The presence of the shepherd: a rhetographic exegesis of Psalm 23

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Abstract

Interpreters have rightly put the immensely comforting power of Psalm 23 to its depiction of the personal care and attention that Yahweh, the Shepherd provides His people. It is also widely accepted that the movement and pilgrimage theme in the psalm adds to the effect of encouraging the weary, fearful or dispirited believer. One aspect of the Psalm, whose contribution remains to be investigated however, is the role of the various locations within which the personal care and attention is provided, as well as the changing spatial positions between the Shepherd and the psalmist. Using the Bible Study method of rhetography, this paper delineates how these spatial dimensions in Psalm 23 contribute to its celebrated effect. It concludes by encouraging song writers and worship leaders to include the rhetographic aspects of the psalm in their song writing.

1. Introduction

One advantage of the burgeoning diversity of Bible study methods is that they enable the re-examination of various aspects of familiar passages which have hitherto not been fully explored. One such category of methods which has already shown significant promise in this direction is the socio-rhetorical method (e.g. Witherington 2006; De Silva 2000; Loubser 2005:127-140; Robbins 1996a; Watson 1998:67-115; Oosthuizen 1997:64-91; Adams 1995:381-384; Ledbetter 1993:289-301). Improving on its parent specialty of rhetorical criticism, the basic assumption of the socio-rhetorical method is that biblical texts were written for the purpose of persuading their first readers and hearers and so change their thoughts, beliefs, feelings, attitudes, and behaviour. In this regard, and given the literary, socio-historical, and cultural

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contexts of the inspired authors and their first readers, the method analyzes how the text was rhetorically designed to achieve the purpose for which it was written. Questions as to the historical and formational value of the text to their first recipients, as well as their place in the biblical canon for the people of God at large, are thereby also answered.

Clearly, the Spirit-inspired nature of Scripture implies that though this basic assumption concerning the rhetorical design of the text is correct, it is an inadequate premise for studying the Bible. In addition to the above, it must also be assumed from the beginning that the text achieves its effect, not just through its rhetorical strategies, but also by the simple fact that it is God's word, which proceeds from Him 'like fire, and like a hammer that breaks a rock in pieces' (Jer. 23:29).[2] The power of the word thus resides not in its ability to manipulate the reader/listener, but in the Spirit's effective ministry of transformation. In this sense, the idea proposed by Irenaeus of Lyons in the second century AD that the Word and the Spirit are the two hands of God by which He changes and moulds believers is worth upholding (Irenaeus 1997).

That said, however, there is also significant mileage in investigating aspects of how the Spirit's power of persuasion and transformation is achieved through the manner in which the text is rhetorically designed. Such knowledge arms the twenty-first century interpreter, expositor, and practitioner of the word with significant expertise in partnership with the Spirit of God. When the socio-rhetorical method is viewed in that context, it has great potential for uncovering the communicative power of Scripture and enriching its application in the modern contexts.

The initial application of the method focused mostly on the *logos* (rational appeal), *pathos* (emotional appeal), and *ethos* (ethical appeal) of the passages, in parallel with how such lines of persuasion were similarly employed by other contemporary literary sources of the era (Robbins 1996b; cf. Bloomquist 2002:61-96; Porter and Olbricht 1993; Bloomquist 1999:173-209; Witherington 1995; Czachesz 1995:5-32; Hester 1992:27-57). The primary tool in this rhetological approach to socio-rhetorical studies is to outline the linguistic and cognitive patterns of the text within its historical context, and establish the means by which the argument of the text would have persuaded the first readers and so achieved its formational purposes. This approach has yielded significant rewards in New Testament studies, especially in the study of the letters.

[2] Unless otherwise stated, all Scripture quotations are from the NIV.

Recently, however, and with the postmodern re-appreciation of the role of the imagination in shaping human understanding, feelings, attitudes, and behaviour, and the important function that the spatiality of a text plays in determining this imagination, a sub-specialist application of the socio-rhetorical method has been proposed. This method, called rhetography, predominantly focuses on the manner in which the spatial dimensions of the text contribute to its rhetorical and imaginative effect on the readers and hearers (cf. Black and Watson 2008; DeSilva 2008:271-98; Dennis 2010; Webb 2009). When employing this method, the task of the interpreter is to establish how the text would have shaped the imagination of the readers and hearers so as to influence their thoughts, emotions, and attitudes, and so inspire their decision making and volitional actions. This method is clearly most suited for those texts in which spatial language and metaphors are prominent.

With this background information in mind, we may now proceed to the task at hand. The aims of this article are threefold. Firstly, since the method is not well-known, the article will describe the rhetographic approach to exegesis and give examples of its application. Secondly, to demonstrate some of its benefits, the paper will apply the method to a familiar text (Ps. 23) to highlight some aspects of the psalm which have hitherto not been adequately emphasized. Finally, it will be observed that a benefit of this application to Psalm 23 is how the knowledge could enhance the manner in which song-writers and worship leaders develop hymns and songs of worship based on the psalm.

2. The rhetographic method of Bible studies

The term rhetography was first used by Vernon Robbins (2008a:81) to describe 'the graphic images people create in their minds as a result of the visual texture of a text'. When employed as a Bible study method, it examines the manner and strategies by which the text, both in its written and spoken form, may have influenced the imaginations of the first readers/hearers, and so persuaded them to take a course of action. 'Rhetography communicates a context of meaning to a hearer or reader. A speaker or writer composes, intentionally or unintentionally, a context of communication through statements or signs that conjure visual images in the mind which, in turn, evoke 'familiar' contexts that provide meaning for a hearer or reader' (pp. 81-82).

