TOUCHSTONE
TEXTS

THE LORD IS MY SHEPHERD

PSALM 23 FOR THE LIFE OF THE CHURCH

RICHARD S. BRIGGS

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Preface

In this book I seek to resource the reader to understand Psalm 23 well—in and for the life of the church. This involves cultivating several practices, including developing the necessary tools of exegesis and interpretation and accessing the necessary reserves of theological and spiritual wisdom. For better or for worse I think of the first of these as drawing mostly upon my scholarly training and the second of these as drawing mostly upon my ministerial training, although each also strengthens and refines the other. One result is a book that seeks to speak with both scholarly and ministerial integrity about multiple aspects of reading Psalm 23. I have written for students and parishioners; essay writers and worshipers; scholars and ministers. I like to think that some readers—like myself—may fit all these labels at once.

Psalm 23 is a familiar text to many, and some of the interpretive ground we will be covering may seem familiar too. But how and why we read the Bible the way we do is not always well understood. Thus I try to explain the interpretive moves we can and do make when we handle this particular "touchstone text." One result is that the book might serve as a primer on questions that are helpful to explore in the task of reading any scriptural passage wisely, even while the main focus throughout is on Psalm 23.

It has been an immense privilege to write this book. I grew up in London and had a happy childhood, though not one that involved Christian faith. I am at home in large cities, riding metro systems—of which the London Underground tube network is still my favorite—shopping at large supermarkets, writing in urban coffee shops, and mixing in large crowds. By background I am therefore possibly one of the least qualified people to write a book about Psalm 23 in the life of the church. But it turns out that it is not where you come from that matters most in reading a scriptural text but where your heart dwells, and my heart (and mind and soul) has been seeking to live in the world of the biblical text for many years now.

I owe much to my wife, Melody, and her family for my sympathy toward a vision of rural life. Melody grew up on a farm in West Virginia and prefers to live a long way from crowds and metro systems. What wisdom there may be about shepherds and farming in this book comes from her and her family, and so it is my pleasure to dedicate this book to them, with many thanks for happy rural adventures that I did not imagine when growing up.

As always, writing is not a solo achievement. I am grateful to Stephen Chapman for inviting me to contribute to this series and offering wise editorial oversight. Likewise it has once again been a pleasure to work with Jim Kinney and the wonderful staff at Baker Academic. Walter Moberly has been a good friend and dialogue partner throughout, providing encouragement and insight in equal measure. I am also indebted to Philip Plyming for his life-giving leadership of Cranmer Hall, Durham, where I work, and for facilitating the study leave that enabled the writing of this book.

I began writing three days after Matthew, our youngest child, went to college. The house was mysteriously quiet—a very mixed blessing. It has since been filled with Psalm 23, which is a very real blessing. I must also acknowledge the presence of our dog, Charlie, who would make absolutely the worst sheep dog ever because he would be scared of the sheep. Normally I need to say that all errors are mine alone. But on this occasion I would like to share responsibility for any remaining errors with Charlie, since his gift for barking mainly while I'm editing tricky details is remarkable.

A Note on Presentation

There are a lot of minor technical issues that beset writing about the Psalms. These include decisions about which numbering system to use for each psalm and its verses and what versions (ancient and modern) to discuss when reading the text—all matters that are taken up at various points in the book. I have simplified these here and always give the psalm number according to the NRSV, and usually the verse number too, which makes no difference in the case of Psalm 23. Exceptions are clearly stated. I restrict key translations, for the purpose of reviewing options, to the KJV, NIV, NRSV, ESV, and NJPS. Others make appearances when interesting, especially *The Message* (MSG) and Robert Alter's *The Hebrew Bible* translation with commentary (Alter). In general, when I say "modern versions," I mean those just noted after the KJV. The Greek version of the Old Testament (known generally as the Septuagint [LXX]) is available in English as NETS. Jerome's Vulgate Latin text of the Psalms is explained as necessary. I have made a small attempt to stem the flood of endless referencing and footnotes by restricting myself to noting only sources that I have actually read on the point being discussed, with a couple of exceptions (noted) where it is appropriate to reference someone being discussed by another author.

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Introduction

On Attending to Psalm 23

"The Lord Is My Shepherd; I Shall Not Want"

The opening verse of the Twenty-Third Psalm is a famous statement of confidence and trust. Cited here in its familiar King James idiom, the declaration resounds that the Lord God is concerned with me personally, as *my* shepherd, and that my needs will therefore be met. Questions of technical complexity—history, hermeneutics, scholarly commentary—take a back seat in the first flowering of the joy of a plain reading: the Lord is my shepherd. Only professional biblical scholars would have thought otherwise. For multitudes of readers and hearers over many centuries, it is the emotive uplift of this great opening verse that rings loud and clear. All is well and all shall be well. God is good . . . even specifically to me.

