and citing it in films. This is partly due to the historic cultural centrality of the Bible to the English-speaking world, as well as the richness of the imagery, its openness to interpretation, and perhaps the gravitas of its old-fashioned language.

Purpose

The primary purpose of the text is to celebrate the protection afforded by God – it is a comforting text, which is likely to explain why this psalm is often chosen as a text to be read at funerals. It is also an emotive text, mainly

because of its poetic aspects, in terms of structure and symbolism.

Content / genre

Psalm 23 is a sacred text, specifically from the Old Testament of The Bible. This psalm comes from the Book of Psalms, 150 texts which were traditionally sung or recited (and often referred to as the hymnbook of the Jews). They have clear poetic elements, including parallelism as a key device. Like many other psalms, Psalm 23 has subsequently been shaped into a Christian hymn.

In terms of images of God, Psalm 23 portrays a very positive, paternal and protective God. He offers to provide the essentials of physical existence (food, shelter and security from enemy attack) as well as moral guidance and comfort during distressing times. The phrase 'my cup runneth over' conveys God's generosity whilst 'Surely... all the days of my life... for ever' indicates his permanence, both highly reassuring notions for any audience.

In return, and less prominent in the text, is the assumption of obedience and submission from God's 'sheep', and the benefits resulting from their compliance. An area of interest is the 'comfort' given by the 'thy rod and thy staff'. Does this mean that these implements (see discussion below of the meanings of these words) are used against the 'enemies' or used to rescue the speaker, or is there a sense in which the speaker is reassured by the limits imposed on him(her)self? However we interpret this, it can be said that where other texts demonstrate the consequences of disobedience, this text focusses on God's benevolence resulting from obedience to him.

Discourse

The discourse structure may be described as list form, with repetition of certain phrases ('he leadeth me') or grammatical structures ('he' / 'thou' + verb) throughout. The elements of the list are not connected together particularly,

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although there is use of 'and' (a frequent feature elsewhere in the *KJB*) in verse 6.

The text uses the first person pronoun 'I' throughout, and relates the ways in which God is beneficial to 'me' using examples of personal experience, without the didactic aspects often found elsewhere in the Bible. It has been suggested that the psalm has two voices: the poet / psalmist and the sheep. Any shift in speaker is not clearly marked, so this idea must be considered an interpretation rather than a certainty.

Furthermore, in terms of cohesion, there is some confusing use of pronouns to refer to God – initially 'The LORD' is referred to using the third person pronoun 'He', but in verses 4 and 5, the text uses 'thou', directly addressing God, indicating greater intimacy of relationship.

Graphology

In the King James Bible (*KJB*) the psalm is divided into chapters and verses with a new line for each verse. The word 'LORD' is consistently written in capitals, in keeping with the rest of the text. This capitalisation results from the attempt to translate the sacred Jewish name for God, YHWH (controversially pronounced as 'Yahweh'), which appears in capitals when translated from Hebrew script into Roman script. It is a way of according respect to the name of God in keeping with the first of the Ten Commandments. This feature is found in the 1611 version almost throughout the text, and continues to be used in the 1769 version.

Grammar

There are some grammatical aspects of the *KJB* version which have since changed. Inflections such as 'eth' ('maketh') and 'est' ('prearest') are no longer used, and the infinitive marker 'to' (as in 'He maketh me to lie down...') is no longer considered necessary.

The opening of the text has two short clauses connected with a semi-colon to emphasise the parallel ideas of the relationship of the 'LORD' and the speaker and their different roles. This patterning continues with longer sentences, using colons to draw attention to the parallel elements. The longest sentence is verse 4, broken into sections by the use of punctuation. Here, there is balance ('though I walk... I will fear no evil') and explanation ('for thou art with me ... comfort me'). Some poetic rhythm can be discerned in the phrase: 'walk through the valley of the shadow of death', which dramatizes a moment of crisis in the psalm. It is resolved with the resolute: 'I will fear no evil'.