As a method, rhetography is based on three main fundamental tenets. Firstly, it takes for granted that there is a strong causal link between human imagination

and their feelings, attitudes, and inspired behaviour (Belaj 2005:119-44; Vermeir 2004:561-91; Hays 1999:391-412). And this applies to both virtues and vices, so that where imaginations are correctly shaped, appropriate feelings, attitudes, and behaviour result. Accordingly, how the language of the biblical passages, which at their basic level were designed to form and transform their readers and hearers, shapes their imagination must also be regarded as a vital area for investigation (cf. Ryken 1990:387-98; Loader 2007; Dykstra 2008:26-31; Harvey 2007:450-58). What this implies is that the Bible student must ask the question as to what particular imageries the writer of the text intended to evoke in the imagination of the first readers through the manner in which he has chosen to articulate his words. This is the task of rhetography.

Secondly, rhetography takes seriously the ancient Mediterranean concept of *ekphrasis*, which is immortalized by Aristotle's instructions to ancient rhetoricians, that to persuade the hearer successfully, he 'must be made to see things' (*Rhetoric*, 3.11). *Ekphrasis* was a rhetorical term that was used to denote 'descriptive language, bringing what is shown clearly before the eyes' (Aphthonius, *Progymnasmata*, 46). Thus even when no explicit statement is made in the text regarding the author's intention, it would be safe to assume, at least in Greco-Roman literature, that deliberate care and attention has gone into the author's descriptions and narration with the intention of generating the kind of pictorial imagination suiting his purposes (Mitchell 1994:11-34; Miles 1996). The least a Bible student ought to do is to take seriously the manner in which pictorial images are formed by the text.

At this stage, it is a moot point as to whether ancient near eastern and Hebrew rhetoricians shared similar views as the Greco-Roman rhetoricians and Aristotle for that matter. At its basic level, human nature, regardless of the era and cultural background, reacts to imaginative language in similar fashion, if even to different degrees (cf. McElhanon 2006:31-81; Martin 2007:37-55; Brauch, Lipphardt, and Nocke 2008). Accordingly, rather than pressing for differences between the ancient Hebrew and ancient Greek perceptions and conceptions of images, what matters is the appreciation that in all cultures, textual depictions are aimed at generating certain images of relevance to those cultures. It is when the specific relevance is in view that the distinctions between the Hebrew and Greek rhetoricians become an issue. In any case, Brinkman's (1992:252) conclusion, after examining the perception of space in the ancient near east is worth pondering: 'people in the ancient near east perceived space in a way similar to that of modern Western people'. The task of rhetography, therefore, is to assemble the images that the text creates and

the relevance of the images to the socio-cultural and religious context of the first readers and hearers.

Thirdly rhetography assumes that a significant component of the text's ability to evoke influential imagination in its reader and hearer derives from the text's spatiality (cf. Flanagan, Gunn, and McNutt 2002; Flanagan 1999:15-43). Modernist understanding of the key role of spatiality in the cognitive and social functions of society was epitomized by Immanuel Kant's maxim that space and time are the two *a priori* concepts or subtexts that allow humans to structure, systematize, and understand their experiences (2002:22). Stephen Toulmin (1990:116-17) expresses this more vividly by describing spatiality as the 'intellectual scaffolding' on which societies frame their understanding of the world around them. Similarly, David Harvey (1996:316) opines that places play a central social role in society by being 'the focus of the imagination, of beliefs, longings, and desire' of people. With postmodernity, the critical role that spatiality plays in human social and geo-political behaviour has been described by authors such as Michel Foucault and Robert Sack (cf. Asumang 2005:63-83). Furthermore, the strength to which the spatiality of a text influences human cognitive functions and imaginations has become a fruitful area of research as demonstrated by writers such as Yuri Lotman (1977), Hayden White (1973), Henry Lefebvre (1991), and Edward Soja (1995).

As a result of this appreciation of the importance of the spatiality of the text in evoking the imagination, and of the imagination to affect human behaviour, much of the consideration in rhetography focuses on the rhetorical effects of the spatiality of the text. In other words, rhetography is a multidisciplinary method of biblical research which combines insights emanating from socio-rhetorical criticism and critical spatiality to examine the text. For example, Vernon Robbins's (1996a) approach to rhetography blends ideas from critical spatiality with his systematic method of socio-rhetorical investigation in which the text is examined at five levels: inner texture, inter-texture, socio-cultural texture, sacred texture, and ideological texture. Depending on the genre of the text at hand, Robbins then argues that there are six rhetographic styles of argumentation, called rhetorolects. These rhetorolects are labelled as apocalyptic, prophetic, miracle, wisdom, pre-creation, and priestly (Robbins 1996c:353-62). Rhetographic rhetorolects are enthymematic[3] styles of generating pictorial imaginations in the reader/hearer in such a manner as to be easily understandable in the socio-cultural contexts of the first readers/hearers.

[3] An enthymeme is defined as a statement of an argument whose premises are not articulated because the speaker assumes their common knowledge by the hearers. For a recent treatment of the role of enthymemes in the New Testament, see Debanné (2006).