Students and ministers trained by long years of hard engagement with the works of biblical studies may be expecting a "but . . ." You may anticipate, dear reader, that after this heartwarming opening focus I shall immediately cut across your desires for spiritual edification and theological encouragement with some such statement as "But such simple reading fails to take into account all the interpretive complexities with which one must wrestle." Then this deflationary moment would be followed by page after page of slowly removing the text from the realms of joy or reassurance and leaving it stranded millennia ago under layers of reconstructed history or learned discussions of shepherding practices in the ancient Near East. There would perhaps be opportunity, too, for those most disheartening of scholarly observations: that our familiar and much-loved translations are mistaken, that the text never really said *that*, and so forth.

As the apostle Paul might have said, By no means! The purpose of this book is not to lose that first joyful plain-sense reading. Instead I affirm: the basic contours of the traditional understanding of Psalm 23 have not led us astray. I have no new discoveries that will show that everyone before me was wrong about this text—which would in any case be a problematic thing to claim in many ways, including theologically. More to the point, I also have no new, grand theories of historical reconstruction that will not so much *discover* the text anew as *invent* a framework for reading it. One of the points I want to make in this book is that a great deal of scholarly reflection on Psalm 23, especially in the twentieth century, is best filed under "speculation" rather than "serious historical research." Speculation can be useful, as when, for instance, it provokes us to look afresh for different kinds of supporting evidence that open up new lines of inquiry. But in my judgment, to be defended as we go, the multiple scholarly hypotheses about the setting and purpose of Psalm 23 have been supported by almost no evidence at all. Reflecting on these so-called advancements, I have felt that one purpose of this book is to set the study of Psalm 23 *back* about one hundred to one hundred fifty years, which is when it began to go off the rails. Of course there was insight and progress in that time. But as we will see, there was also a lot of unsupported conjecture, and I want to scrape much of that away.

By way of contrast, the purpose of the kind of biblical scholarship I pursue here is to allow the picture that Psalm 23 actually paints to shine forth more clearly and constructively. We will seek a full, imaginative, and serious engagement with the psalm's words and phrases, its images and its own imaginative vision, in order that we might hear it in all its widescreen wonder.[1] Let me introduce a spoiler of sorts: I will argue that Psalm 23 encourages us to rejoice that the Lord is our shepherd, who accompanies us both beside quiet waters and through the valley of the shadow of death. We will reflect on paths of righteousness, or perhaps rightness, and on goodness and mercy. In some cases, such as with the "valley of the shadow of death," I will work hardest at the scholarship of what these words mean precisely because I think that the traditional understanding has merit in spite of what several scholars have said in the intervening centuries. Overall this book will provide encouragement to those who wonder if the interpretive paths on which readers have trodden over the centuries are the right ones. The short answer is yes, they are. A longer answer would add, "more or less."

Perhaps, though, the paths have become so well worn that their full impact is sometimes missed. One aspect of our task is therefore to refresh our grasp of what Psalm 23 says and to hear it anew, and perhaps more clearly. This is *not* to hear it "as if for the first time," since as with all good poetry a first hearing is rarely the most significant one. Nor is it necessarily to hear it as having a different intent, although obviously that will depend on how any given person has heard it before. Images that get close to what we are seeking here include the renewed freshness of hearing after one has had an ear blockage removed and the ears are syringed clean, the clarity of sight that follows a new prescription of correctly specified glasses, or the joy of hearing a remastered Beatles album that reveals notes and nuances missed on a scratched and much-loved old copy. Young readers may find all these examples mystifying. So it is also like seeing an Avengers film in the movie theater when you have only seen it previously on your phone or meeting a good friend face-to-face whom you have only been able to engage with online. In none of these cases is the project one of suddenly realizing that one had it all wrong, but in each case there is learning and recalibration of the insights that made the experience valuable in the first place and a deeper entry into the joy and wonder of the whole experience.

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[1] The language of "full imaginative seriousness" as foundational to the constructive reading of Scripture is indebted to the many works of Walter Moberly. For a clear statement, see his *Theology of the Book of Genesis*, 197; and *Old Testament Theology*, 285.

The process I have been describing is a hermeneutical engagement with Scripture that seeks a so-called second naivete—that sense of coming fresh (“naively”) to the text with eyes alert and with critical insight harnessed to know what to look for and what to appreciate in an imaginative and serious reading *of what the text says*. The contrast is with all those other fascinating approaches that major on what the text does not say, or why it says what it says, and so forth. Those approaches do indeed have their place, but I seek to prioritize this critically refreshed (“second”) naivete.[2]

If I labor the point, it is because modern biblical studies has often majored on critical reconstruction of much-loved texts with scant regard for its resultant trampling over much-loved understandings. Of course, this is sometimes necessary, and for some texts there have indeed been major shifts in knowledge and understanding that render former readings untenable. In my opinion, this has happened rather less than one might think from the tenor of a lot of academic biblical studies, and indeed a lot of teaching of biblical studies even in faith-based contexts. As a result, there is real work to be done in reconnecting the scholarly bricks and mortar of critical study with the living and breathing faith of thoughtful readers (Christian and Jewish) down through the ages.

