



## PSALM 23

### "YHWH is My Shepherd"

#### Translation and Performance Notes

#### LEGEND FOR COLORED WORDS:

Key term

Exegesis of emotions

Imagery

Other translation challenges

Hebrew text	verse	English Close-but-Clear Translation
מִזְמוֹר לְדָוִד. יְהוָה רֹעִי לֹא אֶחְסָר:	1	A psalm by David. YHWH is my shepherd; I will never lack (anything).
בְּנֶאֱוָה דָּשָׂא יִרְבִּיצֵנִי עַל-מֵי מִנְחֹת וַיַּחֲלֵנִי:	2	He makes me lie down in green pastures. He leads me to water where I can rest.
וַיַּחַיֵּנִי וַיְשׁוּבֵב וַיַּחֲלֵנִי בַּמִּסְלֵל-צֶדֶק לְמַעַן שְׁמוֹ:	3	He restores my life. He leads me in paths of righteousness for the sake of his name.
גַּם כִּי-אֵלֶךְ בְּגִיא צִלְמוֹת לֹא-אֶירָא רָע כִּי-אַתָּה עִמָּדִי שִׁבְטְךָ וַיִּמְשְׁכֶנָּה הֶקֱמָה וַיַּחֲמֵנִי:	4	Even when I walk in a valley of darkness, I will not fear harm, because you are with me. Your rod and your staff, they comfort me.
תַּעֲרֹךְ לִפְנֵי   שִׁלְחֹן וַיִּגְדֵּל צִרְיִי דִּשְׁנָתְךָ בַּשֶּׁמֶן רִאשִׁי כּוֹסִי רוּחָה:	5	You arrange a table before me in the presence of my adversaries. You have anointed my head with oil. My cup is overflowing.
אֵךְ   טוֹב וַחֲסֵד יִרְדְּפוּנִי כָּל-יְמֵי תַיִי וְשָׁכַנְתִּי בֵּית-יְהוָה לְאֹרֶךְ יָמִים:	6	Surely goodness and loyalty will pursue me all the days of my life, and I will dwell in YHWH's house for as long as I live.

## GENERAL TRANSLATION TIPS FOR THIS PSALM:

- To translate poetry accurately and beautifully, a knowledge of both the source language's poetry and the target language's poetry is needed. So, here are the steps we recommend to follow when setting out to translate this or any psalm:
  1. **GAIN AN UNDERSTANDING OF THE TARGET LANGUAGE'S POETRY/ARTS.** Research and analyze many examples from numerous genres of poetry, storytelling, and music in the target language and culture, and document findings. See our [Local Arts Analysis Guide](#) for help.
  2. **GAIN AN UNDERSTANDING OF THE SOURCE LANGUAGE'S (HEBREW) MEANING AND POETRY.** The aim of all our materials is to provide exactly this for the translator, poet/musician/artist, and consultant: an understanding of what the psalm *means*, as well as its *poetics*.
  3. **TRANSLATE THE PSALM IN THE APPROPRIATE LOCAL ART/POETRY GENRE(S).**
  4. **TEST THE TRANSLATION WITH THE LANGUAGE COMMUNITY, SEEKING FEEDBACK ABOUT BOTH WORD CHOICES AND FORM/GENRE/MEDIA OF TRANSLATION.**

## TRANSLATION TIPS: PSALM AS A WHOLE

These are the elements that we believe are most helpful to keep in mind during both drafting and checking translations, to help verify that the translation or performance is accurate beyond just a word- or verse-level; just as important is accuracy on the level of a **whole**. Additionally, these are elements that will guide decisions about **performance** in oral translations, songs, poems, or other kinds of art based on this psalm.

## 1. Overview

The picture below gives a gives a basic **Overview** of the Psalm, answering the following questions:

- **Title-what title best describes this unique psalm?**
  - "YHWH is my shepherd"
- **Purpose-why was this psalm written?**
  - To express confidence in YHWH's provision and protection.
- **Content-In summary, what is said in this psalm?**
  - David says, "Like a shepherd and a host, YHWH provides for me and protects me even when danger is near."
- **Message-what is the general theme of this psalm? What seems to be the main point the psalmist wanted his audience to realize by hearing this psalm?**
  - I lack nothing and fear nothing because YHWH is with me!

## 2. Story Behind the Psalm

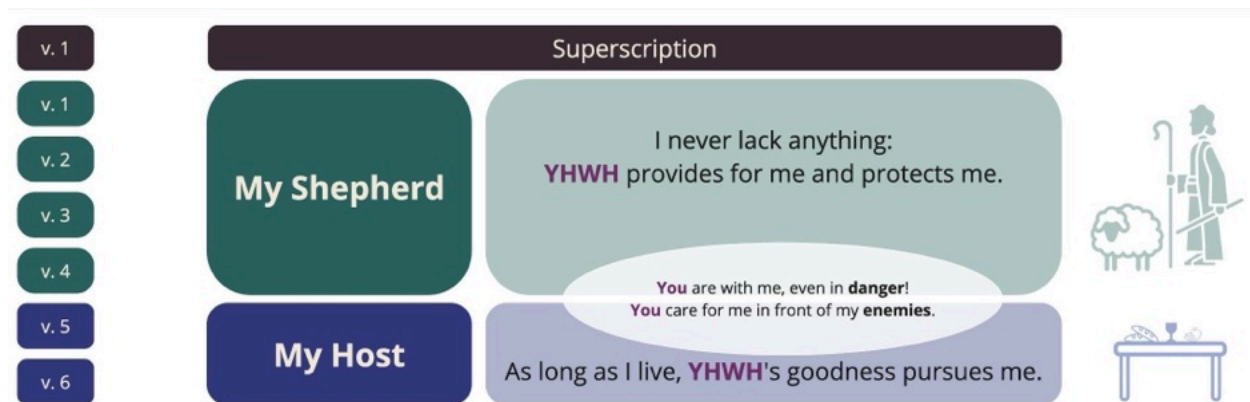
- Every Psalm describes real events. However, many psalms are not written in typical "story" format, with a clear beginning, middle, and end. Here, we attempt to understand the real-life story and background that prompted the psalmist to write.
  - **Story Behind**-What was the real-life story that led the psalmist to write this psalm? What is the main message/theme conveyed by this "story behind"?
    - A threat of danger arises, and David needs protection and provision. Then YHWH protects David and provides for him. David is safe from danger and lacks nothing.
  - **Background situation**-what are the series of events leading up to the time in which the psalm was written?