The clause 'thy rod and thy staff they comfort me' uses apposition, so 'thy rod and thy staff' are equivalent to the pronoun 'they'. This is a highly rhetorical structure, which is often still found in natural speech, but rarely in writing.

Lexis

The *KJB* text would have been accessible to most people as the lexis would have been familiar. Many nouns are common and concrete, e.g. 'pastures', 'waters', 'paths', 'valley', 'rod', 'staff', 'table', 'head', 'oil', 'cup', 'house'. The abstract nouns are also familiar: 'death', 'soul', 'evil', 'goodness' and 'mercy'. There are many high frequency verbs associated with everyday life e.g. 'walk', 'fear', 'comfort', 'follow', 'dwell'. These make the psalm appear more universally relevant. It could be described as a text that relates to every person's metaphorical journey through life.

However, the text is not as simple as it seems, since many of these terms are used to represent a spiritual meaning. Any audience would need to have a shared cultural knowledge of how to interpret such terms. Some of the phrases help the audience to do this: 'the paths of righteousness' and 'anointed' are phrases that are associated with religion, while 'the valley of the shadow of death' signals its own deeper meaning.

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The precise interpretations of 'my cup runneth over' (now a familiar saying) and 'he leadeth me beside the still waters' are more obscure, although the latter would seem to symbolise calmer times in one's life.

While the language of the *KJB* was chosen to be familiar and accessible to the majority of the audience, some words have since undergone lexical and semantic change. For example, 'Yea', 'thou', 'thee', 'mine' (meaning 'my') are now archaic, surviving only in dialects and no longer used in Standard English.

Semantics

Many words found in the *KJB* version of Psalm 23 remain in use, but have changed in terms of meanings. For example, the word 'want' has narrowed in meaning, to indicate something one would like, so that the older meaning of 'lack anything' is now lost, although we still use the idiomatic phrase 'waste not, want not'. The word 'righteousness' is still in use in some higher registers and with this same meaning of 'virtue' and 'conformity with divine law'. However, it has also acquired some negative associations because the more commonly-heard phrase is 'self-righteous', which is used as a criticism of those who are overly proud of their goodness. This is not quite an example of semantic pejoration but demonstrates how words are affected by the meanings of similar words.

Similarly, 'rod' and 'staff' are both words which are still in use, but they

are no longer generally recognisable objects as modern audiences are not familiar with farming implements. Consequently, they have caused much discussion among Bible scholars, with interpretations ranging from instruments for correction and violence, to items used by shepherds for rescuing and defending sheep from attack, to symbols of speech and magical power.

Context

The cultural references are those of an agrarian society, where animal husbandry and features of the landscape are used to exemplify goodness. The later audiences of this text, such as the seventeenth century audience of the *King James Bible* (and audiences until fairly recently), would probably still understand these references, but a modern audience is less likely to value 'green pastures' and 'still waters'. The audience of the *KJB* would probably have understood the concepts of anointing with oil and preparing a table, although these practices might have had other cultural values for the original Jewish audience.

More importantly, the concept of the shepherd and features of the land are imbued with metaphorical significance, so that these function in many ways as an allegory to create a moral landscape. Audiences of the *KJB* were very familiar with this interpretation, and indeed there are other references in the Bible to sheep and shepherds, which reinforce this understanding. (See <http://www.crossref-it.info/repository/big-ideas-bible/Sheep,-shepherd-and-lamb>.)

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Psalm 23

¹The LORD is my shepherd; I shall not want.

²He maketh me to lie down in green pastures: he leadeth me beside the still waters.

³He restoreth my soul: he leadeth me in the paths of righteousness for his name's sake.

⁴Yea, 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.

⁵Thou preparest a table before me in the presence of mine enemies: thou anointest my head with oil; my cup runneth over.

⁶Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life: and I will dwell in the house of the LORD for ever.