Whether we are therefore engaging in “theological interpretation,” “spiritual reading,” or pursuing the “plain (or literal) sense of the text” is a matter of how useful such labels are for whatever purposes are at hand. What really does matter is that the integrative work is done that brings together critical attention to the details of the text, on the one hand, with thoughtful reflection on life and faith on the other. Theological preunderstanding need not trump exegesis, nor vice versa. Holding this balance in a productive dialogue turns out to be a challenging but life-giving task. As I have sometimes expressed it to students nearing the end of taking classes in Old Testament: the task is "simply" to pay attention to what the text says, but it turns out that few tasks are as difficult to do well as paying attention to what the text says. This is in part because of the wide range of questions that immediately rush in once one takes seriously the ancient horizon of the text, the present horizon of the reader, and the intervening centuries with all their own views of what the "simple/plain understanding" might be. But all of this is recognizably different from spending our time guessing about how and when and why our featured text came to be written.

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[2] The phrase “second naivete” comes from the work of Paul Ricoeur, but it is an idea better experienced than described theoretically. In my view, the most helpful account of it in theory is still Wallace, *Second Naiveté*.

Attending to Psalm 23 in this way, with intellectual-spiritual-theological-historical-critical seriousness, requires the best of us with regard to thinking about the psalm then and now, and also at times in between then and now. As a result, understandings of the psalm through history, and uses of it in liturgy and hymnody, can all make a positive contribution to our appreciation of the text and its function(s). All such receptions of the psalm need weighing, of course, and we will be doing that in the pages that follow. Likewise, detailed focus on the original context, meaning(s), and original function of the psalm are also important to weigh, even though the extent to which we can be sure about these proves to be rather limited.

There will be plenty of focus on the text itself in what follows. I have written the book to presuppose no knowledge of Hebrew. However, detailed study of a text originally written in Hebrew does require discussion of features of the language and how it works. I do try to explain what you need to know as we go along, and I am mindful, too, that readers with awareness of Hebrew will benefit from seeing the details explored. I even hope that readers with some dim and distant memory of studying Hebrew might be encouraged to refresh their skills. However, technical Hebrew classifications and issues are reserved in a brief appendix, for those with critically trained ears to hear.

Does detailed scholarly work turn any of our cherished readings of Psalm 23 upside down? Does it do so in practice, and could it do so in theory? My third chapter will engage in a careful critical reading of the text under the broad rubric sketched above—so this will be "critical" as in "attentive to detail." But of course we read with awareness that traditional understandings may have been unhelpful or inadequate, and no matter how established a traditional reading might be, that should not exempt it from critical weighing. Now in theory I can conceive of a well-established reading being overturned, although it is worth reflecting on what such an overturning would say about centuries of earnest and already attentively critical reading.

Probably the clearest and least controversial example of such a scholarly shift has been with regard to authorship, since for reasons to be discussed in chapter 2 we should almost certainly say that King David was not the "author" of Psalm 23, in the modern sense of the term. This does make some degree of difference to various resonances set up by the psalm, although of course it is not a point about the psalm's meaning as such (except with regard to its title). However, with the poetry of Psalm 23 I find it to be the case that no established reading has become established without reason. That falls short of saying that any such reading is the best we can do, but even where I might want to change or nuance a reading, I do not think we approach such interpretation in the spirit of knocking out other contenders until one's own preferred approach is the last one standing. Texts (and especially poetic texts) simply do not work like that.

In practice, to forewarn the reader regarding chapter 3, I think there are nuances aplenty to learn in our reading, but in only one case do I think that there is a serious interpretive option that is especially clouded by a poor tradition. This is with the force of the verb traditionally interpreted "to follow" in the last verse. A lot of the details of Psalm 23:6 are difficult to handle well, but in this one instance I would urge a stronger translation than "goodness and mercy will *follow* me." Details can await the full discussion. But I hope this indicates the scale of the reliability of our traditional translations and understandings.

A Crowd of Witnesses: Cultural, Scholarly, and Popular

Psalm 23 has not suffered neglect over the years in the life of God's people, nor indeed in the academy. Here I note briefly three traditions of witnessing to the text that all have their part to play in our own engagement with the psalm. Specific points about the psalm will be harnessed for later readings of the text in subsequent chapters. Here the goal is to get a sense of the territory that lies before a reader of Psalm 23 in terms of the psalm's influence. First we note the cultural impact of the text, initially in and through worship and ministry, and now also more widely. Since this has now become itself the focus of some academic study, it is appropriate then to note various academic treatments of the psalm's reception. As a result, another category, which in some ways belongs more with the cultural impact examples, is deferred to third place: what I call "popular" readings of the psalm in devotional literature.