### 3. Layout

Knowing the layout of the psalm by sections helps us to understand the progression of thought as the poem progresses.

The picture below shows the main “chunks” or pieces of the poem. Verse numbers appear on the left. The second column has a title for each section. The large third column contains a brief summary of the section’s content. As you read through the content column, you will see important words and ideas highlighted in similar colors. The icons on the right may be used as memory aids.

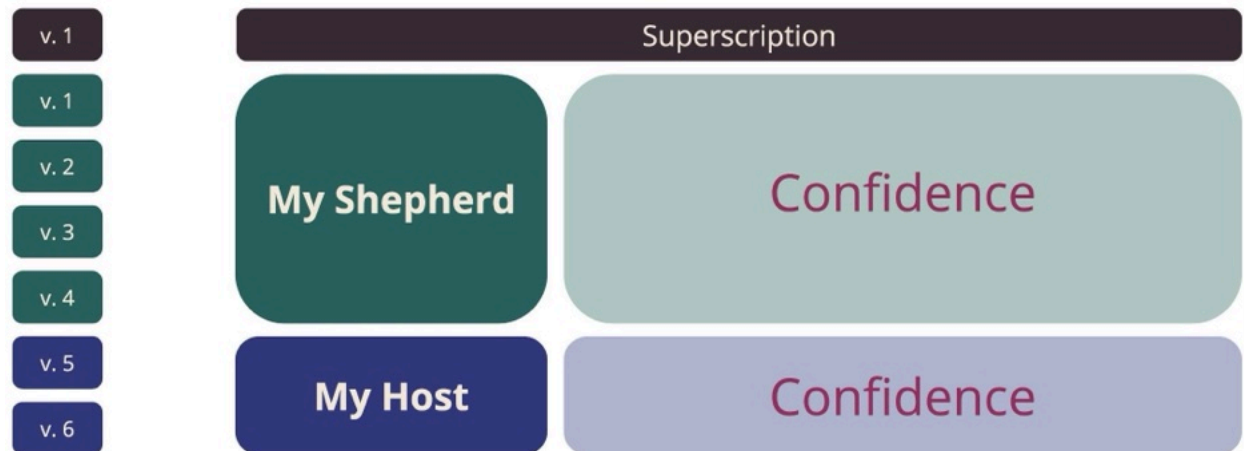


#### Progression—what is the flow of thought as the poem progresses?

- The psalm is divided into two major sections. In these sections, the psalm uses two metaphors to describe YHWH and how he cares for the psalmist:
  - In the first section, the psalmist declares that YHWH is his shepherd. The psalmist tells YHWH that YHWH provides for the psalmist and protects him.
  - In the second section, the psalmist describes the good things that YHWH provides as a host. The psalmist declares that he wants to live as YHWH's guest for his whole life.

