

Psalm 23 in Five Versions

A common problem for devoted Bible readers is getting used to familiar, well-loved passages in a new translation. Psalm 23 is a good test case for this issue. Where is the balance between keeping old expressions and clarifying the meaning of the text?

KJV

The LORD is my shepherd;
I shall not want.
He maketh me to lie down in green
pastures:
he leadeth me beside the still waters.
He restoreth my soul:
he leadeth me in the paths of
righteousness for his name's sake.
Yea, though I walk through the
valley of the shadow of death,
I will fear no evil:
for thou art with me;
thy rod and thy staff they comfort
me.
Thou preparest a table before me
in the presence of mine enemies:
thou anointest my head with oil;
my cup runneth over.
Surely goodness and mercy shall
follow me
all the days of my life:
and I will dwell in the house of the
LORD for ever.

ESV

The LORD is my shepherd;
I shall not want.
He makes me lie down in green
pastures.
He leads me beside still waters.
He restores my soul.
He leads me in paths of righteousness
for his name's sake.
Even though I walk through the
valley of the shadow of death,
I will fear no evil,
for you are with me;
your rod and your staff, they comfort
me.
You prepare a table before me
in the presence of my enemies;
you anoint my head with oil;
my cup overflows.
Surely goodness and mercy shall
follow me
all the days of my life,
and I shall dwell in the house of the
LORD forever.

EHV

The LORD is my shepherd.
I lack nothing.
He **causes** me to lie down in green
pastures.
He leads me beside quiet waters.
He restores my **soul**.
He guides me in **paths of**
righteousness for his name's sake.
Even though I walk through the
valley of **the shadow of death**,
I will fear no evil,
for you are with me.
Your rod and your staff, they comfort
me.
You set a table for me in the presence
of my foes.
You **drench** my head with oil.
My cup is overflowing.
Surely goodness and **mercy** will
pursue me
all the days of my life,
and I will live in the house of the
LORD forever.

CSB

The LORD is my shepherd.
I have what I need.
He lets me lie down in green
pastures.
He leads me beside quiet waters.
He renews my life;
he leads me along the right path
for his name's sake.
Even when I go through the darkest
valley,
I fear no danger,
for you are with me;
your rod and your staff they comfort
me.
You prepare a table before me
in the presence of my enemies;
you anoint my head with oil;
my cup overflows.
Only goodness and faithful love will
pursue me
all the days of my life,
and I will dwell in the house of the
LORD as long as I live.

NIV

The LORD is my shepherd,
I lack nothing.
He makes me lie down in green
pastures,
he leads me beside quiet waters,
he refreshes my soul.
He guides me along the right paths
for his name's sake.
Even though I walk
through the darkest valley,
I will fear no evil,
for you are with me;
your rod and your staff, they comfort
me.
You prepare a table before me
in the presence of my enemies.
You anoint my head with oil;
my cup overflows.
Surely your goodness and love will
follow me
all the days of my life,
and I will dwell in the house of the
LORD forever.

Some notes:

I lack nothing: In contemporary English the traditional *I shall not want* can sound like we are saying we do not want God. In contemporary English *want* no longer means *to lack something* as it once did.

Causes: Any difference between *causes*, *makes*, and *lets*?

He restores my soul: Do the phrases *he restores my soul*, *he renews my life*, and *he refreshes my soul* have the same connotation?

Paths of righteousness: Do *paths of righteousness* and *the right path* have the same connotation?

The shadow of death: The Hebrew word *tzalmaveth* has traditionally been translated as a compound word made up of two Hebrew words, “shadow” and “death.” This rendering accounts in part for the popularity of Psalm 23 as a funeral psalm. Because such compound words are rare in Hebrew, many recent commentaries read this word as *tzalmuth*, a more general term for “deep darkness.” The very fact that despite the rarity of compound words in Hebrew, the Jewish textual scholars consistently wrote this word as *tzalmaveth* shows that there is no compelling reason to depart from the traditional understanding, which reflects the Hebrew text.

Drench my head with oil: This is far by the most attention-catching issue. It takes a compelling reason to depart from a well-loved traditional translation. There is such a reason in this case. The Hebrew verb *dashan* is not one of the usual words for anointing a king or prophet into office. This verb means “to make fat” or “to make rich,” that is, “to pour abundantly” or as EHV renders it “drench.” This verse is not a reference to anointing a prophet, priest or king into office, but to dousing the guests at a banquet with expensive perfumed oil as part of a joyful celebration (a very rough equivalent of dousing the victors with Gatorade). The traditional translation, in this case, is apt to bring the wrong picture to the readers mind (the boy David kneeling before Samuel to be anointed king) rather than the correct picture of the lavish generosity of the Good Host at his wonderful feast.

Mercy: The Hebrew word *chesed* is not the Hebrew word for *love* (that is *ahavah*). *Chesed* has traditionally been translated *mercy*, and despite the recent tendency to translate it as *love*, there is no compelling reason to abandon the traditional translation *his mercy endures forever*.

I will live in the house of the LORD forever. First of all, the Hebrew verb seems to be the common verb for *live*, not the special word *dwell*. The closing words of the psalm, literally translated, read “to length of days.” They could, therefore, refer to length of life on earth. However, see Psalm 21:4 and Psalm 93:5, in which the blessings described by this phrase are eternal, as they are also here. The question therefore is whether this phrase is synonymous with *all the days of my life* in the previous verse, or is it a step ahead?