

# THE UNITY OF PSALM 23\*

by

REUBEN AHRONI

*The Ohio State University*

**ABSTRACT:** This study departs from the laborious attempts at imposing prosodic uniformity and thematic unity on Psalm 23. The Psalm is shown to possess metrical and metaphoric versatility; it exhibits some stylistic features suggestive of the paratactic format. The Psalm provides us with a loosely strung sequence of images, a rhythmic procession of metaphorical snapshots, which cluster around verse 4b.

Based on a study of the terms *šebet* and *miš'enet* in biblical and Qumran Scrolls contexts, the study suggests that these two terms are metaphoric expressions of two cardinal attributes of God in His dealings with His followers: the former symbolizes the divine justice, while the latter exemplifies the divine mercy. Both are commensurate with the biblical image of God as both the stern judge and the merciful, the chastiser and the healer.

The study also departs from the traditional approach which views the Psalm as a simple and homely poem dominated by idyllic sentiments. It is shown that beneath a somewhat deceptive setting of pastoral imagery lurks a tormented soul of a person who is desperately reaching out for God. His comfort derives from his confidence in the imminent transmutation of God's rod of affliction into a healing staff.

Two relatively recent scholarly treatments of Psalm 23, namely the extensive study of David Freedman (1976, pp. 139–166), and the brief article of Mitchell Dahood (1979, pp. 417–419), highlight the complexity of the difficulties which this small but popular Psalm poses. The nature of these difficulties, as pointedly noted by Freedman, is neither textual nor linguistic—"the vocabulary while unusual is quite comprehensible,

\*This study is dedicated to Dr. Sheldon H. Blank, an inspiring teacher, a prominent scholar and a great human being—*עד מאה ועשרים*.

I would like to thank the College of Humanities of the Ohio State University and the Melton Center for Jewish Studies for supporting my research. Thanks are also due to Alan Hauser and John Curtis who read the draft of this article and offered helpful suggestions.

and the grammar and syntax are well within the range of classical Hebrew style" (1976, p. 139). The problems, rather, are related to the Psalm's apparent prosodic intractability and to the disjointedness of its thematic and metaphorical structure.<sup>1</sup> Both Freedman and Dahood wrestle with difficulties pertaining to the Psalm's unity of both form and meaning.

With respect to unity of form, Freedman suggests a strophic structure, which divides the Psalm into five stanzas, each consisting of about 24 syllables. The proposed metrical regularity and strophic symmetry is, however, obtained at the expense of certain vocalic modifications: Freedman's counting-system excludes secondary vowels added in MT in relation to laryngeals, and treats segolate formations in the MT as monosyllabic. Moreover, Freedman deviates from the traditional and commonly accepted reading of verse 4 of the Psalm by splitting it into two clauses: The first clause, ending with *בגיא צלמות* 'in the valley of the shadow of death', he appends to v. 3, to close the second strophe; with the second clause, *לא אירא רע* 'I fear no evil', he opens the next strophe (1976, p. 142). As for the Psalm's unity of content, Freedman views "the Exodus from Egypt, and its accompanying phenomena: the wandering through the wilderness, and the settlement in the domain of God" as the underlying theme which integrates its disparate elements (1976, p. 139).<sup>2</sup>

Resolution of prosodical and contextual problems in the Psalm is also the main concern of Dahood's article. To "improve the stichometry" of the Psalm and "to ease the transition" from v. 4 to v. 5, Dahood suggests two textual emendations: the division of MT *yaḥāḥmūnī* (v. 4) into two words: *yaḥū mānī*, which he renders "they guide my destiny;" and the revocalization of MT *'atāh*, "thou" to *'atāh*, "come." Dahood renders the whole of v. 4 as follows:

Even though I walk  
in the valley of the shadow of Death<sup>3</sup>  
I will not fear the Evil One;<sup>4</sup>  
for with me come (*'atāh*)  
your club and your staff  
behold (*hēmāh*),<sup>5</sup> they guide my destiny!<sup>6</sup>

1. "Difficulties arise," writes Freedman, "when we consider the cohesion of the parts, or the interpretation of the poem as a whole" (1976, p. 139).

2. It should be noted that corporate national interpretation was accorded to the Psalm by the Targum, which saw in it a praise of God who *עמיה במדברא* ון ית עמיה 'fed His people in the wilderness'. This application was adopted by several medieval commentators.