Thus rhetorolects act as heuristic devices through which the intended rhetorical effect of the text may be identified and examined (cf. Robbins 2008b; Robbins 1996c:353-62; Kennedy 1984).

When employing Robbins's method of rhetographic examination, the student will first have to isolate the type of rhetorolect in the text, examine the nature of the image that it evokes, and then determine the intended effects of the rhetorolect on the reader/hearer. In other words, for Robbins, rhetorolects are the dialect of rhetography. So, for example, in a rhetographic study of the Sermon on the Mount, the piece is categorized as a prophetic rhetorolect with emphasis on the kingdom of God. The picture that the sermon evokes is one of a Kingdom or sphere over which God reigns, with its boundary markers, ethos, rules of citizenship, and pride of belonging (Robbins 2008a:93). Similarly, a wisdom rhetorolect, such as Luke 11:33-36 evokes the image of a household in which parents teach their children the rudiments of the godly life and how to project this faithfully to the outside world. Likewise, in his examination of 1 Peter, Robert Webb (2007) identifies the predominance of apocalyptic rhetorolects in that epistle and uses them to show how the letter reshapes the imagination of its first readers/hearers to enable them reinterpret their persecuted statuses and so continue in the faith.

Though innovative, Robbins's rhetographic approach of identifying rhetorolects in the text remains to be tested. It is, therefore, perhaps prudent to reserve judgment at this stage. There are reasons, however, to believe that the approach might require further refinement. Firstly, the procedure for classifying a passage as a rhetorolect before subsequent examination of its rhetographic features has the potential for creating circular reasoning with its inherent problems.[4] Secondly, the blending and bending of literary genres in the Bible as a whole and the New Testament in particular makes research procedures which concentrate on isolating the specific genre of a passage, rather than the broad generic outline, fraught with significant difficulties (cf. Attridge 2002:3-21; Bhatia 2002:3-19). Thirdly, and most importantly for the present project, in Robbins's procedure, the spatiality of the text is not adequately foregrounded in a manner as to enable the secure investigation of the rhetographic effects of the images.

An alternative approach that may well help avoid some of the above problems may now be proposed. In *Unlocking the Book of Hebrews* (Asumang 2008), I have described a multidimensional procedure for the examination of the

[4] The procedure also has a hint of form-critical approach to New Testament study, which even though should not be dismissed in itself, has its well-known drawbacks.

spatiality of the text. This procedure involves four investigative steps: (a) identification and analysis of the nature of the spaces in the text, (b) examination of the spatial interactions between the 'characters' and the identified spaces, (c) examination of how the spatial relationships between the characters within each space are portrayed, and (d) reflections on the semiotic and intertextual representations of the spaces in their socio-cultural and religious context (pp. 39-79). Application of this procedure to the Epistle to the Hebrews yielded some new insights on its rhetorical and rhetographic[5] design, which also has important implications for the appreciation of the epistle's pastoral effectiveness in its original as well as modern contexts.

I propose that this procedure for the examination of the spatiality of the text could be combined with Robbins's systematic socio-rhetorical procedure in performing a rhetographic exegesis of passages. Such a procedure will most likely expose certain dimensions of the passage which were designed by its author to influence the theological imagination of its first readers. I shall now test this proposal on a familiar text—Psalm 23.

3. A rhetographic exegesis of Psalm 23

The enduringly, powerful, and comforting effects of Psalm 23[6] are borne out by the numerous studies, monographs, devotionals, hymns, and songs which are based on it (cf. Rogal 2006; Bosetti 1993). At its core is the manner in which it focuses on the personal attention and care that Yahweh, the Shepherd, provides His flock. Scholarly interest in the psalm has tended to focus on (a) the religious and socio-cultural background of the shepherd imagery (e.g. Freedman 1980; Wilson 1951; Rice 1995:71-78), (b) the possible socio-historical circumstances of its writing (e.g. Stern 1994:120-25; Smith 1988:61-66),[7] (a) its literary structure, especially given the apparent break in the scenery from verse 4 to verse 5 (e.g. Tappy 1995:255-80; Foley 1988:363-83; Marlowe 2002/3:65-80; Cooper 1986:107-14), (d) its intertextual theological roles both in the Old and New Testaments (e.g. Milne 1974/5:237-47; Barré and Kselman 1983:97-127; Bellinger and Arterbury 2005:387-95; Tanner 2004:267-84; Neyrey 2001:267-91; Milne 1974/5:237-47), (e) the circum-

[5] The term rhetography was not used in the book, even though the investigative procedure can now be characterized as rhetographic.

[6] It is assumed that Psalm 23 was written by David during his later years but based on his experience as a shepherd, both in terms of occupation and as a king.

[7] Four different possible times of David's career has been proposed—(a) during his early days as a shepherd, (b) while being pursued by Saul, (c) while being pursued by Absalom, and (d) in later years while retrospectively reviewing the care of Yahweh during his lifetime.

stances of its religious use in ancient Israel (e.g. Lundbom 1986:5-16; Merill 1965:354-60), and (f) its genre (Miller 1986:112; Kraus 1988:305).