Cultural Impact: From Church to World

Psalm 23's setting as a Scottish hymn is well known, sung to the tune of "Crimond."[3] Arguably this is the most famous English-language version of the psalm, and it is hard for most who have sung the hymn to do anything other than read Psalm 23 through its lens. This has some interesting implications, as we will see in our exegesis in chapter 3. A more recent musical version by Stuart Townend has also become popular across a range of church traditions, testifying perhaps to the power of the familiar imagery to win over churches

[3] For a regal version see, for example, "Psalm 23: The Lord Is My Shepherd ('Crimond')," Martin Baker, posted November 7, 2014, YouTube video, 3:06, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yHQoRfFr1rE. Many other versions are available.

less inclined to sing more modern worship songs. At the same time, Townend's repeated chorus line "I will trust in you alone" uses a slightly more familiar idiom for churches inclined to prefer affective choruses and songs that emphasize self-expression.[4] There are plenty of other examples of Psalm 23 set to music down through the centuries, and I am not qualified to discuss their musical merits. Susan Gillingham notes that "almost every composer interested in sacred music has had a hand in arranging this psalm as a motet or anthem," and she surveys multiple examples. Such examples extend as far as Howard Goodall's choral arrangement of the psalm used in the UK as the theme song for *The Vicar of Dibley*, a well-known 1990s TV comedy series set in the life of the Church of England.[5]

More recent examples of Psalm 23 in musical settings strike out across the waters of wide-ranging cultural and artistic receptions, perhaps sometimes in parody, but often take the psalm's promise of comfort in dark times at face value. I do not wish to do more than point to the kinds of examples relevant here, since time would fail us to tell of Coolio's 1995 "Gangsta's Paradise," beginning "As I walk through the valley of the shadow of death"; or Kanye West's 2004 "Jesus Walks," which samples the gospel longing of the Harlem Addicts Rehabilitation Center Choir singing "Jesus walks with me" while reimagining urban decay in the Midwest as the valley of the shadow ("I walk through the valley of Chi where death is").[6] Whereas rap seems to have read the psalm's trust and longing at something close to face value, even if not necessarily aspiring to it, rock music sometimes appropriates it in order to deem its comfort a failure. Pink Floyd's

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[4] See Stuart Townend, "The Lord's My Shepherd," accessed October 21, 2019, https://www.stuarttownend.co.uk/song/the-lords-my-shepherd/.

[5] Gillingham, *Psalms through the Centuries*, 2:151–52.

[6] "Chi" = Chicago. Both these songs are readily available on the internet in various versions. The first was written by Coolio, Stevie Wonder (whose "Pastime Paradise" is sampled in it), L. V. (Larry Sanders), and Doug Rasheed and was originally on Coolio's *Gangsta's Paradise* album in 1995 (Tommy Boy/Warner Bros records). The second was written by Che Smith, Miri Ben-Ari, Kanye West, and Curtis Leon Lundy for West's debut album *The College Dropout* in 2004 (Def Jam/Roc-A-Fella).

"Sheep," part of the Orwellian parable of their 1977 *Animals* album, transfers the sheep imagery into a symbol for culpable passivity, and Psalm 23 is transmuted into arrival not in the house of the Lord but into the slaughterhouse. Similarly, U2's "Love Rescue Me" curses the rod and staff because "they no longer comfort me" and seems to turn to love as an alternative to divine aid.[7] If one were to begin cataloging the uses of the psalm in film, the list of contemporary uses could become very long, though it would surely include reference to the priest reading it as the ship goes down in James Cameron's *Titanic*.[8] Spreading the net wider, the literary reception of Psalm 23 could be another study again, ranging over a much longer time period.[9]

What is the significance of looking at such reception? This is a much-contested question at present, and views range from seeing it as an interesting afterthought to interpretation, to being one interpretive key among others to unlock a text's significance, right through to those who defend reception theory as an essential element of taking seriously a text that has been interpreted over many centuries of changing horizons (perhaps even arguing that the text as such has no significance until it is received wherever it has landed).[10] I wonder if a blanket answer to this question may be inadvisable. Each example could be worth exploring for its (various different kinds of) significance, and there is no need to be more programmatic than that. However, it does seem clear that all these examples point to the substantive iconic and totemic status of Scripture—or at least some of its famous selections, including Psalm 23—in wider culture. That is certainly an area worth exploring, though it is not quite the focus of this book.[11] It does bring us, however, to reception history as a live area in contemporary biblical studies.

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[7] "Sheep" is written by Roger Waters and is on Pink Floyd's 1977 *Animals* album (Harvest/Columbia records). "Love Rescue Me" is written by U2 and Bob Dylan, no less, and is on U2's 1988 *Rattle and Hum* album (Island records), an album that stands a little outside of U2's normal stance on Christian faith.

[8] James Cameron, dir., *Titanic* (Los Angeles: 20th Century Fox/Paramount, 1997). Examples of the psalm's use in film include *Pale Rider*, *Full Metal Jacket*, and others.

[9] For an interesting start consider Hamlin, *Psalm Culture*, 147–72, a chapter titled "'Happy Me! O Happy Sheep!': Renaissance Pastoral and Psalm 23," as a "case study in Psalm translation."