3. Dahood retains the MT vocalization *salmāwet*, thus not going along with the widely held *salmūt*, advocated also by Freedman who renders *bagē' salmūt* 'in the valley of deep shadow' (1976, p. 156).

These textual modifications, contends Dahood, would provide the Psalm with smooth, natural and logical flow from one verse to the other, and would also eliminate metrical disruption (1979, pp. 417–8).

A more recent treatment of the unity of the Psalm is offered by the German scholar, Siegfried Mittmann (1980, pp. 1–23). Mittmann views the statement, 'The Lord is my shepherd' (v. 1) as the motto of the Psalm and its overriding theme. He contends that the Psalm consists of two strophes, which together form an organic unity. These two strophes relate to each other in terms of image (*Bild*) and reality (*Realität*). The first strophe depicts, through the image of the shepherd, the divine care and protection; the second relates to the reflection of this image in the reality of life: the renewal of life and the assurance of its safety. Mittmann maintains that the Psalm is to be construed as a song of thanksgiving, a celebration of the saving acts of God with a sacrificial meal in the House of the Lord (see also Vogt, 1953, pp. 195–211). In its wider application, the Psalm is a celebration of the power of the kingdom of God, manifested in His constant control over the powers of chaos.

It is clearly evident that the main thrust of this detailed study is theological, even though it purports to deal with the "*Aufbau und Einheit*" of the Psalm. As such it has very little relevance to this study.

## II

The unity of Psalm 23 which, according to Freedman, seems "to be insured by its brevity and its structure" (1976, p. 139), is a longstanding

---

4. Dahood understands MT רע as an epithet of Death and renders it as "the Evil One." Freedman (1976, p. 143, n. 11) recognizes the possible merits of Dahood's rendering, which is commensurate with his conception of the Psalm as having its roots in the Exodus from Egypt and the wanderings through the wilderness. Freedman, however, suggests that this phrase may not refer to the mythic figure of Death, but to "the historic figure of the Pharaoh who is the archetypal human antagonist of Yahweh and his people."

5. On the basis of Ugar. *hm* Dahood takes the MT *hēmmah* as the interjection 'look, behold!', not as the traditional and commonly accepted 3rd. mas. pl. pronoun. See also Dahood 1954 (p. 16), 1966 (vol. I, p. 56), and Cross-Freedman 1948 (p. 195).

6. In his commentary on the Psalm (1966, p. 147) Dahood adopted the long proposed emendation of *yanahāmūnī* to *yanhūnī*, 'they lead me'. He claimed that the verb is derived from *nahah* 'to lead' and that "the consonantal cluster *ynhmny* may well contain an internal 'enclitic' mem." Dahood seems to have retracted this proposed derivation and in the article under discussion (1979, pp. 418–419), Dahood argues that the word contains the element of the Canaanite god Mani, whose worship is "underscored by the Ebla tablets."

biblical crux and a major preoccupation of numerous previous studies. The wide divergences which still exist in the attempt to resolve this difficulty only underscore its intricacy. Scholars have long noted that the abrupt transition from the figure of the deity as the good shepherd (vv. 1–4) to that of the lavish and over-generous host (v. 5) disrupts the unity of thought in the Psalm. Far more disturbing, in the view of many scholars, is the phrase נגד צררי 'in the presence of my enemies' (v. 5). It has been contended that this abrupt reference to enemies introduces an inexplicable note, which is "in jarring contrast" to the pastoral imagery and the idyllic character of this hymn of perfect faith in God.<sup>7</sup> "This sudden reference to the enemies, with its unmistakable note of vindictive and selfish satisfaction," remarks Morgenstern, "is altogether out of place" (1946, p. 15). Indeed, this enigmatic clause has been subject to a plethora of interpretations, emendations, and even to deletion. The most notable attempt to wrestle with this problem in an effort to establish the unity of the shepherd metaphor throughout the Psalm was that of Power (1928, pp. 434–442). Power maintained that the new figure of host and guest in v. 5 owes its origin to a very simple error of dittograph: the final letter of שלחן 'table' being a dittography of the initial letter of the following word נגד 'in presence'. If instead of שלחן 'table', suggested Power, we read שלח 'weapons', the whole verse becomes, 'Thou preparest (or bearest) before me weapons against my enemies', and this produces "a very natural development of the idea of the comfort derived from the shepherd's club of defence" (1928, p. 439). Power's study was enthusiastically endorsed by Morgenstern (1946, pp. 13–24), who vigorously defended Power's interpretation of the Psalm and expanded upon it. Power's proposed "very minor and simple textual emendation," wrote Morgenstern, not only eliminates the disturbing note of selfishness and vindictiveness, but also restores the "original unity of thought," with the figurative representation of the Deity as the good shepherd prevailing throughout the entire Psalm (1946, pp. 15–16). For Morgenstern, the term צררי 'my enemies' does not refer to human enemies, but rather to beasts of prey, against whom the faithful shepherd stands constantly on guard with his שלח 'spear' (1946, p. 17). Morgenstern carries the figure of the shepherd still further to include v. 5b, 'Thou anointest my head with oil, my cup overflows'. The reference of this phrase, claims Morgenstern, is not to a host or a banquet, but rather to the task of the faithful shepherd to anoint his sheep's wounds with oil, that they may heal more readily (p. 17).

