

# THE SHEPHERD AND THE FLOCK: A CRITICAL STUDY OF PSALM 23 AND ITS IMPLICATIONS

Ernest Chibuzo Osuchukwu

## Abstract

*The Sheep is the most vulnerable of all domestic animals that will most likely never survive on its own without care and protection from a master Shepherd. Over the years Psalm 23 has inspired a lot of individual Christians. It has constantly given hope, assurance and guidance to many who have sought to draw inspiration from it as a source of protection from their enemies. This highly memorized Psalm by Christians continues to remain universally relevant because it has been acclaimed as a source of comfort to many. In Nigeria currently, we live in a situation in which many, if not most people are engulfed with fear and anxiety. Our mirages of problems are insurmountable. Some are afraid of what is going to happen at every moment in the future. Others fear as a result of what has happened in the past. Still many fear about the present. Anxiety has gripped their souls and they cannot imagine how to cope with the ugliness of the present circumstances in their lives and the society. Thousands of people each day wake up with untold burdens. "How then can Christians in Nigeria respond to all these anxieties of life?" like all the great questions of life, the Scripture affords us an answer. As a perfect example the life of David as depicted in Psalm 23 comes as a constructive and God-honouring way to respond. If we are vulnerable flock, we have a God who is the great Shepherd of our souls. This paper therefore seeks to examine this powerful passage so as to reveal the efficacy of the unconditional love that God has for mankind especially Christians in Nigeria by constantly meeting their needs during this period of dark valley experience in our national history.*

**Keywords:** the shepherd, the flock: a critical study of psalm 23

## Introduction

David was a mortal man just like all of us. He was tempted to fret over his life on so many occasions. One of it was when Saul was seeking to take away his life, which according to some Bible commentators may very well form the background to this Psalm. David overcame those sinful worries by trusting and rejoicing in God. Psalm 23 is a model for Christians in Nigeria in our contemporary situation. It is a paradigm to be followed throughout our lives as we respond to all the difficulties and worries that Nigerians are passing through.

Phillip Keller (2007) in his famous work, *A Shepherd Looks at Psalm 23*, opined throughout the book that this Psalm is all about shepherds and sheep. Going by an ancient Near Eastern perspective, Psalm 23 is all about king YHWH and his covenant relationship to the Davidic king. Kings all over the ancient Near East from Egypt to Mesopotamia, in various time periods portrays themselves as "Shepherds." J. W. Hilber (2009: 340) gave a literary and iconographic depiction of Ramses II with a shepherd's crook. This is because shepherding is a well established metaphor for kingship. When human kings use crooks, no one will actually

assume that the king had a literal experience with sheep in the pasture the same way Bishops and General Oversees do today in our contemporary Nigerian society. Psalm 23 is profound and pastoral. It talks about the care, providence and protection assured by God to the believers and this gives reason for them to rejoice and celebrate in thanksgiving.

There have been so many approaches towards explaining this Psalm. Theologians, teachers, preachers, seminarians, linguists, free-lance writers, death-bed counselors, spiritual shepherds, and even literal shepherds have all tried in their different ways to interpret it (Marlowe 2003: 65). The outline or literary structure of this Psalm has been a major issue of disagreement over the years in the field of academia. Leupold (2019: 208) argues that the history of this Psalm is fragmented while Craigie (1983: 204) is of the opinion that its structure is difficult to define with clarity or certainty.

So many other scholars and Christian people have come to regard Psalm 23 as their most favorite. It is well known all over Christendom. Most times kids all over the different Christian denominations memorize the entire Psalm even before they are able to learn how to read and write. Old people die with the very words of this Psalm on their lips. So many others in every generation will usually find hope and succor in this Psalm in times of great dangers, risks, tribulations, panic, vulnerability, attacks and uncertainty. George W. Bush in his address to Americans shortly after the September 11, 2001 attack on the World Trade Centre in New York quoted from this Psalm thus: *“Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I fear no evil, for you are with me ... none of us will ever forget this day, yet we will go forward to defend freedom and all that is good and just in our world. Thank you. Goodnight and God bless America.”*

A shepherd will usually make sure that all aspects of the sheep’s life are properly taken care of. Psalm 23 is important because it is about God’s protection. Whether an individual is deeply connected to God, have wandered away from him and the fold or is seeking comfort in a higher being, this Psalm is usually selected as a passage of hope. The central metaphor of this Psalm is the use of the relationship between the shepherd and the sheep. The shepherd represents God while the sheep represents his people. God will always and surely too guide his people to “greener pastures” where they will be protected from the attacks of the enemy. God the good shepherd will surely pour out his oil of abundance on His children as He waits to garner them in His heavenly fold where no form of evil can harm anyone.