The concentration by interpreters on these areas of the psalm, together with the oft emphasized centrality of the relationship between Yahweh and the sheep as key to the psalm, are well founded. William VanGemeren's (1991:251) comment regarding the extraordinarily personal tone of the psalm is worth noting: 'The temptation in ancient Israel was to speak only about "our" God (cf. Deut. 6:4), forgetting that the God of Israel is also the God of individuals. The contribution of this psalm lies, therefore, in the personal, subjective expression of ancient piety'. Furthermore, it is perhaps correct that regardless of the exact setting of its writing, the psalm strongly featured in the pilgrimage celebrations of Israel's temple cult in later years. Accordingly, suggestions that it contains echoes of the Exodus and Israel's wilderness wanderings may well be correct. In its detail, the Shepherd's considerate care and extravagant affection for the sheep lends the psalm the well-deserved sense of comfort that it provides the people of faith (cf. Craigie 1983:209). The eventual climax of the psalm with the believer in the house of the Lord, despite clearly relating to Israel's cultic worship, nevertheless rightly appears to also allude to the believer's eschatological hope of dwelling in the presence of the Lord forever.

Notwithstanding the above, the concentration on the relationship between the Shepherd and the flock does not adequately convey the full rhetographic effect of the psalm (Trudinger 2009:139-42). A focus on the spaces evoked by the psalm alone shows a change of scenery from the open environment in the first part of the psalm (23:1-4) to the sheltered environment in the second part (23:5-6). And within each section, there are still differences in the spatiality from verse to verse. How do these changes in the spatiality contribute to the powerful effects of the psalm?

3.1. The places of the Shepherd's care

As the psalm is written based on the knowledge of a shepherd, even though the sheep is at its centre, it is perhaps right that the description of the Shepherd's care and attention includes several different places where the Shepherd takes his flock. In Philip Keller's (2007:15) examination of this psalm, he notes that the psalm accurately depicts the Palestinian shepherding arenas where sheep are reared. Likewise, Artur Weiser (1962:227) believes that, while worshipping before Yahweh, the writer remembered, the various arenas in which he had previously cared for the sheep in his youthful days and now projects them unto Yahweh as the true Shepherd of Israel.

Though these reflections are correct, the question that a rhetographic examination of the psalm attempts to answer is what specific images these spatial descriptions or 'arenas of care' may have evoked in the minds of the first readers and hearers of the psalm. As the following discussions show, there are important intertextual resonances, which may guide such a reflection, even in the absence of adequate socio-historical information on ancient pastoral practices. Table indicates that the psalm describes the care of the psalmist in six different arenas—on green pastures, by still waters, at confusing crossroads, in the valley of the shadow of death, in a banquet area and in the house of the Lord. Each of these bore important socio-rhetorical and imagistic functions in the ancient near east and the Old Testament.

Table : The spatial dimensions of Psalm 23

Verse	Place or Arenas of Care	Movement of Sheep	Orientation of the Sheep
2a	On Green Pastures	Lie down	Follows Shepherd
2b	Beside Still Waters	Slow walking	Follows Shepherd
3	Confusing crossroads	Righteous paths	Re-oriented by Shepherd
4	Valley of death's shadow	Walk	Beside Shepherd
5	Banquet area	Seated or reclined	Shepherd serves sheep
6	House of the Lord	Dwells (or returns)	Shepherd follows sheep

The idea of green pastures evoked the image of luxury and extravagant provision, although such vegetation was rare in many places in the original setting. Accordingly, William Barnes (1913:179) has noted that in its geographical setting, 'the grass is short-lived under an Eastern sun, and to stand still is to lose the flock.' In this view, Barnes opines that the greenness expresses the guidance of the Shepherd to locate for the sheep provisions that are often hard to come by. Similarly, Ron Tappy (1995:258; cf. Dahood 1966:145) identifies the main imagery of the green pastures as representing food, whereas the water represents drink. Other interpreters draw parallels of this abundant provision with the description of Boaz's benevolence towards Naomi in Ruth 4:15 (e.g. Goulder 2006:469).

For most of David's first readers and hearers, however, the greenness of the pastures would have conveyed additional notions of newness, productivity, revitalization, and regeneration. References in the Old Testament to the colour green tend to associate it with productivity and freshness of plants.[8] The likely rhetographic effect of reading or hearing about green pastures in David's socio-cultural milieu is, therefore, not just the finding of abundant provision in

[8] Gen. 9:3; 30:37; Lev. 2:14; Deut. 12:2; Ps. 52:8; Song 1:16; 2:13; Isa. 15:6; Jer. 11:16; 17:8; Hos. 14:8.

the midst of lack but more so of the experience of revitalization and regeneration which comes with it. Thus the feeling of contentment which 'lying down' evokes blends in with the sense of revitalization and reinvigoration that green pastures suggest.

This rhetographic image explains Psalm 23:3a, 'He restores my soul'. Interpreters have often wondered about the role of this piece in the stanza, since it appears to interrupt the enumeration of material blessings by the psalmist (cf. Goulder 2006:466). Foregrounding the rhetographic effect of the 'green pastures', as well as 'still waters', helps explain this restorative aspect of Psalm 23:2. Accordingly, Timothy Willis's (1987:104-106) proposal that the action of the shepherd in Psalm 23:3a indicates the gathering in of the strayed sheep is clearly inadequate.[9] The sentiments represented by 'He restores my soul' is not just the completion of the feeding and watering of the sheep, but more so the perpetual revitalization of the sheep by the Shepherd (cf. Mittmann 1980:5-7; Jenni 1968:25).