7. See, for example, Power (1928, p. 434); Dahood (1979, p. 419).

## III

The various laborious attempts at imposing prosodic uniformity and thematic unity on a Psalm which clearly exhibits both metrical and metaphoric versatility are too numerous to be enumerated here. However, this ingenuity is disconcerting, particularly when it comes at the expense of textual modifications. Freedman provides many valuable insights, and one notes that he remains faithful to his often voiced discomfort with scholars' proneness to textual emendations as the way out of difficulties, and does not indulge in consonantal modifications in his study of the Psalm. However, his deviation from MT vocalization for the attainment of metrical uniformity and strophic symmetry is highly questionable. The paucity of our knowledge regarding pre-masoretic vocalization does not permit valid and incontestable conclusions. In view of this, vocalic alterations *metri causa* must be deemed conjectural. One also cannot help wondering, with Barr (1968, p. 35), "whether it is ultimately consistent to look with such deep veneration on the Jewish transmission of the consonants of the Bible while holding such deep scepticism towards the Jewish transmission of the vowels."<sup>8</sup>

Dahood's reconstruction of parts of the Psalm has admittedly *prima facie* fascination. True, the advances made in the study of cognate languages and the application of comparative philology to the elucidation of obscure words and passages in the Hebrew Scriptures have proved very useful. Indeed, the contribution of Dahood in this field is substantial. The problem with Dahood's approach is his excessive invocation of Semitic languages for the alleged restoration of the MT and his tendency to overstate his case. Thus, for example, his "detection" of the Canaanite god Mani in *yənahəmūnī* and his substitution of *'atāh* for MT *'attāh* are, to say the least, far fetched. His suggestions go far beyond what can be deduced from the Psalm, and his references to extra-biblical texts are not sufficient to establish his claim.

Numerous studies on biblical poetry<sup>9</sup> clearly indicate that many biblical poems are not amenable to metrical analysis, since they do not exhibit clear-cut strophic or metrical patterns. "In Hebrew," remarks Gerleman

8. In his 1937 study, Gordis provides a wide-ranging and penetrating evaluation of the role of the Masoretes. In this and other studies, Gordis clearly defends the reliability of the vocalic system transmitted to us by the Masoretes. See *inter alia* Gordis 1958, pp. 444-469; 1976, pp. 95-96. In this 1937 study (pp. 94-95), Gordis also speaks critically of the pan-Ugariticism approach and its uncertainties.

9. See the extensive bibliography in Freedman (1972, pp. XLVII-LIII).

(1951, p. 170), "we find nothing of the coercive rhymes and rigid metrical schemes so typical of Arabic poetry." The biblical poet, notes Freedman, tended to resist metrical rigidity and strove for artistic freedom. He often deviated from the prosodic norm in order to avoid mechanical uniformity and repetitious monotony (1977, pp. 5–26). There is also general agreement that meter does not exhaust the complexity of artistic devices which constitute rhythm in biblical poetry. A close scrutiny of Psalm 23 leads me to believe that the key to the understanding of this poem lies not in the futile quest for metrical and strophic symmetry, nor in the thematic unity. It lies, rather, in its distinctive style which is determined by the pervading emotional impressionistic conception, and which eliminates any syntactically disciplined logical form. The Psalm provides us with a loosely strung sequence of images, a rhythmic procession of metaphorical snapshots. It will be shown, however, that despite the apparent lack of syntactic connections, conspicuous links, and logical relationship between the seemingly disparate segments, the Psalm possesses a basic cohesiveness and unity.<sup>10</sup>

I suggest that the keynote of the Psalm is stuck in v. 4b:

שבטך ומשענתך המה ינחמני

commonly rendered as 'Thy rod and thy staff, they comfort me'. The interpretation which I will offer for this verse, however, departs from the traditional one.