[10] Useful orientation to all these issues and more may be found in Parris, *Reading the Bible with Giants*. Parris is somewhere in the middle of the spectrum of views outlined here.

Academic Engagement: From Origins to Reception

Modern biblical studies has poured forth its never-ending torrent of critical studies on the Psalms more widely, and on Psalm 23 in particular, for well over a hundred years now. We will be sampling many such studies in the chapters to come, and in particular in chapter 2 I will say a little about trends in Psalms scholarship that have had an impact on how Psalm 23 (among others) has been interpreted in academic circles. Such commentaries and critical studies are typically excellent at "analysis": a word that signifies the breaking apart of an object of study into components. These historical-critical approaches to the text offer key insights into how Psalm 23 works. At the same time, they seem to have short memories and often rehearse scholarship only from within their own (relatively modern) horizon, so that Erasmus's lengthy reading of the psalm, for instance, which overlaps at various points with modern exegetical concerns, is conspicuously absent in modern commentaries.[12] I will also seek to explore some of these older readings in the discussions that follow.[13]

The days of such critical amnesia are passing, however. With the Psalms in particular, looking at the history of their interpretation seems to tap into something close to the essence of the Psalter: a compilation arguably designed as a prayer book and certainly used as a prayer book. The magisterial study of William Holladay, *The Psalms through Three Thousand Years*, sets the pace and is helpful to us not least because he uses Psalm 23 as his initial case study in considering what may be gained and lost through the history of interpretation.[14] Earlier examinations of usage and reception were also particularly interesting. I have benefitted from W. O. E. Oesterley's *The Psalms in the Jewish Church*, which is an assessment of Jewish interpretation and use of the Psalms from origins to the present, including in synagogue and private spiritual life.[15] John Alexander Lamb's comparable volume from 1962, *The Psalms in Christian Worship*, offers a wide-ranging review of the liturgical use of the Psalms in the Eucharist and in daily and occasional offices across a broad spectrum of Christian traditions. There is also an earlier and unique volume by Rowland E. Prothero called *The Psalms in Human Life*, which is a fund of stories accumulated by a former fellow of All Souls, Oxford, who was already en route to a career in British politics. The book is discursive, anecdotal, and consistently illuminating.[16] Prothero's book also seems to be the source of the thought that Psalm 23 "was fitly chosen by Augustine as the hymn of martyrs," which has been much cited since, though without evidence of Augustine actually saying it.[17]

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[11] The best discussion of the refracted nature of these cultural Psalm 23 references is Jacobson, "Through the Pistol Smoke." See also Roncace, "Psalm 23 and Modern Worldviews," 205–6, commenting in particular on Coolio's *Gangsta's Paradise*, and also his own "Psalm 23 as Cultural Icon" on SBL's *Bible Odyssey* website: https://www.bibleodyssey.org/en/passages/related-articles/psalm-23-as-cultural-icon (accessed October 21, 2019).

[12] See Erasmus, "Threefold Exposition of Psalm 22," 119–99, and discussed in chap. 4 below.

[13] The task is eased by the remarkable compendium of material found in Neale and Littledale, *Commentary on the Psalms*; 1:307–16 is on Psalm 23.

The flowering of academic interest in the reception of the biblical text since Holladay's book in 1993 has borne fruit in various ways,

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[14] Holladay, *Psalms through Three Thousand Years*, 6–14.

[15] Oesterley (1866–1950) would go on to be Professor of Hebrew and Old Testament at King's College London, and was the author of many well-respected books. This 1910 study was one of his earliest and appears to have left little trace—it is absent from the works of Gillingham and Holladay, for instance.

[16] Prothero was not a biblical commentator but a "learned Victorian," and the resultant eclectic nature of his musings is pointed out by Dawes, *Psalms*, 184–85. (Dawes also provides a fascinating biographical note on Prothero in Dawes, *Psalms*, 206n8.)

[17] Prothero, *Psalms in Human Life*, 12. There is no footnote, and scholars have been unable to trace this claim in Augustine's work. Augustine offered only the briefest of comments on Psalm 23 in his lengthy Psalms writings (see Augustine, *Expositions of the Psalms*, 1:244–45), and nothing in it accords with Prothero's remark. It may be an error or perhaps an overly free recasting of some other thought of Augustine's. Prothero offers no further context for the reference.