The idea of still waters follows a similar line of rhetorical imaging. The water describes the Shepherd's provision of drink; but, it is a good question as to why it needs to be still waters, if all that was meant was drinking. Patrick Wilton helpfully explains that the idea here is for the sheep to be 'able to drink the waters without predators disturbing him' (1994:125, n. 13; cf. Tomback 1982:93-96). Rhetographically, however, the imagery has wider resonance than the idea of drinking in safety that Wilton implies. *Menūḥāh*, translated as 'still' by the NIV, is a spatial word often associated with 'rest', in contrast to chaos or destruction (e.g. Pss. 95:11; 132:8, 14).

Furthermore, the idea of Psalm 23:2b is one of movement *beside* the still waters, and not just the drinking of the water, though clearly, the waters in verse 2b match well with the green pastures in verse 2a as drink matches with food. Bratcher and Reyburn (1991:232) are therefore correct: 'This is not a stagnant pool, but a place where the fresh water flows gently, making it easy for the sheep to drink it'. Indeed, the idea of still waters has Sumero-Akkadian[10] and Old Testament parallels that explicitly contrast them with floods and destructive acts of water (cf. Polak 1995:69-74; Polak 1982:231-50). Accordingly, the rhetographic effect of the 'still waters' of Psalm 23:2 is one of stability and tranquillity. Yet this is a dynamic stability, for whereas the sheep lie down in green pastures, the imagery of still waters is one of slow

[9] Willis's interpretation might appear to suit direct translation from the LXX which uses *epestrepsen* (return) for Hebrew, *shûb* (restore) in Ps. 23:3a. Even so, *epestrepsen* also has the connotative meaning of restoration as in Isa. 49:5.

[10] e.g. In table XI of the Gilgamesh Epic 1.131 (cf. Bailey 1989:168).

movement, allowing the sheep to stroll alongside the waters without fear of danger. For the believer, the relationship with Yahweh is depicted as a relaxing gentle walk as He feeds and cares for His loved one.

The dramatic change of arena from verse 2 to verses 3-4 would have produced a spectacular change of mood in the original reader/hearer. The abundance, revitalization, tranquillity, and security of verse 2 are immediately replaced by a sense of confusion at crossroads and gloominess in a valley. In addition to the translation problems associated with *b^{e}gê᾿ ṣalmavet* in Psalm 23:4,[11] the language also appears to stray from the dangers that a sheep might face, to depict the sense of darkness, foreboding, and gloom that would accompany a lonely traveller through a confusing maze. A rhetological exegesis alone might force the interpreter to choose between a sheep and a human traveller. Hermann Gunkel (1929:99), for example, chooses the former and so suggests that it depicts the sheep's fear for thieves around the ravines. John Eaton (1986:38), who believes that the psalm describes the life of Israel's king, suggests that it depicts the king's reflections on the nature of death in general and the difficulties of decision making.

A rhetographic exegesis of the passage would focus on the places in verse 3, regardless of whether it is the sheep's dangers or human peril which is being portrayed. The imagery of the valley in the Old Testament represents a place of gloom (e.g. Deut. 21:6), danger (e.g. 1 Sam. 15:5; 2 Sam. 5:18-25; 2 Kgs 3:16) and decision making (e.g. Joel 3:14). This is intensified in the passage with the depiction of dark shadow, a presentation commonly associated with death in the Old Testament (e.g. Job 3:5, 10:21-22; Ps. 44:19; Isa. 9:2). Perhaps the association with crossroads of decision-making, together with the gloom of death and danger, favours the travel of a pilgrim. Even so, any reader in the socio-cultural milieu of the time would also have noted that the psalm indicates the ever present protection and guidance of Yahweh in the worst of places and circumstances. Michael Goulder's (2006:469) suggestion that the psalm may well have been written after David's victory in the Valley of Baal-Perazim and subsequent anointing as king in 2 Samuel 5 may well be correct. Yet, for the competent reader of the time, this psalm equally speaks to their own periods of uncertainties, fear, and sense of gloom conveyed by the spatiality of the text. The comfort Yahweh the Shepherd gives transcends all places and circumstances that His loved one goes.

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[11] The choice is between 'deep ravine', 'valley of deep darkness' and preferably, 'valley of the shadow of death' (cf. Eaton 1986:38).

The spatiality of the psalm moves from the ragged outside to a comfortable environment and atmosphere of a banquet in verse 5. Here, any attempt to interpret the psalm in terms of the life of a Palestinian sheep falters; for, the description is one of a human being lavishly feasted and served by Yahweh, while his enemies look on astonished at such largesse. The verse epitomizes a prominent Old Testament concept which depicts Yahweh as a benevolent Host (e.g. Pss. 39:12, 104:10-15, 136:25, 145:14-16, 146:9; Prov. 9:1-6).[12] Here, the image is even more extraordinary as Yahweh is portrayed as serving and anointing His loved ones (cf. Eccl. 9:8; Ps. 92:10). The presence of enemies who would otherwise hurt the psalmist, but are now rendered as powerless onlookers witnessing the amazing outpouring of the Shepherd's graces, only heightens this sense of celebration and utter safety.