The puzzling collocation of two apparently synonymous terms שבט 'rod' and משענת 'staff' in v. 4b of the Psalm seems to have been resolved, particularly since Power's extensive treatment of the problem (1928, pp. 434–439). Based on previous studies of the shepherd's customs in Palestine and Syria,<sup>11</sup> Power strongly argued that these two terms are not to be regarded as hendiadys; 'staff', he claimed, is not a mere rhetorical repetition, nor amplification of 'rod', but rather a designation of a totally different rod. Each of the rods, contended Power, fulfills a distinct role: the שבט 'rod' is an offensive weapon in the form of a club, used for the

10. The Psalm clearly exhibits stylistic features suggestive of the paratactic format. Parataxis, as aptly defined by Hauser (1980, p. 26),

refers to the placing side by side of words, images, clauses, or scenes without connectives that directly and immediately coordinate the parts with one another . . . Parataxis does not present a complete picture, but normally selects only certain elements which often at first glance do not appear to correlate well with one another. This does not mean that the adjacent parts lack a common unity . . . The unity that is present is subtle, implicit, indirect, and below the surface.

See also Gerleman (1951, pp. 168–180).

11. See the references to these works in Power (1928, pp. 435–436).

protection of the flock from robbers and beasts of prey; the *משענת* 'staff' is an instrument in the form of a crook, used by the shepherd to guide the sheep, to maintain order within the flock, and as a means of support for the shepherd himself to facilitate his walking and climbing on rocks.<sup>12</sup> This view, which is strongly supported by Morgenstern (1946, pp. 16–17) and has won general approbation, is, nevertheless, not without difficulties. Scholars pointed out that the word *ינחמני* 'to comfort' is not appropriate with the subjects 'your club and your staff' (Dahood, 1979, p. 418). This problem prompted the widely held emendation of *yanahāmūnî* 'they comfort me' to *yanhūnî* 'they lead me', or Dahood's above-mentioned proposed *yanhū mānî*, rendered as 'they guide my destiny'.

The significance of these two terms in the Psalm is of more import than has been accorded to them. They are, in my opinion, metaphoric expressions of two cardinal attributes of God in His dealings with His followers: the former, *שבט* 'rod' symbolizes the *divine justice*, and it is the one which leads the psalmist through *מעגלי צדק* 'paths of righteousness' (literally, 'paths of justice'); the latter, *משענת* 'staff' exemplifies to the *divine mercy*, the *טוב* 'goodness' and *חסד* 'kindness' which shall follow (*ירדפוני*). Justice is often paired in the Hebrew Scriptures with Mercy or Grace (*חסד*)<sup>13</sup> to express God's constant providential concern for His faithful ones. The doctrine itself is expounded in numerous biblical contexts, which build up an image of God as both the stern judge and the merciful, the chastiser and the healer.<sup>14</sup> A brief study of the terms *שבט* and *משענת* substantiating this view follows.

#### IV

The word *שבט* denotes a rod or staff used for diverse purposes. As such it occurs 43 times in the Hebrew Scriptures. In a few cases<sup>15</sup> the term refers to a staff which symbolizes power and authority or a scepter. Most of the occurrences, however, denote an instrument used for oppressive or punitive purposes, a kind of flail or scourge. Thus we find the expressions *שבט הנגש* 'the rod of oppression' (Isa 9:3); *שבט אפי* 'the rod of my fury'

12. Power (p. 437) cites Ezekiel's mention of two *ēsīm* 'rods' (37:16–20) and Zecharia's reference to the two *maktōt* 'rods' (11:7) in support of his thesis of the shepherd's two rods.

13. See, for example, Hos 2:21; Jer 9:23; Ps 103:17.

14. See Hos 6:1; Job 5:17–18; Ps 30:6. That 'rod' and 'staff' are expressions of God's chastisement and mercy respectively has already been observed by Rashi (*ad loc.*).