### **Translation of Psalm 23 and its Structure**

One of the best direct translations of this Psalm was that made by B. V. Yeshwanth (2017: 2). It reads:

*1. A melody of David.*

*Yahweh is my shepherd, I shall not lack.*

*2. In pastures of grown grass, He shall cause me to lie down, By the water of resting-place, He shall lead me with care.*

3. *My soul (life) he restores, He shall cause to lead me in the paths of righteousness for the sake of his name.*

4. *Even though I shall walk in the midst of valley of death shadow, I shall not fear, For you are with me, Your rod and your staff, They comfort me.*

5. *You arrange indeed before me, A table in front of my adversaries, You cause yourself to anoint me with oil, (And) my cup overflows.*

6. *Surely goodness and loving kindness shall follow me, All (the) days of my life, And I shall dwell/returns in the house of Yahweh, For long days (Forever).*

There are many differences among scholars concerning the classification and genre of this Psalm. Some are of the opinion that it is a Psalm of thanksgiving while others classify it as a Psalm of confidence and trust, still others as a royal Psalmody. Gunkel (1998:19) on his own classified it as a Psalm of trust or confidence. This Psalm can also be classified as a hymn because of some allusions to the sanctuary of God, and also a reference to cultic meal. From the original Hebrew rendition the Psalm is divided into two sections viz: 1. The Lord as a Shepherd verses 1-4. 2. The Lord as a host verses 5-6.

Ron Tappy (1995: 260) opined that this Psalm contains strategic verses which holds the whole together in terms of the transition of the image of Yahweh from being a shepherd to being a host.

### **Authorship**

Psalm 23 is generally believed to have been written by king David who grew up tending sheep as his father was also a well known shepherd. He tried so much to express his great confidence and delight in the constant protection of a loving God. According to most scholars it was written during his reign as king around 1000-970 BCE. The setting for the Psalm is thought to be the royal court in Jerusalem, and the author is believed to be reflecting on his relationship with God. There are other theories about authorship, but this is the most widely accepted view. Some scholars proposed that the imagery in Psalm 23 may have been drawn from the life experiences of King David; for example the reference to shepherding, green pastures, shadow of death, darkest valley, evil and evil men. Some scholars even suggest that the Psalm may have been written as a reflection on David's entire life and his journey from shepherd to king.

However, it should also be pointed out here that this Psalm belongs to individual Psalms. Going by the superscript in the original text, we can assume a Davidic authorship. However, there could be some problems in attributing it to David because of the varied meaning to the Hebrew word *ledavid* which can be translated as "for David or of David." When one carefully observes from the original text; the first person usage by the Psalmist which may lead to a probable conclusion that this Psalm is "of David."

### **Analysis of the Keywords/Phrases**

If we compare Psalm 23 in King James Version, New International Version and English Standard Version, some key words could be drawn out as follows:

1. *The Lord is my Shepherd*: This refers to Yahweh as a personal Shepherd to the author. David here sees God as one who leads; guides and directs him. Isaiah 40: 11 gives reassurance that God will care and protect his children constantly. “He shall feed his flock like a shepherd: he shall gather the lambs with his arm and carry them in his bosom, and shall gently lead those that are with young.”

The Qal participle of the Hebrew word *ra’ah* can be translated as “Shepherd.” J. A. Soggin (1997:3:1246) opined that it was used 168 times in qal form throughout the Old Testament. The word was also used for kings and rulers. David E. Green (2004: XIII: 544) opined that in a larger context, this word was used as a title for kings and gods in the Mesopotamian and Egyptian usages. In Psalm 23 the metaphor can be understood from religious and cultural points of views.