Table : The rhetographic effects of the places in Psalm 23

Place or Arena of Care	Rhetographic Effect	Intertextual References
Green Pastures	Abundant provision, revitalization	e.g. Gen. 9:3; Lev. 2:14
Beside Still Waters	Dynamic stability, tranquillity	e.g. Pss. 95:11; 132:8, 14
Confusing pathways	Uncertainty and confusion	e.g. Joel 3:14
Valley of death's shadow	Fear, insecurity and comfort	e.g. 2 Sam. 5:18-25
Banquet area	Celebration, utter security	e.g. Pss. 146:9; Pr. 9:1-6
House of the Lord	Worship	e.g. 2 Sam. 12:20; 92:13

Yet, without focusing on the place, and hence the rhetographic image, the verse would appear to return to the luxurious feeding on green pastures of verse 2. However, there is a difference in verse 5. The environment, even if it were outdoors—banquets could certainly be held outdoors—nevertheless is one which is less open in the wilderness of verse 2. The banquet here occurs in an environment of celebration, with tables being laid, cups of wine overflowing, and heads being anointed. The hint of derision in the psalmist's tone, at the envious and powerless observing enemies, adds some hilarity to the rhetographic image. The change of environment thus forces another dramatic change of the mood of the psalm, from the sense of fear and confusion to a combination of security and joyful celebration. Rhetographic

[12] The idea first appears in Gen. 1 where God is depicted as the benevolent Creator who welcomes the first humans into His creation and makes 'every plant yielding seed … every tree with seed in its fruit... you shall have them for food' (Gen. 1:29). God also plants a garden for the first humans and 'freely' makes available to them every tree as food for His guests, apart from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil (Gen. 2:8-17). Other human agents portrayed as receiving hospitality from God include Hagar in Gen. 21:19, the elders of Israel in Exod. 24:1-11, Israel in the wilderness in Exod. 16-17 and Deut. 8:2-5, the alien and homeless in Deut. 10:17-18, and Elijah in 1 Kgs 19

exegesis shows how foregrounding the spatiality of the verse highlights the imagination and socio-rhetorical effect intended by the author.

The change in scenery reaches its pinnacle as the psalmist enters the house of the Lord.[13] Here the rhetographic feature is at its enthymematic best, for there is no indication at all of how the psalmist felt, except his promise to dwell in (or return to) God's house. Clearly, the assumption is that the reader, who shares the religious faith and commitment of the psalmist, would also share the same mood that the psalmist experiences as he enters the house of the Lord. The various moods in the psalm, such as abundance, satisfaction, security, fear, loneliness, confusion, comfort, celebration, and utter safety, are all rolled into the one mood of *worship* before Yahweh in His special presence in His house. Thus as Table shows, a rhetographic exegesis of the places covered by the psalm reveals several different human emotions evoked in the first reader/hearer by the psalm. Their climax is one of worship and submission to Yahweh in His special presence.

3.2. The movements and orientations of the psalmist

Just as the places and arenas in the psalm evoke several influential imaginations, the changes in the movement and orientation of the psalmist also have a number of rhetographic implications. The psalm begins with the sheep led to a carpet of green pastures on which he is made to lie in deep satisfaction. This is then followed by the image of gently moving waters. Even though there is an implied parallelism between verse 2a and 2b, since they both refer to provision and in terms of word length are similar (cf. Bratcher and Reyburn 1991:232; Goldingay 2006:349), there is also an inherent contrast in the verse with regard to the rhetographic imagery they evoke. As noted above, the idea in verse 2b goes beyond just drinking, for *mayim* (waters) is in the plural and so the rhetographic image is one of gently moving waters to which the sheep, led by the Shepherd, moves in tandem. Accordingly, verse 2b combines the idea of guidance to refreshing drink with safety as well as the provision of the drink itself, all in one image (cf. Goldingay 2006:344; Kidner 1973:110). So, whereas Psalm verse 2a is an almost static rhetographic image (the sheep is brought to a stop as it is made to lie down), there is dynamic, albeit slow, movement in 2b (the sheep is slowly led beside peaceful waters). The two together paint a picture of stable progress in the formational relationship between Yahweh and the psalmist.

[13] This clearly did not refer to the temple but the ancient Hebrew concept of God's cultic presence as His house.

This stability of progress is manifested by the positions and orientations between the sheep and the Shepherd in verse 2. Rhetographically, the Shepherd is depicted in front of the sheep, searching for and finding the best place with abundant provision for the sheep. The sheep is equally depicted as utterly dependent on the Shepherd as it trustingly follows the Shepherd to the extravagant supply of these provisions. Accordingly the guidance—and therefore pilgrimage—motif appears quite early in the psalm. This becomes explicit and intensified in verse 3 where the rhetographic picture is of a human agent[14] at the confusing crossroads of decision making. Here, the guidance relates not just to physical provision, but also to spiritual and ethical guidance. Of crucial note is the sphere in which the moral and ethical decisions of the palmist are to be made—'for His name's sake' (v. 3b).