15. Gen 49:10; Ezek 19:11, 14; Ps 45:7.

(Isa 10:5); שבט מכף 'the rod of the one that smote thee' (Isa 14:29); שבט הרשע 'the rod of wickedness' (Ps 125:3); שבט עברתו 'the rod of his wrath' (Prov 22:8); in some cases שבט designates a rod used for chastisement, particularly for disciplinary purposes. This function is exemplified in expressions such as שבט מוסר 'rod of discipline' (Prov 22:15), שבט ותוכחת 'rod and reproof'.

When used in reference to God, the term שבט expresses God's strict and rigorous judgment. Generally, God's rod, namely afflictions, is retributive, primarily constituting punishment for sin. It serves as a scourge to punish the transgressor for his iniquities.<sup>16</sup> The 'rod' is also used by God to render judgement of his chosen People:<sup>17</sup> when Israel violates His laws and statutes and strays away from Him by committing moral and other offenses, He makes them 'pass under the rod'<sup>18</sup> to purge the evil from among them. Thus the principle of retributive punishment as atonement for sins, and as an explanation for life's fortunes or misfortunes, is a common belief in biblical and post-biblical sacred writings.

However, retributive judgement does not exhaust the whole spectrum of meaning and purpose of suffering. In numerous scattered passages and verses, the Hebrew Scriptures also give expression to the notion that God often uses His rod against His righteous servants in order to enhance their goodness and to ennoble their character.<sup>19</sup> This notion of divine fatherly reproof and salutary correction, which the Talmud aptly terms יסורים 'afflictions of love',<sup>20</sup> accounts for those seemingly paradoxical biblical verses in which the afflicted profusely thanks God for the immense suffering inflicted upon him: 'Blessed is the man whom thou dost chasten, O Lord . . . to give him respite from days of trouble' (Ps 94:12). The biblical sufferer is confident that the same hand which wounds will also heal, and that his sorrow will soon be transformed into triumph; weeping may tarry for the night, but joy would come with the morning (Ps 30:6).

These two attributes of צדק ומשפט 'justice and lawfulness', and חסד ורחמים 'loving-kindness and compassion' (Hos 2:19), also serve as the basis for the covenant between God and Israel, insuring that stern judgment is tempered with mercy. Thanks to their interaction and harmonious exis-

16. See 2 Sam 7:14; Ps 2:9; Job 9:34; Lam 3:1.

17. See Isa 10:5-6; Ps 89:33.

18. Ezek 20:37.

19. For chastisement conceived as fatherly discipline, see Deut 8:5; Prov 3:12; 6:23; Lam 3:27-33; Job 36:10. See also Heb 12:5; Acts 14:22; Ecclus 18:13-14; 21:7. The theme is frequent in Psalms of Solomon. See Moore (1927, vol. 2, p. 254).

20. For the rabbinical concept of suffering as 'afflictions of love', see the detailed discussion and the exhaustive references in Urbach (1975, pp. 442-447).



tence, the general orderliness of the world and the covenant with Israel are sustained.<sup>21</sup>

It would appear that God's second attribute, namely חסד ורחמים 'loving kindness and compassion' is exemplified in Ps 23 by the term משענת. The root שׁען, which occurs 37 times in the Hebrew Scriptures, is generally rendered as 'to lean'. As a noun<sup>22</sup> (משען, משענת, משען, משענה) it refers to a staff, stay, or something to lean upon, particularly for support. In ten cases, the term שׁען refers to God as source of support, sustenance and salvation.<sup>23</sup>

It is true that the only occurrence of the combination שבט and משענת is in Ps 23:4b. However, the concept of משענת as an aspect of God's loving kindness and mercy is borne out by various scriptural contexts. Thus in Isa 10:20–24, the term is clearly associated with the idea of healing from wounds, inflicted by the Assyrian enemy who smites Israel with the שבט. Moreover, in various biblical contexts the 'leaning' on God enables the subdued to prevail over all afflictions;<sup>24</sup> it provides salvation from the 'cords of death' and the assailing torrents of perdition and calamity (Ps 18:4, 18). Rebellion against the Lord causes the withdrawal of His משען and משענה (Isa 1:3) and the activation of the excruciating disciplinary שבט. It is stressed that God is the sole support and the only source of salvation, and that all other substitutes are nothing but קנה רצוץ 'leaning upon a crushed reed'.<sup>25</sup>