2. *I shall not lack*: This means the assurance in God’s protection that the shepherd will always be there for him. David had a full assurance that all his needs will be supplied as a result he has placed his total dependence on God. The metaphor of shepherd is used to project a relationship and also Yahweh’s providential care to his sheep. The phrase “*I shall not lack*” points out to the psalmist’s contentment in Yahweh’s providential care, an affirmation that he lacks nothing as a direct consequence of being in the shepherding care of Yahweh.

3. *He makes me lie down in green Pastures*: In our everyday context “Green Pastures” is usually used in reference to greater or better opportunities. For David it refers to a state of abundance, where he will continue to grow and flourish. The Lexical meaning of the Hebrew *nahal* is “lead, guide to a watering-place or station and cause to rest there; to bring to a station or place of rest.

4. *He leads me in paths of righteousness*: Paths of righteousness means that the power of God can refresh, renew and even make one to come alive. The restoration will surely bring forth a well spring of joy. A major characteristic of sheep is that they like to wander from the fold and the shepherd sometimes will have to climb steep mountain slopes in an effort to save them. Green (2004: XIII: 312) is of the opinion that the Hebrew word *nahah* is a verb in Qal meaning “to lead/guide.” In this Psalm it means “Yahweh’s self initiation to lead his sheep in a right way.” This highlights the action of the shepherd to lead his flock in a right way. In the Ancient Near Eastern culture this word is used to qualify the ability of a king, who “pastures” his people. “Shepherd” is an attribute that is ascribed to God. It is a mark of Old Testament office of Prophet, Priest and King.

5. *He prepares a table before me*: Here David affirms his confidence in God’s providential care. The table alludes to the prosperity that God will grant His children when they choose to

trust Him. Just as the table is spread with many varieties, he described that even the enemies will look on in envy when they witness God's goodness in his life.

### **Further Exegesis**

Psalm 23 is very different because many of David's Psalms are full of complaint, but this one is full of comforts and the expressions of delight in God's great goodness and dependence upon him. It has been sung by good Christians and will continue to be even with great deal of pleasure and satisfaction. This Psalm teaches us three comfortable lessons. We are saved by hope and that hope will not make us ashamed, because it is well grounded. It is our duty as Christians to encourage ourselves in the Lord. We are to stand on the experience we had of God's goodness.

In this Psalm, David referred to God as Jehovah which is actually His original name. Jehovah is a vocalization of the Tetragrammaton – YHWH – which is the proper name for God of Israel in the Hebrew Bible. This name distinguishes Him from other false gods in the Ancient Near East, where Egypt alone has more than 360 gods in existence as at that time.

When the Psalmist mentioned that Yahweh leads him beside still waters and restoring his soul, he was actually calling God "Jehovah my peace." The inhabitants of the Middle East will surely appreciate a continuous supply of water because they live under the middle-eastern scorching sun. Wilson (2018) is of the opinion that water can also represent peace, harmony, love and beauty. It can also denote rest and quietness as well as absence of rapid torrents, which frightens the sheep and make them not able to drink as a result of the noise they make and the swiftness of their motion. Lying down besides the still waters will therefore signify satisfaction as well as fullness.

*Jehovah Ropheka* (the Lord my healer) is in tandem with the psalmist's reference to God as a restorer of his soul. People experience lots of grief, disappointment, pains, diseases and even other disturbances on a daily basis that inflict injuries and worries on their souls. Amidst these problems, the Lord restores our souls and emotions. This surely brings renewal and strengthening of our lives. In the Bible land, the process of a shepherd crossing the stream with his sheep is usually a very interesting one. He will usually lead the way into the river, then the confident ones will plunge into the river boldly and soon crosses over the water body, but yet others enter with a serious alarm and hesitation. Majority of those will soon miss their fording place because they are not very close to their guide. They are carried down a distance in the river but may be able to clamber ashore. Little lambs and others with special needs are often driven into the river by dogs. They will usually bleat pitifully while they plunge and leap. It is the duty of the loving shepherd to rescue those who could not manage to cross over, carrying them in his bosom ashore. Yahweh acting as our good shepherd has

the same duty to rescue his abiding children, who must pass through the streams of affliction especially such as we are passing through in our contemporary Nigerian society.