The role of Yahweh the Shepherd in this instance is to re-orient the psalmist, that is, He guides. But His actual spatial position in relation to the psalmist, whether in front of or behind, is at best ambiguous. As the Guide in the paths of righteousness, Yahweh is sometimes depicted as leading while the believer follows (e.g. Isa. 42:16). On the other hand, He provides His guidance by pointing in the right direction through navigational instructions which the believer then obeys in order to arrive at the correct destination (e.g. Isa. 45:13). Thus the lack of clarity regarding the relative positions of the Shepherd and the psalmist in verse 3b does not hamper the idea that He guides the psalmist in paths of righteousness. In fact, it enhances the rhetographic effect, for ambiguous rhetographic images have very powerful rhetorical effects on the reader/hearer (cf. Franzosi 1997:135-44; Lagerwerf 2002:244-60). They invite the reader/hearer to complete the picture in their imaginations and in the process place himself in the act of formation. In this particular case, the ambiguity draws on the spiritual and emotional commitment of the first reader or hearer to remain dependent on Yahweh as he seeks ethical and moral direction. Finding the paths of righteousness becomes dependent solely on the relationship between the Shepherd and the sheep, and not in a 'moral vacuum' without the pre-requisite relationship with Yahweh.[15]

The movement theme established in verse 3 continues in verse 4 as the psalmist walks through the gloomy, intimidating, and dangerous environment of the valley. Here, the orientation to Yahweh is clear—He is *with* or beside

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[14] Amos Hakham's idea that the sheep is still in view in Ps. 23:3 and that the phrase 'paths of righteousness' refers to paths in the wilderness along which the sheep should not stray is not fully convincing (Hakham 2003:170). If even this were so, the references to 'righteousness' and 'His name's sake' reduce the impact of the metaphor of sheep.

[15] Jesus would say this more plainly in John 14:6 when He insists that it is He who is the Way, the Truth and the Life.

the believer. The rhetographic image also contains other elements that reassure the believer in an environment otherwise filled with gripping loneliness and fear. The Shepherd is depicted as a fellow Traveller, very close at hand, and with His staff and rod to fend off predators and enemies. The dominant idea of movement through this shadowy environment also indicates the temporal nature of the condition. Regardless of the foreboding and threatening tone of the condition, it still is a 'walk through', and more so with Yahweh the Shepherd alongside the believer. His presence and company as a fellow Traveller is what transforms the believer's emotions of loneliness and fear into courage, comfort, and hope.

The movement theme slows down again to a resting situation, either seated or reclining at a banquet, and eventually dwelling in the house of Yahweh in verses 5-6. The word *râdaf* (follow) in verse 6 is better translated as 'pursue', and is used elsewhere in the Old Testament for the pursuit of enemies (e.g. Gen. 35:5; Deut. 19:6). Thus the twin attributes of Yahweh—goodness and mercy—are here depicted as pursuing the psalmist. Given its use to describe Saul's pursuit and persecution of David (e.g. 1 Sam. 24:14; 25:29; 26:18), the positive spin on it here to depict the manner in which the divine graces pursue the psalmist is remarkable (cf. Goldingay 2006:352).

Where did David get this idea from? The divine virtues of the goodness and loving kindness of Yahweh are depicted in Exodus 34:6 as accompanying the train of Yahweh as He passed in front of Moses in a theophany. Thus in the ancient Hebrew conceptualization these divine graces follow after and come behind Yahweh. It could be that this is where David has derived the idea of the virtues pursuing him. Michael Goulder has also suggested a link between the goodness and mercy of Yahweh and the idea of the Ark of the Covenant accompanying God's people in their travels. He explains, 'Goodness and mercy are thought of here as angelic beings, such as formed the base of Yahweh's throne over the ark in the Temple: 'Righteousness and judgement are the foundation of your throne; mercy and truth go before you' (Ps. 89:15; cf. 96.6)' (Goulder 2006:465). Accordingly, if, as it is most likely, David was familiar with these ideas of the movement of the divine attributes, then it may well be that the rhetographic image of Yahweh being with the psalmist in verses 4-5, automatically led him to reflect on how the divine virtues would follow in pursuit behind the believer.

Reflecting on the overall changes in the orientations between the Shepherd and the psalmist in the psalm, there is an apparent choreography in the rhetographic image. In terms of orientation, the psalm begins with Yahweh ahead of the sheep or the psalmist (v. 2). This is followed by ambiguity in the

Shepherd's position (v. 3b), before He comes to the psalmist's side in the valley (v. 4), and then serves him at the banquet (v. 5). The psalm then finishes with Yahweh pursuing the psalmist with His attributes from behind. These changes in orientation between Yahweh and His loved ones is commonly depicted in the Old Testament, in relation to the Exodus where God's angel and the pillar of cloud went ahead and behind His redeemed people (e.g. Exod. 14:19; 23:20-23; 32:34). It is also depicted in the 'new Exodus' where Yahweh goes ahead (e.g. Isa. 42:16; 43:19; 45.13; 52:12), with (Isa. 51:9-11; 52.7-8), and at the rearguard (e.g. Isa. 52:12) of His people to Mount Zion.[16] Accordingly, the view among sections of scholarship that the psalm has strong links with Israel's pilgrimage tradition is well founded.