The association of the term שׁען with חסד ורחמים 'loving kindness and compassion' is much more pronounced in the Dead Sea Scrolls.<sup>26</sup> In the Thanksgiving Hymns (4:36–37), the poet sees himself immune against tyranny and affliction בחסדיכה והמון רחמיכה 'for I lean on Thy loving kindness and the abundance of Thy compassion'. The concept of leaning on God's compassion as a refuge from stern judgment is clearly expressed in the Manual of Discipline (10:17–18) 'every day shall I lean (אשען) on His compassion and I shall know that within His Hand lies the judgment (משפט) of all the living'.<sup>27</sup> The collocation of the terms שׁען, גחם, and רחם occurs in the Thanksgiving Hymns (11:33), 'thou hast freed (me

21. See Exod 34:6–7; Hos 2:20–22; Amos 3:2. See also Katz (1977, pp. 69–70), and Urbach (1975, pp. 448–461).

22. See, for example, 2 Sam 22:19; Isa 3:1; Exod 21:19.

23. Isa 10:20, 50:10; 2 Chr 16:7, 13:18, 14:10, 16:8; Mic 3:1; 2 Sam 22:19; Ps 18:19, 23:4.

24. 2 Chr 13:18, 14:10, 16:8.

25. 2 Kgs 18:21; Isa 36:6. See also Ezek 29:6.

26. See Haberman 1959; Mansoor 1961.

27. See also Manual of Discipline 4:45: 'and leans upon (ונשענת) His abundant mercy'.

from) my pains and comforted me (נחמתני) in my anguish, for I have leaned (נשענתי) on Thy compassion (ברחמיכה). We also find the association of ישועה with משענת in The Wars of the Sons of Light (4:13) which reads, 'the salvation (ישועה) of God' . . . the help (עזר) of God, the support (משענת) of God.

## V

It is in this sense, in my opinion, that the metaphorical terms 'rod' and 'staff' are used in Psalm 23. The assurance that God's fatherly chastisement will ultimately be followed by His salvation serves as the unfailing source of the psalmist's comfort. It is this transformation of adversity into triumph that prompted Isaiah (12:1-2) to turn to God in the following language:

I will give thanks to you, O Lord, for though you were  
angry with me, thy anger turned away, and thou did  
comfort me (*ûṭənahāmēni*). Behold, God is my salvation,  
I will trust, and will not be afraid, for the Lord God  
is my strength and my song, and he has become my salvation.

Thus the problem of the "inappropriate" use of the concept of comfort with respect to the subjects 'rod' and 'staff', which prompted the emendation of MT *yənahāmūni*, finds its solution.

If my proposed interpretation to v. 4 is sound, it would entail a totally different approach to the whole Psalm, not commensurate with the traditional and commonly accepted one. For generations, Psalm 23 was viewed as a "simple and homely" poem (Morgenstern, 1946, p. 13), marked by the "tender touch of a serene soul enjoying perfect peace of mind" (Weiser, 1962, p. 227). "There is no Psalm," remarks Perowne, "in which the absence of all doubt, misgiving, fear, anxiety, is so remarkable" (1966, p. 248). This simplistic understanding of the Psalm accounts for the excessive zealotry of scholars to maintain the idyllic sentiments throughout the Psalm, and the consequent ingenious suppressing of all the elements that are not compatible with such a conception.<sup>28</sup>

A close study of the Psalm reveals that beneath a somewhat deceptive setting of pastoral imagery and "joyful tranquility" lurks a tormented soul

28. This zealotry is explicitly expressed by Morgenstern: "Unquestionably Ps. 23 would be stronger and more direct and effective, and its unity more pronounced, were the figure of the Deity, as the good shepherd, manifest beyond all question in vv. 1-4, maintained throughout the entire Psalm" (1946, p. 15).

