

Dale C. Allison Jr., Psalm 23 (22) in Early Christianity:
A Suggestion.

The twenty-third Psalm is one of Christendom's most treasured texts. It is thus surprising perhaps to learn that the psalm has left scarcely a trace in early Christian literature. It is, in fact, never quoted in the NT and is cited but once in the Apostolic Fathers (see below). Nonetheless, one suspects that the Christian piety of early times could not have been unattracted to that psalm which later generations have found so encouraging; and this suspicion is confirmed by a critical combing of the sources. Indeed a close look at the few probable early allusions to Ps 22 (LXX: 23 Masoretic Text) uncovers what seems to have been a customary way of reading the psalm about the Lord as shepherd.

Revelation 7.17 reads as follows: "For the Lamb in the midst of the throne will shepherd them (ποιμανεῖ; some mss have the present tense ποιμαίνεῖ) and will lead them (ὀδογήσει; again, some mss have the present tense ὀδηγεῖ) to springs of living water (ἐπὶ ζωῆς πηγᾶς ὑδάτων), and God will wipe away every tear from their eyes." This verse probably depends in part upon Isaiah 49.10 (LXX). Certainly this is true of the preceding verse, Rev 7. 16. When John prophesies, "And they will neither hunger nor thirst any more, neither will the sun strike them nor any scorching heat," he is clearly taking up Isaiah's words, "They will neither hunger nor thirst, neither will heat nor the sun smite them; but one having mercy will comfort them, and by springs of water he will lead (διὰ πηγῶν ὑδάτων ἄξει). So the following sentence, Rev 7.17, which, like Isaiah 49.10, mentions springs of water, has probably been partially coloured by the OT text. But the scriptural background of Rev 7.17 is not thereby sufficiently explicated. For the notion that the Lamb in the midst of the throne will be a shepherd is not from Isaiah 49.10; and John's ὀδογήσει contrasts with Isaiah's ἄξει, nor does his ἐπὶ match the LXX's διὰ. Moreover, and beyond these differences, there is, as Charles, Lohmeyer and others have observed, another scriptural text that supplies an even closer parallel for Revelation 7.17. /1 John the seer speaks of the one who shepherds his people and leads them to springs of water. It is difficult not to see here the influence of Ps 22(23) - especially when one sets out

the parallels in vocabulary: ποιμανεῖ/ποιμαίνει (Rev 7.17 /Ps 22.1); ὁδογήσει/ὁδόγησεν (Rev 7.17/Ps 22.3); ἐπὶ... ὑδάτων/ἐπὶ ὕδατος (Rev 7.17/Ps 22.2). Further, the theme of Ps 22(23) is largely "I shall not want," and this is also an apt summary of the thrust of Rev 7.16-17. So the Psalmist's picture of the Lord shepherding his people beside still waters seems to lie beneath the text of Revelation.

Two observations are to be made concerning the use of Ps 22 in Rev 7.17. First, the shepherd is not the Lord God of the OT. He is rather the Lamb in the midst of the throne, Jesus Christ. Secondly, the psalm is used as if it were prophetic. That is, its promises are used to depict the conditions of the coming redemption. This second observation is particularly interesting, and it leads one to ask, Is there any other evidence that Ps 22 (23) was given an eschatological interpretation by early Christians?

Chapters 24-27 of 1 Clement concern themselves with the doctrine of the general resurrection of the dead. Chapters 24 and 25 offer evidence for the reasonableness of that doctrine. Chapter 26 summons scriptural support. And chapter 27 contains exhortations to believe in the God who is all-powerful and faithful to his declared purpose.