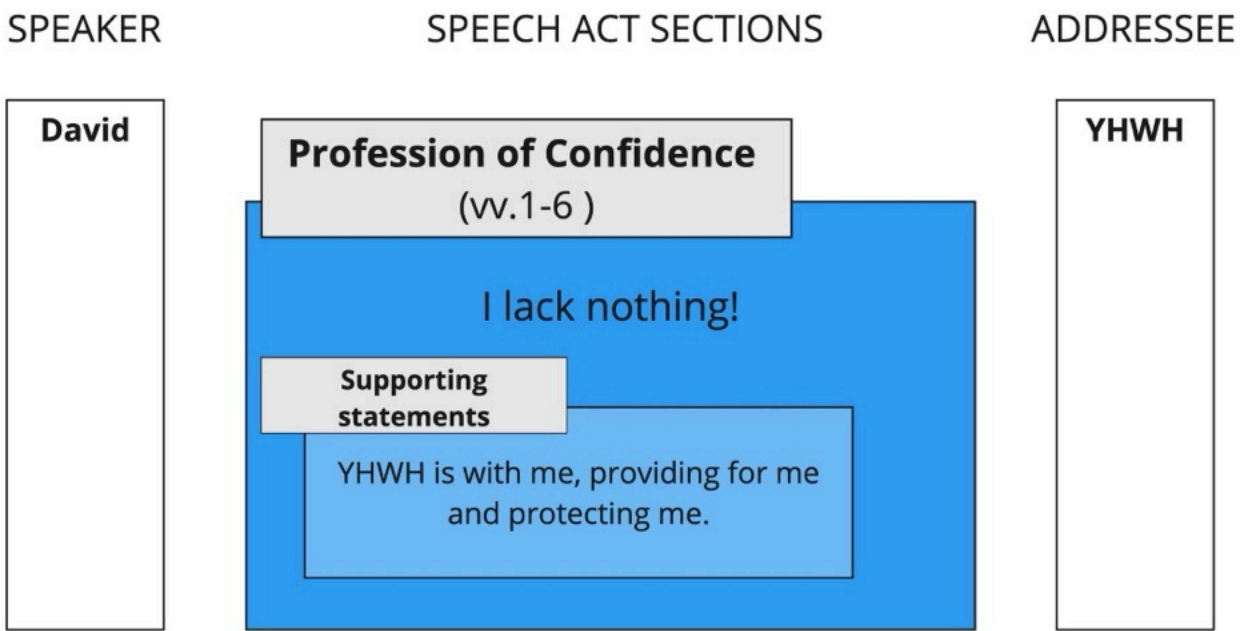
#### 4. Emotions

Part of poetry is communicating emotion. Each section, and even each verse, can contain a number of different emotions. Here are the main emotional themes of each section:



## 5. Participants and Speech Acts

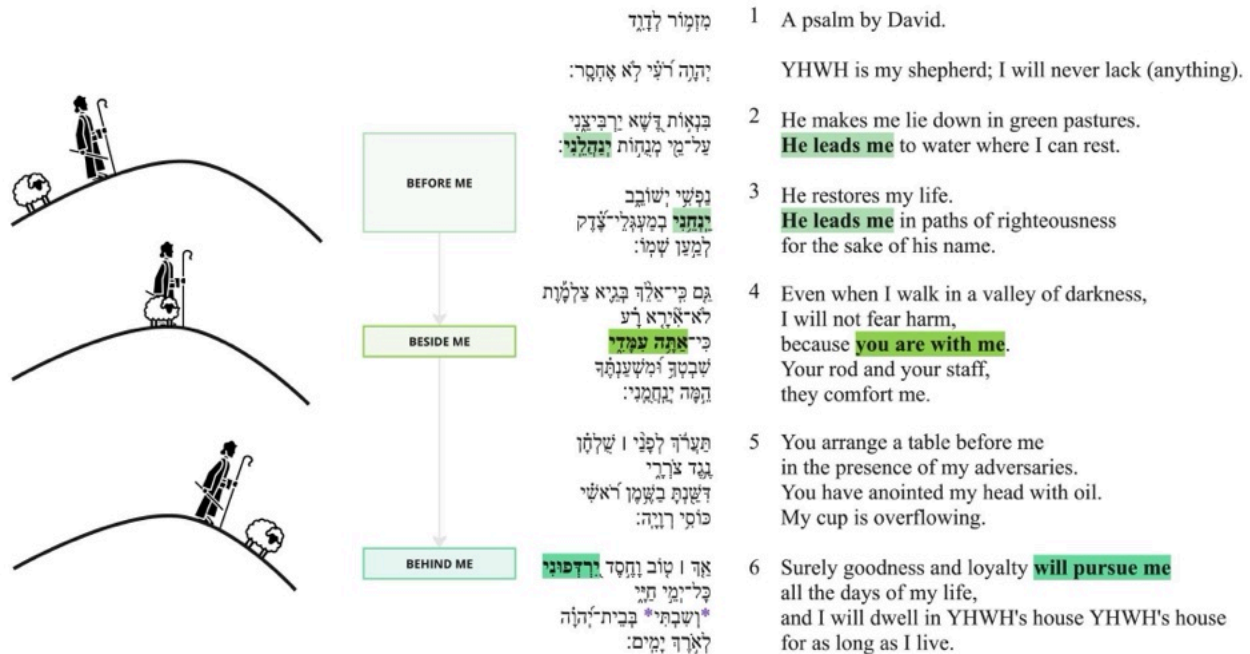
In poetry, it is important to keep track of who is speaking, who is the audience, and what it is that the speaker is trying to do with his words. In the chart below, the left-hand column identifies the speaker, who is David. The right-hand column identifies the audience, who is YHWH. The middle column tells what the speaker is trying to do with his words (his speech acts) in each section.


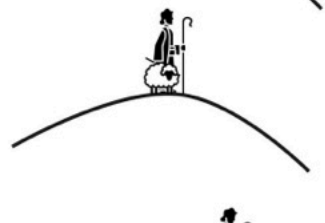



## 6. Poetics

- **Poetics**—what kinds of artistic beauty did the psalmist incorporate into the poem to reinforce its message? (See Poetic Features video and layer for more details.)