of a person who is desperately reaching out for God. True, feelings of bitter emotions and shifting tides of faith and despair, which are so characteristic of many Psalms,<sup>29</sup> do not seem to be apparent in this Psalm. The author's predicament is not set forth in a copious and leisurely fashion, but rather is submerged in idyllic pictures and veiled in a series of allusions and metaphors that bear a dense texture of meaning. We obtain some vivid glimpses of the psalmist's situation in many key expressions. Thus the phrase נגד צררי 'in the presence of my enemies' (v. 5), which has been a long-standing biblical interpretive crux, does not refer to beasts of prey that lurk about the sheepfold, as Morgenstern and others hold, but to real enemies, oppressors, who hunt down the poet's soul and inflict suffering upon him.<sup>30</sup> The reference of רע 'evil' or 'The Evil One' (v. 4) is indeed to those persecutors, and the whole verse is a hyperbolic portrayal of the gloomy ordeal, which causes the psalmist to visualize himself walking 'through the valley of the shadow of death'. However, the psalmist, in his most assured trust in God, believes that salvation is at hand. Yahweh will ultimately deliver him out of deep darkness into light and happiness,<sup>31</sup> He will 'restore' his soul, and will lead him to joyful tranquility (*mê mənūhôt*). Yahweh's scourging 'rod' will soon turn into a *comforting* 'staff' and the poet will no longer be hunted down (ירדפוני) by enemies (צררים), but by God's benevolence and loving kindness (טוב וחסד). Through reversal of meaning, the traditionally ominous negative sense of רדף 'hunt down' is transformed into an assuring positive one.

## VI

The prosodic and metaphoric versatility which is characteristic of this Psalm enriches the expression of the poet's feelings. We are confronted here with three corresponding images which focus upon the host-guest motif. These loosely strung together images undergo transformation in form but not in their essential content. Thus, in verses 1–4, the Lord is presented as a shepherd who not only entertains his flock-guests with green pastures and refreshing waters, but also provides them with protection, peace and tranquility. The same motif recurs in verse 5: it depicts God

29. See, e.g., Pss 42, 43, 84, 102.

30. Cp. Ps 69:20–21: 'my adversaries are all before thee . . . I looked . . . for comforters and there were none'. Cp. also with the intriguing collocation of the verbs צרר and רדף in 2 Sam 24:13; Ps 119:157.

31. Cp. Isa 9:1; 29:18; 58:8; 58:10; Amos 5:8; Ps 107:14.

not only as a generous host who prepares for his guest (the psalmist) a royal banquet with bountiful provisions, but also provides him with refuge from the *צוררים* 'enemies'. The motif culminates in verse 6 which exemplifies the Lord-host as furnishing his guest with the eternal 'pastures': a dwelling-place in the 'house of the Lord'. In this ultimate place of refuge the psalmist-guest finds abundant nourishment for his soul and he envisions himself continually sheltered with 'goodness and mercy'.

Attention should be paid to the significant role of the phrase *למען שמו* 'for His name's sake' (v. 4a). This expression, which some scholars either delete or relegate to perfunctory status,<sup>32</sup> serves within the framework of my proposed interpretation of the Psalm as one of the crucial keys to the meaning of the poem. It gives expression to an overriding biblical doctrine, reiterated and reemphasized in various biblical contexts. The dominant concept is that the suffering and wretchedness of God's righteous servants might be understood by God's adversaries as a sign of His impotence, and would, therefore, greatly discredit His reputation, and cause the profanation of His holy name. Therefore, God has to redeem His servants as a demonstration of His supreme power, for the sake of the sanctification of His name and the magnification of His glory among the non-believers.<sup>33</sup> This deep-rooted biblical doctrine plays a significant role in the psalmist's unflinching faith in Yahweh's imminent salvation, and contributed to the poet's renewal of spirit which infused him with new vitality in times of adversity. The conceptual correspondence between the poet's expectations of the 'restoration' of his soul and of the restoration of his Lord's name in v. 3, is one of the implicit cohesive factors in the Psalm.

Of significant evocative power is the image of the cup in v. 5 of the Psalm. As scholars have noted,<sup>34</sup> the cup is used in some biblical contexts to express the notion of chastisement and humiliation meted out to the sinner, and in others the idea of triumph and the happy lot of the righteous.

32. Thus Morgenstern (1946, pp. 20–21) claims that this expression is used in Ps 23 "in just this conventional, almost meaningless manner." He further contends that this phrase "in its present context . . . adds practically nothing to the meaning or force of thought," and that it is "metrically out of order." He, therefore, suggests a "rearrangement" of the text thus:

יחנני במעגלי צדק/נפשי ישוב למען-שמו

This rearrangement would, according to Morgenstern, not only restore the 3/3 measure, "which was undoubtedly original," but will also reestablish the logical sequence of thought.