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among the most notable of which is the (Wiley) Blackwell Bible Commentary series.[18] In my view these volumes have been always fascinating but sometimes frustrating, since the accumulation of instances of reception can provoke the question, To what end? What exactly is the benefit of seeing multiple interpretations amassed, especially if there are no evaluative criteria of any kind in play? However, the Psalms commentary in this series, by Susan Gillingham, is a significant exception to this judgment, not least because how the Psalms have been used in worship and art and wider cultural circles chimes with their purpose: to be sung or prayed in dialogue with God and in the midst of God's world. Her three-volume work is an indispensable guide to the living power of the Psalms as it has been experienced in Jewish, Christian, and wider cultural circles.[19] Her study of Psalm 23 takes the reader from King David all the way to George W. Bush, with wide-ranging coverage of options in between.[20] With respect to this particular text, she has also offered an earlier exemplary study of a range of historical and literary interpretations up to the end of the last century in a thoughtful discussion of how best to evaluate competing and complementary interpretations.[21] Part of her agenda there is to flag the importance of the reader in interpretation and the interdependence of historical and literary categories for interpretation. The framing argument of the book involves an appeal for openness to a postmodern sensibility within the confines of an academic discipline more naturally "modern," though the implications of such an interpretive shift are left largely open.[22]

In certain respects, the present study builds upon Gillingham's approach in her various studies of Psalm 23 and considers further developments in the early twenty-first century, as the nature and possibilities (and problems) of “postmodern” interpretation have become gradually more clearly drawn. The core issue, in my view, is how to balance openness to text-oriented *and* reader-oriented approaches, much as Gillingham advocates herself, and perhaps also to let one’s (critical) reading be part of the ongoing conversation of interpretation that extends back to before the arrival of modern critical categories. This was sketched in principle at the beginning of this chapter and will be explored in practice throughout the book.

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[18] See the series website at http://bbibcomm.info/ (accessed October 22, 2019).

[19] Gillingham, *Psalms through the Centuries*. Vol. 1 (2008) is an overview of the issues, vol. 2 (2018) covers Pss. 1–72, while vol. 3 will complete the project.

[20] Gillingham, *Psalms through the Centuries*, 2:144–53.

[21] Gillingham, *Image, the Depths and the Surface*, 45–78. The chapter is entitled "In and Out of the Sheepfold: Multivalent Readings in Psalm 23."

[22] Gillingham, *Image, the Depths and the Surface*, 122–27.

The challenges of such an approach may be seen with reference to another project that is similarly interested in historical (and spiritual) reception of the Psalms while simultaneously assigning priority to historical reconstruction of the original intent. This is the fascinating multivolume historical commentary study by Bruce Waltke and James Houston, which includes Psalm 23 as one of its extended examples in *The Psalms as Christian Worship* volume.[23] Unlike the reception approach of Gillingham’s work, what we have here is a two-author defense of a two-step approach: meaning, which can be (largely) determined, and then significance, which may be appreciated but must ultimately be measured against “the textual or doctrinal meaning of the psalm.”[24] Despite many helpful insights, their work’s adherence to such a two-step approach is problematic, as we will see shortly.

Popular Devotion: From the Text to the Life of a Shepherd

One could amass a bookshelf of popular readings of Psalm 23 alone. On that shelf would be much encouragement and devotional wisdom. Yet not all of it would have much to do with the psalm itself. Despite my own intention to remain positive with respect to received spiritual wisdom about the psalm, it is true that much of what passes for devotional reading of "the Lord is my shepherd" tells us more about life in general than the impress of the text. In particular, it can tell us a remarkable amount about shepherding. Why this happens is worth pondering, and part of chapter 2 will be given over to reflecting on the interest in (ancient) shepherding that particularly characterizes popular readings of the psalm while also lurking in the middle-distance of critical study.

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[23] See Waltke and Houston, *Psalms as Christian Worship*, 416–45, on Ps. 23. Other volumes in the series are *Psalms as Christian Lament* (2014) and *Psalms as Christian Praise* (2019).

[24] Waltke and Houston, *Psalms as Christian Worship*, 433.

In preparing for this project, I took on vacation with me an old study of *The Twenty-Third Psalm* by a well-known Scottish preacher, which I will refrain from identifying further. It was a startling read: a spirit-stirring mix of personal experience, doctrinal reflection, sideways references to other Scriptures, and a loose arrangement of six chapters, ostensibly one per verse of the psalm. Not only did it end with an evangelistic (Christian) altar call to come to Christ the Shepherd, but at one point it offered something of a pastoral rebuke to the reader: "So, dear friends, when the minister calls, let him hear less of that weary tale of your doubts and fears."[25] The tone of the book, if nothing else, was rather a long way from the tone of Psalm 23. My perusal of more recent popular accounts suggests that this is not a problem unique to this one older book.

But in fact the problem here is not just one of tone. Amid all the encouragement of this opening chapter, for us to construe positively the history of the church's reception of Psalm 23 and to seek theological and spiritual insight therein really does not mean that anything goes. Specifically, it does not mean that you can say what you like in loose connection with Psalm 23 and count it as a good interpretation. Sometimes it is not even an interpretation at all. Ironically, although the mode of the problem is different, the issue here is actually similar to that of critical study that spends its time on historical reconstruction: something has been substituted in place of reading the text. In this case, what has been substituted is spiritual edification rather than critical conjecture, but the distance from the text can be similar. Of course, spiritual edification is not in itself a problem, and we live in a world where vaguely aspirational preaching is hardly among the greatest of evils, so a certain degree of perspective is in order. But such approaches to Psalm 23, which I label "popular readings," are running on empty, making little of the text, and often relying instead on randomly sourced Gospel verses or (surprisingly often) on quotations from hymns.