### Before Beside Behind



	<p>BEFORE ME</p>	<p>מִזְמוֹר לְדָוִד יְהוָה אֱלֹהֵי רָעִי לֹא אֶחָדֶּה: בְּנֵאֻת דָּשָׁא יִרְבִּיצֵנִי עַל־מַי מְנַחֹת יִהְיֶה־לִּי: נַפְשִׁי יִשׁוּבֶה יִגְמְלֵנִי בְּמִשְׁעָלֵי־צֶדֶק לִמְעַן שְׁמִי:</p>	<p>1 A psalm by David. YHWH is my shepherd; I will never lack (anything). 2 He makes me lie down in green pastures. <b>He leads me</b> to water where I can rest. 3 He restores my life. <b>He leads me</b> in paths of righteousness for the sake of his name.</p>
	<p>BESIDE ME</p>	<p>גַּם כִּי־אֵלֶּף בְּגִיא צִלְמוֹת לֹא־אֶרְאֶה רָע כִּי־אַתָּה עִמָּדִי שִׁבְטֶךָ וּמִשְׁעֲנֶתְךָ תְּקַח וְנִחַמְתִּי:</p>	<p>4 Even when I walk in a valley of darkness, I will not fear harm, because <b>you are with me</b>. Your rod and your staff, they comfort me.</p>
	<p>BEHIND ME</p>	<p>תַּעֲרֹךְ לִפְנֵי וְשִׁלְטֹן גִּגְד צִרְבִי דָּשְׁנֶת בְּשֶׁמֶן רֹאשִׁי כּוֹסִי רוֹחֵף: אֵךְ וְיֹב וְחֶסֶד וְרֶדְפוּנִי כָּל־יְמֵי חַיִּי וְשִׁבְתִּי בְּבֵית־יְהוָה לְאֹרֶךְ יָמִים:</p>	<p>5 You arrange a table before me in the presence of my adversaries. You have anointed my head with oil. My cup is overflowing. 6 Surely goodness and loyalty <b>will pursue me</b> all the days of my life, and I will dwell in YHWH's house YHWH's house for as long as I live.</p>

Several phrases throughout the psalm identify YHWH's position with relation to the psalmist. In the fields and streams, **YHWH leads the psalmist** (verses 2 and 3) so that YHWH is before the psalmist. In the midst of danger, **YHWH stands beside the psalmist** (verse 4). And as the psalmist looks ahead to the rest of his life, he knows **YHWH's goodness and loyalty will chase after him** (verse 6). In other words, YHWH's attributes will pursue the psalmist from behind. By characterizing YHWH's position as "before, beside, and behind," the psalmist declares that he cannot escape God's presence. God surrounds David and protects him (see Pss 125:2 and 139:5).



He	<p><b>A</b>      יהוה רעי לא אחסר:      <b>YHWH is my shepherd</b>; I will never lack (anything).</p> <p>בנאות דשא ירביצני      2      <b>He makes me lie down</b> in green pastures.</p> <p>עלמי מנחות ינהלני:      He leads me to water where I can rest.</p> <p>נפשי ישובב      3      <b>He restores</b> my life.</p> <p>ינהני במעגלי צדק      <b>He leads me</b> in paths of righteousness</p> <p>למען שמו:      for the sake of <b>his name</b>.</p>
You	<p><b>B</b>      גם כִּי־אֵלֶךְ בַּגִּיא צִלְמוֹת      4      Even when I walk in a valley of darkness,</p> <p>לֹא־אֶירָא רָע      I will not fear <b>harm</b>,</p> <p>כִּי־אַתָּה עִמָּדִי      because <b>you</b> are with me.</p> <p>שִׁבְטְךָ וּמִשְׁעַנְתְּךָ      <b>Your</b> rod and <b>your</b> staff,</p> <p>הִנֵּמָה יְנַחֲמֵנִי:      they comfort me.</p>
You	<p><b>B'</b>      תַּעֲרֹךְ לִפְנֵי וְשִׁלְחֹן      5      <b>You arrange</b> a table before me</p> <p>בְּגֵד צָרָרִי      in the presence of <b>my adversaries</b>.</p> <p>דִּשְׁוַנְתָּ בְּשֶׁמֶן רֹאשִׁי      <b>You have anointed</b> my head with oil.</p> <p>כּוֹסִי רֹנֵה:      My cup is overflowing.</p>
He	<p><b>A'</b>      אֵךְ וְטוֹב וְחֶסֶד יִרְדְּפוּנִי      6      Surely goodness and loyalty will pursue me</p> <p>כָּל־יְמֵי חַיִּי      all the days of my life,</p> <p>*וְשִׁבְתִּי* בְּבֵית־יְהוָה      and I will dwell in <b>YHWH's house</b></p> <p>לְאֶרֶךְ יָמִים:      for as long as I live.</p>

In the picture above, the beginning and ending sections (both colored yellow) have matching features. Then the two middle sections (both colored red) have matching features.

In the beginning (verses 1-3) and the end (verse 6) of the psalm, YHWH and David are the only participants, and David speaks of YHWH in the 3rd person ("he").

In the middle sections of the psalm, though, two new participants join YHWH and David. The first new participant is not a human being, but it is an idea: "harm" (verse 4). The second new participant is "adversaries" (verse 5). In these two verses, David addresses YHWH in the 2nd person ("you"), which suggests that YHWH is close.

So, harm and adversaries appear exactly at the point where YHWH is the closest to the psalmist. David experiences God's presence most strongly in a time of danger. YHWH will protect David from anything or anyone that could potentially cause him harm.

## 7. Prominence

It is also important to consider how the author chose to draw attention to certain parts of the psalm. Here are the parts of the psalm that we believe are most prominent, and thus should be most prominent in a performance of the psalm.