The type of table used by the early Semitic peoples of Old Testament times looks more like a modern day mat. The Hebrew word “*shool-kihawn*” is usually translated as “table” has its root meaning as “a skin or leather mat that is spread on the ground.” Going by this notion, one will surely understand the psalmist when he said that God has prepared a table before him in the presence of his enemies. While he was enjoying the goodness of the Lord the enemies came to attack him but their feet will get entangled in the mat because it was already spread on the floor and they will surely fall to their shame, and fail in their mission.

In the Ancient Near East, the practice of anointing guests with oil was a very old custom among most of the peoples of the East. They usually use olive oil but most often mix it with some spices. It is a very good indication of reception and hospitality. David through this psalm has immortalized this ancient custom when he wrote; “*he anointed my head with oil and my cup overflows,*” thus signifying Yahweh’s abundant provision. This will surely make him want to dwell in the house in the house of God forever, where he will continue to enjoy the ever presence of God and his blessings forever.

### **The Implications of Psalm 23, for Christians in the Contemporary Nigerian Society**

It is fascinating and amazing how different religious traditions can find meaning in the same text. It is so wonderful how something so simple like a metaphor such as psalm 23 can have such a powerful impact on our lives in Nigeria today especially among Christian who make use of it the most. At the moment, the economic situation in Nigeria is quite challenging. The country is facing high inflation, a weakening currency, a struggling economy, which is largely due to low oil prices and other global economic factors. Many people are struggling to afford basic necessities, and unemployment is now a major issue. The government has been implementing some reforms and policies to try and address the situation, but it will likely take time to see any significant improvement.

Wole Soyinka (2006: 133) a Nigerian writer and Nobel laureate wrote, “*Nigeria is a nation that is most unkind to itself and unforgiving to its own promise.*” Many people in Nigeria are really suffering right now because of the economic situation. They find it so hard and difficult to find jobs, afford food or even pay for other necessities. Little wonder that Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie (2016) a Nigerian author said in an interview she gave to the BBC “*Nigeria feels like a place where everyone is angry. It feels like a nation in a terrible mood.*” These quotes really capture the frustration and despair that many Nigerians feel about the current situation.

Besides the economic situation, there are a number of other challenges facing Nigerians right now. For example, insecurity and violence in the country have been on the rise, with frequent reports of kidnappings, banditry, and terrorist attacks. In addition, corruption and a lack of

trust in the government are major issues, as is the country's poor infrastructure and inadequate health care system. According to a famous Nigerian author; "*A country which cannot provide basic health services for its population is not worth its name as a country*" (Achebe 1983: 37).

Aside from the issues discussed above are a number of other challenges facing Nigeria. Another good example is the challenge of climate change, which is affecting the country's agricultural sector and as a result leading to food insecurity. Another one is population growth, which is putting pressure on the country's resources and infrastructure. The country also faces a high rate of youth unemployment, which has led to unrest and social unrest. There is also the ongoing issues related to the country's political and electoral systems, including problems with voter turnout, vote-buying, and vote rigging.

There are definitely more challenges facing Nigeria; for example, the lack of access to quality education, especially for girls and rural communities. There are also major issues with water and sanitation, as well as a lack of access to reliable electricity. Another challenge is gender inequality, with women facing lots of discrimination and violence, as well as limited access to economic opportunities. Last but not the least, there is also the issue of religious tensions, which have been increasing in recent years. Christians in Nigeria have been facing increasing persecution and violence including targeted attacks by Boko Haram and other extremist groups. Many Christians have been killed, kidnapped, or displaced by the violence. There have also been reports of church buildings and other attacks on places of worship. Chinua Achebe opined "*It is almost impossible to talk about the Nigerian situation without lapsing into a kind of despairing rage*" (Achebe 1983: 16).