The twenty-sixth chapter is of particular interest for our purposes. Clement writes, "For he (God) says in a certain place, "And thou wilt raise me up, and I shall praise thee" (Ps 27.7?), and "I went to rest and slept, I was awakened (ps 3.6) for thou art with me" (ὅτι σὺ μετ' ἐμοῦ εἶ = Ps 22.4). /2 And again, Job says, 'And thou wilt raise this my flesh which has endured all these things' " (Job 19.26). Several OT passages are here gathered in what must seem to us a rather confusing and unconvincing fashion. Particularly odd is the clear citation of Ps 22.4, "For thou art with me." How did our author come to connect this line with the doctrine of the resurrection? Knowing the content of Ps 22, one is initially inclined to conclude that Clement was simply guilty of drawing upon the text in a completely

arbitrary manner. But when we recall the use made of Ps 22 in Rev 7.17, caution is required. For the passage in Revelation takes the picture of the twenty-second Psalm to apply to the future - Jesus will shepherd his people and he will lead them to springs of living water. Thus it may be suggested that Clement's use of Psalm 22 should not be considered either idiosyncratic or utterly arbitrary. Here we may rather have to do with exegetical tradition. Clement uses Ps. 22 as did the author of the Apocalypse, i.e. both use the psalm as if it were a prophecy of the eschatological future.

There is one final passage at which we must look, namely, Mark 6.32-34, the story of the feeding of the five thousand. Commentators have long debated the import of the striking, anomalous reference to "green grass" in 6.39. Is this notice the sure trace of an eye-witness? Or is it perhaps an indication of the Palestinian spring, the time of the Passover (cf John 6.4,10) ? Or is it a messianic sign, evidence that the wilderness has begun to bring forth miraculous bloom? These questions rapidly dissolve when one discovers that allusions to Ps 22(23) are apparently imbedded in Mark 6.32-44:

Psalm 22(23)

The Lord is my shepherd (1)

I shall not want (1)

He makes me to lie down

in green pastures (2)

(ἐπι τόπον χλόης)

Mark 6

They were like sheep
without a shepherd (34)

They all ate and were
satisfied

He commanded them all
to sit down by

companies upon the green
grass (ἐπι τῷ χλωρῷ χορτῷ)
(39)

Even the Markan setting may recollect Ps 22(23):2, "He leads me beside still waters"; the feeding takes place at the seashore in the evening (Mark 6.34,35). In any event, Mark 6.32-44, as it now stands, contains elements which conjure up the images of Ps 22(23), and the picture in both is the same: the shepherd cares for his flock on the green grass by the water, and the sheep have no lack. /3

If Mark 6.32-34 does indeed draw upon Ps 22(23), then two remarks are to be made. First, as in Rev 7.17, the shepherd is Jesus. Then, secondly, as in Rev 7.17, and 1 Clement 26, the allusion to Psalm 22(23) comes in an eschatological context. Even if the feeding of the five thousand should not be interpreted as an anticipation of the great messianic banquet, /4 the passage Mark 6.32ff, in the words of Eduard Schweizer, certainly presents Jesus "as the one who excels all the prophets and is, therefore, the one who brings salvation in the end-time." /5 Jesus is in fact here the prophet who gathers and sustains the restored people of Israel; and just as the first redeemer, Moses, fed the Israelites manna in the wilderness, so the second redeemer, inaugurating the new Exodus, miraculously feeds the multitude bread. /6 Thus the allusions to Ps 22(23) in Mark 6 belong to a story whose meaning is to be discerned eschatologically.

Having now examined three early texts that refer or allude to Ps 22(23), it may be said that they share a common interpretation: Jesus is the shepherd and the psalm's promises have to be interpreted eschatologically. If so, one question remains to be answered. How do we account for this tradition? Why did early Christians identify the shepherd of Ps 22(23) with Jesus and why did they refer the lines of that Psalm to eschatology?