מזמור לדוד		1	A psalm by David.
26 words	יְהוָה רֹעִי לֹא אֶחָסֵר:	1 line	<b>YHWH</b> is my shepherd; I will never lack (anything).
	בְּנָאוֹת דָּשָׁא יְרֵבִיצָנִי עַל־מֵי מְנוּחֹת יְנוּחֵלֵנִי:	2 lines	2 He makes me lie down in green pastures. He leads me to water where I can rest.
	נַפְשִׁי יִשְׁוֹבֵב יְהַנְנִי בְּמַעְגְלֵי צֶדֶק לְמַעַן שְׁמוֹ:	3 lines	3 He restores my life. He leads me in paths of righteousness for the sake of his name.
	גַּם כִּי־אֵלֶךְ בְּגִיא צֹלְמוֹת לֹא־אֶירָא רָע	5 lines	4 Even when I walk in a valley of darkness, I will not fear harm,
	כִּי־אַתָּה עִמָּדִי		<b>because you are with me.</b>
26 words	שִׁבְטְךָ וּמִשְׁעַנְתְּךָ הִנְחָה יְנַחֵמְנִי:		Your rod and your staff, they comfort me.
	תַּעֲרֹךְ לִפְנֵי ו' שְׁלֹחַן גִּגְד צִרְיִי דִּשְׁנוֹת בַּשָּׁמֶן רֹאשִׁי כּוֹסִי רֹוּחַ:		5 You arrange a table before me in the presence of my adversaries. You have anointed my head with oil. My cup is overflowing.
	אֵךְ ו' טוֹב וְחֶסֶד יִרְדְּפוּנִי כָּל־יְמֵי חַיִּי *וְשָׁבְתִי* בְּבֵית יְהוָה לְאָרְךָ יָמִים:		6 Surely goodness and loyalty will pursue me all the days of my life, and I will dwell in <b>YHWH's</b> house for as long as I live.

The phrase **because you are with me** in verse 4 stands out in several ways, including:

- It is the center of the psalm. 26 words come before it and 26 words come after it.<sup>1</sup>
- It introduces a shift from speaking *about* YHWH (3rd person) to addressing him *directly* (2nd person).<sup>2</sup>
- The divine name 'YHWH' appears at the beginning and end of the psalm, which suggests that the middle is significant.

So, the psalmist wanted to emphasize this line about YHWH's constant presence.

<sup>1</sup> Verse 4 has the most number of lines (five lines) of any verse in the psalm. Verse 4 is also the peak of the ascending number of lines-per-verse (from **monocolon** to **bicolon** to **tricolon** to **pentacolon**).

<sup>2</sup> Verse 4 is the only place where personal pronouns appear in the psalm ("you" and "they"). Verse 4 is also the only verse with the presence of subordinating markers (גַּם כִּי - "even when" and כִּי "because").

## TRANSLATION TIPS, VERSE BY VERSE

Gray boxes discuss sections and subsections. The headings (in green) are guides, and not part of the Biblical text.

### VERSES 1–4: My Shepherd

- In this first section of the psalm, David portrays YHWH as his shepherd who provides for all of his needs. The *shepherd* imagery binds this section together.
- A poetic feature of this section is that it contains similar sounds in Hebrew. These similar sounds give prominence to the following phrases:
  - The phrases **I will never lack** (*lo echsar*) in verse 1 and **I will not fear harm** (*lo-ira ra*) in verse 4 contain similar sounds.
  - The phrases **He leads me to water where I can rest** (*al-mei menuchot yenhaleni*) in verse 2, **he leads me** (*yancheni*) in verse 3, and **they comfort me** (*hemmah yenchamuni*) in verse 4 contain similar sounds in Hebrew.
- The main emotion expressed in this section is *confidence*.

### VERSE 1

**Expanded Paraphrase** - the words in *italics* provide a fuller sense of the psalm; the text itself is in **bold**.

A **psalm** written **by David** expressing confidence in YHWH's providence and protection. Like a sheep, I need a shepherd who knows my needs intimately so that he can meet them. I depend upon my shepherd because I cannot meet my needs on my own. Yet, I do not need to worry because **YHWH is my shepherd**; who provides for all of my needs. Therefore, **I will never lack (anything)**. When I need food, water, and a place to rest,

<p>מְזִמֹּר לְדָוִד יְהוָה רֹעִי לֹא אֶחְסָר:</p>	1	A <b>psalm</b> by David. <b>YHWH</b> is my <b>shepherd</b> ; <b>I will never lack (anything)</b> .
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- The first line is the superscription of Psalm 23. Superscriptions can identify the psalmist, the instruments, the tune, the setting, and other information. They are not part of the content of the poem.
  - The superscription describes this poem as a **psalm** (מְזִמֹּר). The Hebrew word "is a technical term for a song that was to be sung, perhaps with musical accompaniment."<sup>3</sup> In order to distinguish a psalm from other kinds of songs, in some languages it may be necessary to add a qualifier such as *praise, religious, or worship*; for example *songs for worship* or *songs for praising God*. Translators must make sure to translate the key term 'psalm' consistently with other psalms and with the way the word is translated in the New Testament.
  - The phrase **by David** (לְדָוִד) means that king David is the author of this psalm.

<sup>3</sup> Ross 2011, 40.

- If the name **David** is unknown in the target language, it may be best to transliterate the name based upon the Hebrew letters or upon an existing translation from a language of wider communication.<sup>4</sup>
- This phrase implies that David has written the psalm. Some languages may require that the verb be made clear: *A psalm written by David* or *A psalm composed by David*. Some languages may require an active construction: *David wrote this psalm* or *David composed this psalm*.
- For more detail see the webpage [Ledavid](#).
- The psalmist uses the image of a **shepherd** to describe YHWH. The following chart compares various characteristics of a shepherd with characteristics of YHWH.

Chart instructions: The first box under the word "Shepherd" describes how a shepherd has the characteristics of a Leader, then the box below that describes how a shepherd has the characteristics of a Deliverer, and so on. The first box under the word "YHWH" describes how YHWH has the characteristics of a Leader, then the box below that describes how YHWH has the characteristics of a Deliverer, and so on. The chart provides an easy way to compare each characteristic side-by-side.