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[25] The book is almost a hundred years old.

My suspicion is that readings like this, and preaching like this, persist in part because people are not well trained in the art of reading the text. Scholars who make this point (like myself) typically prefer not to dwell on the thought that it is the guild of biblical scholars who might be as much at fault here as the readers and preachers making their way through the valley of the shadow of academic biblical studies. What are often lacking in readerly formation are sustained examples of attending to the text rather than allowing it to be eclipsed by critical, historical, and literary examination. No more need be said in general terms on this issue. In chapter 2 we will look at the specific issues raised by enthusiasm about studying shepherding as a way into Psalm 23. But the overarching task before us is to set out beyond this, to just the kind of attentive reading of the text that I have been advocating in this introduction.

Living in the World of Psalm 23

Let us draw together the threads of this review of other readers by way of outlining a hermeneutical focus for our work with the text. The goal of a theologically and ministerially relevant reading is not first to exegete the text and then, secondly and separately, to apply its insights to today's world. There are many who would say that this is precisely what Christians are doing when they preach, for example. I think one can honor such sermons and their wisdom without necessarily thinking that the hermeneutical model in play is actually "exegesis + application."

The problems with this model are well known. Firstly, objective exegesis is always an approximation at best, since we read as embodied people from certain sociocultural (and theological) horizons, foregrounding certain types of questions and living largely unaware of others—at least until such time as we mix with those of profoundly different perspectives. Secondly, it is a model overly focused on abstracting principles from texts that, all unawares, were often not designed to be in the business of offering principles, let alone "doctrinal meaning."[26] Thirdly, as the great hermeneutical theorist Hans-Georg Gadamer once magisterially defended, all worthwhile interpretation already includes aspects of "application" anyway, in that the text is approached from within a particular horizon (or interpretive framework) that factors into how the text is being perceived in the first place.[27] As a result, the two-stage nature of such reading is a heuristic simplification at best, useful—in my opinion—for reflecting on what sorts of moves we have made in offering an interpretation, but not particularly useful as a method with which to set out and generate interpretations in the first place.

This is one reason why students of Scripture are often puzzled by the challenge to "go and do likewise" in exegesis after watching a favorite professor demystify a text and show how it works, thinking that they have thereby learned a method for so doing. Far more likely they have watched a wise reader deploy some wisdom and will be unable to "go and do likewise" unless they have some comparable wisdom with which to read a new and different text. Biblical studies is only slowly catching on to the probability that this is key for reading: good character is part of what shapes having eyes to see what is at stake in the biblical text.[28]

One could go on—since theoretical hermeneutical discussion has a way of extending itself almost indefinitely, sometimes with a curious disregard for actually reading any biblical texts. For us, all our hermeneutical thinking will be tethered to working on the specific example of Psalm 23. I want to suggest just one overarching rubric for how the hermeneutical task will play out as we engage in this interpretive practice.

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[26] Cf. Waltke and Houston, *Psalms as Christian Worship*, 433 (cited above).

[27] Gadamer, *Truth and Method*.

[28] I offer an account of how one might match up biblical study with cultivation of character in *Virtuous Reader*; and I discuss the implications for how we learn Bible reading in "Biblical Hermeneutics and Practical Theology," 201–17.

As noted, the "exegesis + application" model seems to suggest that we need first to isolate the original communicative intent as the key to our understanding, subsequent to which we will then deploy our broader hermeneutical and theological thinking. However, in practice all sorts of hermeneutical and theological judgments are inevitably involved along the line. All I want to observe here is that this two-step model almost unavoidably suggests that we are moving *from* the world of the text (and its author) *to* today. This is the way people think of interpretation when they talk of applying ideas *from* the Bible *to* ourselves today. But that is the wrong way around.

Our job is not to take understanding out of the biblical text and drop it down into our world, as if it could then self-sufficiently take care of itself among all our twenty-first-century judgments and evaluations and commitments. Our twenty-first-century world is not that theologically robust. Rather, our job is to reverse the hermeneutical flow and to take our own attenuated theological vision and apprentice it to that of the text—to go and live in the world of the text, as a shorthand way of putting it.[29]

Critics of this idea sometimes suggest that this is an otherworldly or ivory-towered approach to biblical interpretation, all very well for a scholar but falling well short of the needs of the church on a week-by-week basis. I disagree. Crucially, immersion in the world of the text changes who we are. This is hermeneutics by way of character transformation, rather than trying to add character applications on to the end of technical handling of the text. Again, although one could write (and I have written) about this at length, the merit of the idea in this particular case will be open for inspection as we employ it with regard to Psalm 23. So we will review the matter briefly in the final chapter of the book.

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[29] For more on this key idea see Lash, "What Might Martyrdom Mean?," 75–92. I did not invent the phrase "reverse the hermeneutical flow" but learned it from various works of Larry Kreitzer, in the first instance from his two volumes in the early 1990s, *New Testament in Fiction and Film* and *Old Testament in Fiction and Film*, both of which are subtitled *On Reversing the Hermeneutical Flow*. Kreitzer uses the idea slightly differently.