The NT contains a number of texts (none by the way Pauline) in which Jesus is given the title, "shepherd", e.g. "Jesus said to them, 'You will all fall away; for it is written, I will strike the shepherd, and the sheep will be scattered. But after I am raised up, I will go before you into Galilee'" (Mark 14.27,28); or the allegory of the Good Shepherd (John 10.1-18); "the Lord Jesus, the great shepherd of the sheep" (Heb 13.20) (cf also 1 Pet 2.25; 5.4 and Rev 7.17). There are also additional texts which through their imagery make it plain that Jesus was widely portrayed as being the shepherd of the Christian sheep, e.g. "go rather to the lost sheep of the house of Israel" (Matt 10.6;15.24); or "The Son of Man came to seek and to save the lost" (Luke 19.10). Hence it is only natural that thoughts turned to Jesus

when the early church read of the good shepherd of Ps 22(23). Beyond this, Jewish eschatology knew of a shepherd who would come and reign in the end of days. Ezekial 34.23-24 reads, "And I will set up over them one shepherd, my servant, David, and he shall feed them; he shall feed them and be their shepherd. And I, the Lord, will be their God, and my servant David will be prince among them; I, the Lord, have spoken." We may note also, "He shall stand and feed his flock in the strength of the Lord" (Micah 5.3(4)) and especially "(He will be) shepherding the flock of the Lord faithfully and righteously, and will suffer none of them to stumble in their pasture." (Psalms of Solomon 17.45(40); cf also the difficult verses in Zechariah:10.3;11.4-17 and 13.7). The description of the promised messiah in the Psalms of Solomon is striking. Now the NT does not lose sight of the eschatological connotation which the title "shepherd" had in Judaism. Mark 14.27-28 tells us that Jesus was the one who fulfilled Zechariah's prophecies about the shepherd who would suffer in the tribulation of the latter days. 1 Peter 5.4 offers the comfort that "when the chief shepherd is manifested you will obtain the unfading crown of glory." And Rev 7.17 foresees the day when the Lamb in the midst of the throne will shepherd and lead his people to springs of living water. /8

All of this means that the thought of Jesus as shepherd was frequently linked with thoughts about the end-time. Not only had Jesus at his first coming fulfilled the future prophecies of Zechariah chapters nine to fourteen, but at his second coming he would, it was held, fulfil all the prophecies of a messianic shepherd (cf Ezekial 34.23-24). No doubt it was this belief in Jesus as the Davidic shepherd which encouraged the interpretation of Ps 22(23) reflected in Revelation 7.17, 1 Clement 26 and Mark 6.32-44. As they waited for the parousia, for the shepherd who would rule over Israel and the nations, the first followers of Jesus could think of the assurances of Ps 22(23) as pertaining to the future.

Notes

1. R.H. Charles, The Revelation of St. John (ICC: Edinburgh, T & T Clark 1920), I, 216-217; Ernst Lohmeyer, Die Offenbarung des Johannes (HNT 16; 2nd ed.; Tübingen: J.C.B. Mohr (Paul Siebeck), 1950) 73
2. The "for thou art with me" from Ps 22.4 replaces the "for the Lord will help me" of Ps 3.6; see further D.A. Hagner, The Use of the Old and New Testament in Clement of Rome (NovTSup 34; Leiden: E.J. Brill 1973) 58-59.
3. Cf. R. Pesch, Das Markusevangelium (HTKNT 11/1; 2nd ed.; Freiburg: Herder 1977), 1.350,352, 355-56.
4. See Albert Schweitzer, The Quest of the Historical Jesus (trans. by W. Montgomery; NYork: MacMillan 1961) 376-77. It is worth noting in this connection that the feeding of the five thousand recalls the Lord's Supper ("taking...he blessed, and broke...and gave"), and that the latter was understood as a foretaste of the messianic feast (cf 1 Cor 11.26 and Didache 9-10).
5. Eduard Schweizer, The Good News According to Mark (trans. by Donald H. Madvig; Atlanta: John Knox 1976), 140.
6. Cf. Madelaine Boucher, The Mysterious Parable: A Literary Study (CBQMS 6; Washington, D.C.: Catholic Biblical Association of America 1977) 73-75 and note John 6.14 and 31-34.
7. For discussion see J. Jeremias, ποιμὴν ktl.. TDNT 6 (1968) 492-493.
8. It is also possible that the sayings in Rev 2.27; 12.5 and 19.15 which use ποιμαίνω should be mentioned here. It is, however, difficult to determine whether a conscious use of shepherd imagery was here intended; See Jeremias, *ibid.*, 494 N.87.

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