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<sup>4</sup> If the phonetics of "David" (DAY-vid) as it is said in English (or dah-VEED as in Hebrew) do not work well in your language, consider adjusting some of the sounds/letters to sound more natural to your language. Some languages add a prefix or suffix to a name to designate a king or another rank or position of honor. How to translate/transliterate proper names is an important issue that is concerned with the tension between domestication and foreignization of a Bible translation: do we change the Hebrew or LWC names to sound more natural in our language, or do we preserve the Hebrew/LWC names in order to be closer to the source text? This should be decided before translation begins, in cooperation with the community and their desires and needs.

Ps 23:1 "YHWH is my <i>shepherd</i> "		
	Shepherd	YHWH
<b>Leader</b>	Leads the sheep to safety and sources of food, water, and rest (Ps 23:1-3)	Leads his people to safety and prosperous lands (e.g. land promise [Gen 13:14-17])
<b>Deliverer</b>	Defeats predators threatening flock (e.g. lions and bears - 1 Sam 17:34-35; Ps 23:4).	Defeats enemies threatening his people
<b>Loyal</b>	"Takes the flock's side against its attackers" (Goldingay 2006, Ps 23)	Takes his people's side against enemies (Ps 80:1-3; Jer 31:10)
<b>Discipliner</b>	The shepherd makes his flock endure pain when necessary (e.g. he shears, slaughters, sacrifices, and disciplines his flock).	YHWH makes his people endure pain when necessary (e.g. he disciplines, punishes, and purifies his people).
<b>Caregiver</b>	A shepherd might carry his sheep in his arms holding them close to his heart. (Isa 40:11).	YHWH lifts up (carry) his people to care for them and to bring them through danger.
<b>Seeker</b>	A shepherd values each and every sheep to the extent that he will leave the majority to retrieve one that is lost.	YHWH cares for every single person, and he promises that he "will seek the lost, and [he] will bring back the strayed" (Ezek 34:16).
<b>Knower</b>	A good shepherd knows his sheep and his sheep know him (John 10:14)	YHWH knows his people and his people know him.
<b>Owner</b>	The shepherd owns the flock	YHWH owns/has possession of his people
<b>Summary</b>	Shepherds lead the flock to sources of safety and sustenance and protecting them from enemies/harm.	YHWH leads David to safety and sustenance protecting him from all harm.

- The most prominent characteristics of a shepherd in this psalm are *the categories of leader and deliverer in the table above*.
  - Some cultures may not have sheep, even if they do have people who take care of other animals. A crucial part of the shepherd imagery is the fact that sheep are highly dependent upon a person to protect and provide for them. So, as a possible substitute for the word **shepherd**, the translator may consider selecting the caretaker of a locally known animal that needs a human provider and protector.
  - Some cultures may not have people who protect and provide for animals. In this case, translators may consider one of two strategies: 1) in a natural and concise way, describe the shepherd within the translation as someone who cares for animals; or 2) add a footnote that briefly explains that a shepherd protects and provides for vulnerable animals, and that shepherds may use a staff or rod in their work.
  - With the above said, the imagery of shepherding and sheep is very common in the Bible, and so the translator should seek to retain the shepherd imagery if possible.
- As the chart above suggests, God is often referred to as the shepherd of *his people*, that is, an entire nation.<sup>5</sup> Psalm 23:1 is the only place in Scripture where YHWH is described as the

<sup>5</sup> For example, in Pss 80:1; 95:7; 100:3; Isa 40:11.



shepherd of a single person. David is saying that YHWH is the one who rules, leads, and provides for *him*.

- In the ancient Near East, "kings were portrayed as shepherds,<sup>6</sup> and to portray God as a shepherd is to portray God as a royal figure (cf. Ezek 34:10–16)."<sup>7</sup>
- The reason that David can say **I will never lack (anything)** is because in the previous clause, he said **YHWH** is his **shepherd**. However, for poetic reasons, the relationship between the two clauses has not been made obvious: there is no result-word like *therefore* to tell the hearer of this psalm 'YHWH is my shepherd, *therefore* I will never lack (anything).' While it is best to imitate the grammar of the psalm here by leaving out a result-word like *therefore*, translators should make sure that the grammar of their rendering leaves open the possibility that 'I will never lack anything' can be understood as the result of the fact that 'YHWH is my shepherd.'
- The verb **lack** (חסר) is often used in the Bible in contexts that show how God will "meet the needs of his people."<sup>8</sup> God's people will not lack because God cares for them.
  - In Hebrew, the verb does not have a direct object, but most modern languages need to add one. Examples include:
    - In English: *not lack for anything* (LEB)
    - In French: *je ne manquerai de rien* (NBS, BDS)
    - In Spanish: *nada me faltará* (RVR)
    - In Hausa: *ba zan rasa kome ba* (CLB)
  - In Hebrew, the verb 'lack' is negated: **not lack**. In some languages, such a phrase may be confusing or simply will not work. An alternative is to make the expression a positive statement, such as:
    - *I have everything I need* (GNT); *I have what I need* (CSB); *I have all that I need* (NLT); *I lack nothing* (NIV, NET, NJB); *there is nothing I lack* (NABRE).
  - Some translations render the verb **I will not lack** in the present tense.<sup>9</sup> However, the verb form in Hebrew "mainly refers to the future"<sup>10</sup> and denotes a situation that extends to the future. So, a future tense rendering is preferred.
  - The classic English translation of this phrase is the KJV, *I shall not want*.<sup>11</sup> However, there are some serious issues with following the KJV translation:
    - The Hebrew word rendered 'lack' refers to not having the things that are necessary to live. In contrast, the English word *want* implies that the person's needs are met, but there are still things they desire to have. While no doubt David believes that YHWH can take care of his desires, that is not the emphasis of the psalm here. Instead, David is saying that his needs will be met.