It is no longer news today that in Nigeria people live their lives in a state of great fear and anxiety. Citizens cannot predict what tomorrow holds for them. One keeps wondering if there is still hope for the nation. Nigeria is gradually sliding down as the world's poverty capital. Over 90 million people are living in extreme poverty if not more. Every day, the unfolding events in the nation keeps plunging many citizens into a state of hopelessness with nothing to show that the future will be better. The rate of poverty and unemployment keeps on rising in an unprecedented proportion. These obviously result to more gang membership, crimes and many other social vices. So many thousands of citizens have lost their lives and properties worth millions of Naira destroyed. Farm land and agricultural products have been devastated. Over 2.4 million people have been displaced through militancy and terrorism (UNHCR 2019). Despite all these factors, an average ordinary Nigerian Christian lives a life that is synonymous with a very good determination to survive. This is because they firmly believe that in the midst of all odds, God will surely provide them with diverse kinds of help. Yahweh is a faithful and good shepherd. His promises will surely come to pass.

God will always shepherd His children amidst the attacks that we encounter on daily basis. Flock leadership is predicated on the idea that the collective has greater potential capacity than does the individual leader. Flock leadership is usually not just about directing the flock;

rather, it is about helping the flock develop its capacity to engage challenges. The greater potential capacity paradigm is a theory that posits that everyone has the potential to become their best selves and reach their full potential. Looking at Psalm 23 in this context, one would say that it can offer Christians in Nigeria hope and strength to persevere through difficult times. The Psalm can remind them of their own potential, and also encourage them to have faith and trust in God's plan, even when things are difficult. It's also worth noting that the greater potential capacity can also encourage Christians to take action and work towards making positive changes in their communities. So in the context of Nigeria, Psalm 23 could also encourage Christians to take action to improve their country, even when it seems like there are many problems. They could use the Psalm as a source of strength and inspiration to work for positive change. This Psalm also offers some important lessons about community. It emphasizes the importance of unity and working together, even when we have differences. This is an important reminder for Christian leaders in Nigeria, who often have to work with people from different backgrounds and perspectives. Another important lesson from this psalm for Nigerian Christians is the importance of humility. It reminds us that we are all fallible and imperfect, and that we can learn to grow from our mistakes. Another key lesson is the importance of trusting in God's guidance and wisdom. Just as the sheep trusts the shepherd to lead them to safety, we can trust God to lead us in the right direction, even when we can't see the way ahead. The psalm also reminds us to be humble and rely on God's strength, rather than our own.

Psalm 23 is a song of gratitude to a loving God in a painful world. David made every effort to express confidence and trust in the Lord by portraying God as a loving and good shepherd who both guides and blesses his sheep. God's goodness is the assurance that they have nothing to fear about. Whatever happens to them, God will surely be with them. Christians in Nigeria needs to trust Him as our faithful Shepherd especially at this trying contemporary time in our national history.

## **Conclusion**

The best summary of Psalm 23 is that it offers a message of hope, trust and gratitude in the face of hardship and adversity. It surely reminds Christians that no matter what challenges we face, we can find strength and comfort in God's presence. It encourages us to live with humility, rest, and a sense of community. The beauty of this psalm is that it can be read and reread, and we can always find new insights and wisdom within it. It also encourages Christians to always be thankful for the blessings we receive, and to recognize that all good things come from God. According to information from the (Wycliffe Bible Translators 2022), Psalm 23 has been translated into over 2500 languages, thus making it one of the most widely translated Psalms in the world. It has also been set to music in many different styles and genres, from classical music to rock and roll. It's been recorded by artists such as Bob Dylan, Leonard Cohen, and Johnny Cash. Here in Nigeria there are also several Nigerian musicians who have incorporated Psalm 23 into their music. For example, Nigerian gospel singer Chioma Jesus has a song called "Psalm 23," which is a contemporary rendition of the psalm



set to music. In addition, Nigerian gospel artist Nathaniel Bassey has a song called “Psalm 23 (A Psalm of Thanksgiving),” which is also based on the psalm. And of course, the Psalm is well-known for its use in funerals and memorial services, as it offers comfort and hope in times of loss. It is used in Jewish liturgy as well and remains an important part of worship and prayer.

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