On a practical note, I might add that this is also a model that nourishes preaching ministry in the life of the church. It is not how I was taught to preach, but it is how I have pursued preaching ministry in my local church week by week, and I think it makes a practical difference to people's lives. It does so precisely by allowing the scriptural text to set an agenda and a vision for the daily life of those who gather for worship. Points of application will not do this. Capturing the imaginative vision of those who attend to the text has at least some chance. It takes time, but then any worthwhile cultivation of Christian character takes time. If readers of this book end up "at home" in the world of Psalm 23, then they will have been changed on their way there. To live in the world of the text involves and requires character transformation. So it will make all manner of difference in the life of the church.[30]

Approaching Psalm 23

The rest of this book will seek to offer an account of "Psalm 23 for the life of the church." For the sake of clarity, I divide up this single task into three artificially separated angles of approach. One might read them in any order, but there is a logic to their order of presentation here. I adopt the language of the worlds *behind*, *in*, and *in front of* the text.[31] I take these terms in their most straightforward and current usage to refer respectively to

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[30] And in principle, *mutatis mutandis*, in the life of the synagogue, with respect to Jewish character, although I am not qualified to comment on this in any detail and am aware of differences in the scope and nature of Jewish preaching.

[31] The use of this language in biblical studies again derives from the work of Paul Ricoeur, though it proves complicated to track in his actual writings. For a user-friendly account, see Brueggemann, *Cadences of Home*, 59–61.

- the world that produced Psalm 23, including its author(s) and editor(s), and so forth;
- the world that is accessed by immersing oneself in the text, as a matter of attending to its words and phrases and meanings and connotations—what is most simply called “exegesis”; and
- the world “in front of” Psalm 23, which is the imaginative space opened up by taking Psalm 23 seriously.

All are important. None is self-sufficient. The understanding of each one will have implications for how the others are approached, and none can be understood in isolation.[32] But one must start somewhere.

Chapter 2 will explore “the world behind Psalm 23.” Here we meet with David, the shepherd-king—in light of the psalm’s title and its reference to David. If we knew who had written Psalm 23, when, and how, then that is what we would discuss in this chapter. But in the absence of much hard evidence, what we will mainly have to discuss are theories about those questions. Background information about Psalm 23 can take several forms, including historical reflections upon its author(s) and the world of shepherding at the time, and more literary-critical reflections upon how the text has landed as the twenty-third in an ancient collection of psalms. As long as one does not think that such considerations are the same as reading the text, this is all well and good. So here we will explore ancient shepherding, the status of David the poet—who was also a shepherd and king—and the compilation of the Psalter, without which we would not have had Psalm 23 preserved for us. I will reflect also on the significance of the lack of historically specific information in and about the psalm.

Chapter 3 explores “the world in Psalm 23.” This is exegesis as traditionally understood. Word by word and phrase by phrase we will pick our way through the text. This can get detailed to the point of distraction at times, although in a couple of particularly complicated cases I signpost shortcuts for readers who are more interested in the conclusions than in why they are held. However, the basic goal of this chapter is to show readers how we get from the original Hebrew text to our generally understood English-language translations and interpretations, and what sort of interpretive flexibility there is along the way. Technical Hebrew discussion is cross-referenced to a brief appendix.

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[32] That would take us back toward the problematic “exegesis + application” kind of split.

Chapter 4 then takes up "the world in front of Psalm 23." Here the focus is on ministry as we explore how Psalm 23 has been and could be used in the life of the church. This is the place, for example, to evaluate why and how the psalm is used in funeral ministry or how it could be of pastoral relevance to those facing "enemies" of whatever sort. Given that the psalm is often sung in hymnic versions or choruses, which tend to default to saying that one will be in God's presence "forever" or "forevermore," it is also appropriate to look at what sorts of hope it offers for not just this life but the life of the world to come.

I seek to draw together all these reflections in chapter 5, by way of honoring the theological vision of Psalm 23. My approach is via the challenging task of preaching the psalm, and I discuss there my own experience of preaching it in a range of contexts, as I have discovered some interesting ways in which it speaks. Of course, even a book as long as this on a text as short as this cannot foresee all that the psalm will yet say to thoughtful and faithful readers in times and contexts yet to come.[33] But I hope it will resource all such readers with clearer vision and with a firmer grasp of the text's interpretive, theological, and ministerial possibilities.

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[33] Or in other contexts around the world today. See the "global perspectives" gathered in Levison and Pope-Levison, *Return to Babel*, 55–72, which has readings from Latin America (Croatto, "Psalm 23:1–6"), Africa (Kinoti, "Psalm 23:1–6"), and Korea (Moon, "Psalm 23:1–6"). These are interesting, for example with Croatto's rendering of part of v. 3 as "paths of liberation," but are disappointingly brief and generally lack detail.