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<sup>6</sup> See 1 Kgs 22:17; Jer 23:1–4; Ezek 34:1–10.

<sup>7</sup> Jacobson 2014, 240.

<sup>8</sup> TWOT. This verb also occurs in Neh 9:21 in reference to God's provision to Israel in the wilderness.

<sup>9</sup> *je ne manque de rien* (PDV, TOB); *nada me falta* (BTX, DHH, NVI).

<sup>10</sup> It is a *yiqtol* stative verb; see van Peursen 2017, 106 and JM §113a.

<sup>11</sup> Also NASB 1995.

- The addition of the word *shall* could be taken to mean that David is giving a command. David is not commanding anyone, but instead is reporting what YHWH does for him. Additionally, this is archaic English.

## VERSE 2

**Expanded Paraphrase** – the words in *italics* provide a fuller sense of the psalm; the text itself is in **bold**.

**He makes a way for me to lie down in green pastures where I can eat and rest, and He leads me to water where I can drink and rest.**

בְּנֵאֻת דָּשָׁא יִרְבִּיצֵנִי עַל-מֵי מְנַחֵם יְנַהֲלֵנִי:	2	He makes me lie down in green pastures. He leads me to water where I can rest.
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- Through the imagery of **green pastures** and **water where I can rest**, "the psalmist evokes in the reader's mind feelings of security as well as sustenance through the peaceful, rich imagery of animals grazing and resting in a ... watered meadow, to which they have been safely led by their shepherd."<sup>12</sup> The translator should check to ensure that the imagery is rendered in a way that is understood by the target audience and will have a similar effect of evoking feelings of security and sustenance.
- The phrase translated as **green pastures** (בְּנֵאֻת דָּשָׁא) refers to grass-filled pastures where the sheep can graze and rest. Sheep who are in green pastures have enough food and do not need to move from place to place to be satisfied.<sup>13</sup>
  - The word **green** symbolizes that the pastures are filled with fresh, healthy grass. Some languages may lack a word for **green**. In such cases, it may be helpful to translate with something like *having fresh grass* (Hausa CLB).<sup>14</sup>
  - Especially with the rapid movement of populations to cities and away from rural life, the word in many languages for **pastures** may be unknown to a large number of target language speakers. For example, the classic Hausa LMT uses the word *saura*, which is unfamiliar to many modern Hausa speakers. If your language has a similar challenge, a possible strategy for translators is to follow the newer Hausa CLB: *places of grazing/tending (to animals)*.<sup>15</sup>
- The verb we have translated **he makes me lie down** (יִרְבִּיצֵנִי) refers to a "causative action by which humans cause animals to assume a horizontal position in order to rest."<sup>16</sup> The causative form of the

<sup>12</sup> Miller 1986, 114.

<sup>13</sup> VanGemenen 2008, 253. Cf. also Ezek 34:14.

<sup>14</sup> Hausa CLB: *masu danyar ciyawa*. See also Hausa LMT: *mai danyar ciyawa*.

<sup>15</sup> *wuraren kiwo*.

<sup>16</sup> SDBH.

verb 'to lie down' does not have the sense of 'he forces me to lie down' . . . The idea is that the shepherd finds a place (green pastures) where the sheep can lie down and rest."<sup>17</sup>

- The idea of resting is central to the meaning here. In some cultures, the phrase *make lie down* would not communicate that the goal is that the person would rest. In such cases, it may be better to translate the verb as *rest* rather than 'lie down' (NLT, Hausa LMT).
- Some translations render the verb as *he lets me rest* (NLT, NCV) or *he lets me lie down* (CSB). These translations do a good job of avoiding the sense that YHWH is forcing the psalmist to lie down. But translators should also bear in mind that the sense of the verb is not so much on *giving permission* to lie down, as it is on *making it possible* to lie down.
- The phrase we have rendered **water where I can rest** (מַי מְנוּחָה) literally means "waters of restful/resting places." In Psalm 23, the phrase refers to a body of "water [next to] which the sheep may rest."<sup>18</sup> It forms a parallel with the idea in the previous line of a place where sheep could rest.<sup>19</sup>
  - Several English translations use the preposition *beside* (ESV, NIV, NLT) or *by* (LEB), which correctly reinforces the idea that the word **water** refers to a body of water. Some languages may need to clearly state that a body of water (as opposed to water in general) is in view. Possibilities are *pools of...water* (GNB), *streams of water* (CEV), or *lakes of water* (Hausa CLB).<sup>20</sup>
  - Many English translations understand the phrase to mean that the body of water itself is calm. These translations render the phrase as *quiet waters* (NIV, LEB, NRSV, CSB) or *still waters* (ESV, NRSV, KJV). It is important, though, to ensure that the local translation does not imply that the waters are stagnant. It is true that the water described in this verse is not quickly rushing. However, water that does not flow is dangerous to drink, yet context suggests that the psalmist refers to drinkable water. So, it is unlikely that the psalmist means to describe water that is not moving, and such a rendering should be avoided. The main point is that the water is good for sheep to drink and is in a calm place for them to rest.
    - Translations that understand the waters as a *place where the sheep and shepherd may rest* include the REB, which says, "He leads me to water where I may find rest," and JPS, which says "He leads me to water in places of repose." Translators should seek to reproduce the idea of a place to rest in the local language.
  - Finally, the word **water** can be rendered as either singular or plural, depending on what makes the most sense in the local language.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Bratcher and Reyburn 1991, 232.