Considerable debate surrounds the interpretation of *yâšab* (dwell) in verse 6b. The issue is well stated by Bratcher and Reyburn (1991:235-36): 'The verb appears in the Masoretic Text as a form which means 'I shall return'; but the Hebrew consonants can be read with other vowels (following the Septuagint) to mean 'I shall dwell,' which is done by most commentators and translations.' Among interpreters who opt for 'return', some base their decision on the view that the psalmist was a shepherd, and not a Levite or priest (e.g. Köhler 1956:233). Yet, the psalm is really not describing the shepherd's movement as much as that of the worshipper's experiences, desires, and longings. Hence the occupation of the psalmist is the least important consideration when judging how to translate *yâshab.*

The argument that the genre of the psalm is one of passage or pilgrimage may support the rendition of *yâšab* as 'I shall return', in which case the psalmist is making a pledge to return to Yahweh's house another time, and repeatedly keep making the house of the Lord the centre point of his religious orientation. Goulder (2006:466) also believes that his hypothesis that this psalm was sung on behalf of the whole nation, rather than the individual worshipper, makes 'return' more suitable as expression of Israel relationship with Yahweh. Yet, the personal tone of the psalm would suggest that though it may well have been sung at corporate worship, the individual worshipper is the one making the pledge, and not the whole nation. A number of interpreters who wish to retain 'dwell' as the best translation propose that the psalmist may have been a Levite (e.g. Schmidt 1934) or a priest (e.g. Kraus 1988; Barnes 1913:177-185). This approach however appears to take 'dwell' in a rather too literal sense than what the psalmist meant. Others draw attention to the manner in

[16] A similar picture is depicted in Mark 11:9 where during His triumphal entry to Jerusalem Jesus is said to be in front as well as behind sections of the crowd.

which the preposition *kol y^emê ḥayāy* ('all the days of my life') appear to support 'dwell' (cf. Goldingay 2006:345).

A rhetographic exegesis of verse 6b, however, diminishes the problems posed by the translation of *yâšab*. In either case, 'dwell' or 'return', the rhetographic idea is one of a constant attractive pull in the relationship between Yahweh and the worshipper with His house as the centre point—the source of the religious life and place of re-orientation and reinvigoration of the covenantal relationship between Yahweh and the worshipper. Though the notion of 'dwelling', as in a constant revitalizing relationship with the Lord, is much more suited, the idea of a repeated intermittent return to the same relationship is in effect no different. Returning to the house implies a religious commitment, dependence, and affiliation to the life of Yahweh (cf. Craigie 1983:208). The psalmist could return, only because His affections and hopes 'dwell' with Yahweh and in His house. As the psalm has already emphasized from its beginning, the presence of the Lord is with the psalmist wherever he has been. In the end, therefore, dwelling within God's benevolent hospitality is the ultimate hope of God's people, now, always, and forever.

4. Summary, implication, and application

In a summary, the preceding rhetographic study has demonstrated an aspect of the mechanisms by which the Spirit designed the twenty-third psalm to achieve its rhetorical effect on the first readers. The main focus of the psalm is no doubt on the extraordinarily personal care and attention that Yahweh, the Shepherd, provides for His covenanted people. Yet, it is when the places where this deluxe care is provided, and the movements and orientations between Yahweh and the believers are foregrounded and analyzed, that the comfort and blessings that the psalm in itself gives God's people become evident. Rhetography enables this foregrounding and analysis to be done in a systematic manner.

The changes in the mood of the psalm have been highlighted—from the emotions of contentment and security, through revitalization and restoration, and the sense of confusion needing divine re-orientation in the 'paths of righteousness', and of fear and loneliness ameliorated by the divine presence, to a setting of joyful celebration and abandoned security, then finally to worship in the presence of the Lord, with Him as the divine host. All these moods combine to shape the manner in which the relationship between the people of God and Yahweh is built and fortified. Similarly, the movement and orientation motif strengthens the sense of guidance in the presence of the Lord, as well as the assurance that He surrounds His beloved.

Though, clearly, not all biblical passages would be amenable to this method of exegesis, the above exercise has demonstrated the utility of the rhetographic method of study in ensuring a disciplined and systematic examination of texts in which spatial language and metaphors are prominent. It certainly does suggest that exegesis of Psalm 23 which downplays the rhetographic elements is unlikely to adequately uncover the original intentions of its writer, as well as the effect it had on its first readers.

In addition, the demonstration of the above method supports the suggestion that a combination of a systematic examination of the spatiality of the text with the socio-rhetorical method may be achieved in a simple and straightforward manner. Here, the spatiality of the text is examined by focusing on the spaces in the text, the relationships between the spaces and the ‘characters’ mentioned in each space, and the semiotic and intertextual interpretation of the spatial dimensions, as well as references to movement and orientation of the ‘characters’. This is then followed by a socio-rhetorical examination which reflects on how such findings would have influenced the first readers/hearers in their religious, socio-cultural, and ideological settings.

With regard to the findings of the above exegesis, one important application could be in the area of song writing. Because of the ability of the imaginations to transcend people and shape their emotions, attitudes, and behaviour, a rhetographic understanding of the text is likely to influence how hymn and song writers transpose the message of biblical texts into songs and hymns for the worship of the people of God. The countless number of songs and hymns based on Psalm 23 testifies to its versatility. Most of the songs with which I am familiar, however, focus on the relationship between Yahweh and the believer that the psalm beautifully portrays, but to the exclusion of the immensely rich messages that the spatiality and imageries evoke in the reader. The above rhetographic exegesis shows that there is yet more in the powerful psalm to be explored and applied for the edification of the people of God. It is these and other advantages which make rhetography another commendable Bible study tool at the service of biblical scholars and ministers of music.

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