33. For a trenchant discussion of this doctrine, see Blank (1967, pp. 117ff). See also Morgenstern (1956, pp. 122ff).

34. See, for example, Power (1928, p. 440), Freedman (1976, p. 161).

The juxtaposition of the 'overflowing cup' with the 'enemies' in the scene of God's banquet is indeed very intriguing. It emphasizes the Psalm's predominant sense of transformation of the poet's adversity and humiliations into exuberant feelings of victory and comfort. One also notes the close association of the cup, saturated with wine which 'gladdens the heart of man' (Ps 104:15), with the טוב 'goodness' and חסד 'mercy' which will 'pursue' the poet from now on, in place of the צררים 'enemies'. The whole image is commensurate with the central theme of the Psalm, namely the transmutation of God's rod of affliction (שבט) into a comforting staff (משענת).

It would appear that we are faced here with a poetic composition made up of multiple small images, seemingly placed side by side without coordinative connectives. The diverse segments do not seem to correlate well with one another. However, despite the apparent disregard for syntactically logical relationship, the Psalm does not lack a basic cohesiveness and unity. Its unity, however, is subtle and implicit. It is borne out not so much by the verses themselves, but by virtue of the characteristic style of the poem which is conditioned by emotional impressionistic conception. The dense and evocative metaphors and images are "fraught with background."<sup>35</sup> They reverberate with each other to produce in the imaginative mind of the reader an essentially integrated whole and an impression of unity.

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Auerbach, E. 1971. *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature*. Princeton.
- Barr, J. 1968. *Comparative Philology and the Text of the Old Testament*. London.
- Blank, S. H. 1967. *Prophetic Faith in Isaiah*. Detroit.
- Cross, F. M. and D. N. Freedman. 1948. "The Blessing of Moses." *Journal of Biblical Literature* 67:191-210.
- Dahood, M. 1954. "The Language and Date of Ps 48(47)." *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 16:15-19.
- \_\_\_\_\_. 1966. *Psalms (The Anchor Bible)*. Garden City.
- \_\_\_\_\_. 1979. "Stichometry and Destiny in Psalm 23, 4." *Biblica* 60:417-419.
- Freedman, D. N. 1972. "Prolegomenon" to G. B. Gray's *The Forms of Hebrew Poetry*. New York.

35. See Auerbach (1971, pp. 12-13).

- Freedman, D. N. 1976. "The Twenty-third Psalm." *Michigan Oriental Studies in Honor of George G. Cameron*, pp. 139–166. Ann Arbor.
- . 1977. "Pottery, Poetry, and Prophecy: An Essay on Biblical Poetry." *Journal of Biblical Literature* 96:5–26.
- Gerleman, G. 1951. "The Song of Deborah in the Light of Stylistics." *Vetus Testamentum* 1:168–180.
- Gordis, R. 1937. *The Biblical Text in the Making*. Philadelphia.
- . 1958. "Qadmutah šel hammasora lə'or sifrut Hazal uməgillot yam hammelah." *Tarbiz* 27:444–469.
- . 1976. *The World and the Book: Studies in Biblical Language and Literature*. New York.
- Haberman, A. M. 1959. *Məgillot Midbar Yəhuda*. Tel Aviv.
- Hauser, A. J. 1980. "Judges 5: Parataxis in Hebrew Poetry." *Journal of Biblical Literature* 99:23–41.
- Katz, S. 1977. *Jewish Ideas and Concepts*. Jerusalem.
- Mansoor, M. 1961. *The Thanksgiving Hymns: Translated and Annotated with Introduction*. Leiden.
- Mittmann, S. 1980. "Aufbau und Einheit des Danklieds Psalm 23." *Zeitschrift für Theologie und Kirche* 77:1–23.
- Moore, G. F. 1927 *Judaism*. Cambridge.
- Morgenstern, J. 1946. "Psalm 23." *Journal of Biblical Literature* 65:13–24.
- . 1956. "485 B.C." *Hebrew Union College Annual* 27:101–179.
- Perowne, J. J. S. 1966. *The Book of Psalms*. Grand Rapids.
- Urbach, E. 1975. *The Sages: Their Concepts and Beliefs*. Translated from the Hebrew by Israel Abrahams. Jerusalem.
- Vogt, E. 1953. "The 'Place in Life' of Psalm 23." *Biblica* 34:195–211.
- Weiser, A. 1962. *The Psalms*. London.