<sup>18</sup> Goldingay 2006, 350.

<sup>19</sup> The NET argues that "shepherds usually watered their sheep at wells (see Gen 29:2-3; Exod 2:16-19)" and therefore this line of the psalm probably does not refer to shepherding sheep. This argument, though, is an oversimplification. Animals were watered at wells in places where wells were available; in places they were not, other water sources were used.

<sup>20</sup> *tafkunan ruwa*.

<sup>21</sup> Similarly to the word "heavens" which is plural in Hebrew but often rendered with the singular "heaven" in English. See JM §136c, GKC §124b.



- There are several different Hebrew verbs that mean **to lead**. The one in this verse (נהל) "is normally used with reference to guidance to water."<sup>22</sup> If the target language has a verb with a similar emphasis on leading animals or people to water, it should be used here.
- The word order of the clauses in verses 2 and 3a is unusual in Hebrew. This unusual word order emphasizes the following phrases:
  - **in green pastures** is emphasized as *the place* (among all other possible places) where He makes me lie down.
  - **to water where I can rest** is emphasized as *the place* (among all other possible places) where He leads me.
  - **my life** is emphasized as *the thing* (among all other things) that He restores.
  - This results in the poetic repetition of emphasis, as shown below. Translators should seek to imitate this repeated emphasis in their translations, if possible:

בְּנֵאֻת דָּשָׁא יִרְבִּיצֵנִי	2	(It is) <b>in green pastures</b> (that) He makes me lie down.
עַל־מִי מְנַחֵת יְנַהֲלֵנִי:		(It is) <b>to water where I can rest</b> (that) He leads me.
בְּפֶשֶׁי יְשׁוּבָב	3	(Nothing less than) <b>my (whole) life</b> (is what) He restores.

### VERSE 3

**Expanded Paraphrase** – the words in *italics* provide a fuller sense of the psalm; the text itself is in **bold**.

He is a source of refreshment like no other; when I feel physically deprived of food, water, and rest, **He restores my life** by giving me nourishment. YHWH, my shepherd, is more than a provider, he is also a guide. I am not lost or aimless because **He leads me** securely where I should go. Life is fraught with conflict and trial, and the only safe path is following YHWH closely, pursuing righteousness. My security is that he leads me **in paths of righteousness** which enable me to live a righteous life. My confidence is in knowing that, ultimately, he does this not merely for my sake but, rather, **for the sake of his name**, because he receives honor when his servants pursue righteousness. His reputation, or name, benefits. He chooses paths that honor him and care for me, because he is a good shepherd. A "right path" does not necessarily mean a safe path. Sheep may need to go on dangerous paths on their way to pasture or water. The safety comes not from the path but from the shepherd's presence, because he protects his sheep.

בְּפֶשֶׁי יְשׁוּבָב יְנַחֵנִי בַּמַּעְגָּלִי-צֶדֶק לְמַעַן שְׁמוֹ:	3	<b>He restores my life.</b> <b>He leads me in paths of righteousness</b> <b>for the sake of his name.</b>
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- The figure of speech **restores my life** (בְּפֶשֶׁי יְשׁוּבָב) literally means "to bring back (one's) self" or "to restore a sense of well-being," which may include things like "feeling refreshed after a good meal" or "feeling contented because of a major change in one's life situation."<sup>23</sup>
  - The word we have rendered as **life** here is often translated as *soul* in English (NIV, ESV, KJV, NRSV, etc.). The difficulty with this rendering is that it brings in the idea of a disembodied

<sup>22</sup> Ross 2011, 562. See Isaiah 49:10, "And [He] will guide them to springs of water."

<sup>23</sup> SDBH. See also Psalm 19:8.

soul that has no real connection to the physical world. The previous verse has just spoken of physical refreshment, which suggests that the physical body was important to the psalmist here too. The NJB rendering *spirit* has some of the same issues as the rendering *soul*.

- On the other hand, translations such as the GNT's *he gives me new strength* may focus too much on the purely physical side of things.
- The Hebrew word 'life' (חַיִּים) often refers to the complete person, both physical and spiritual, and so life is the preferred option for translation. The phrase **my life** (נַפְשִׁי) can simply be rendered as *me*.<sup>24</sup>
- The word for **lead** in verse 3 is a different Hebrew word (נָהַג) than the one in verse 2. While the verb in verse 2 referred to leading to *water*, the one in verse 3 "often occurs with the imagery of the shepherd in reference to the Lord (see for example Pss 31:3, 77:20; 78:72). The word may have been drawn from the setting of shepherding to refer to *divine guidance*."<sup>25</sup> Both verbs also occur near one another in Exod 15:13.
- The phrase **paths of righteousness** (בְּמִשְׁלֵי צְדָקָה) could have two different meanings, because the key term **righteousness** can refer either to something that is safe/correct, or to something that is ethically and religiously good:
  - The phrase can mean *right paths*; in other words, paths that are "safe" or "correct," where no harm will happen to people or animals.<sup>26</sup> These paths lead to pastures, wells, or the flock.<sup>27</sup> Many English translations follow this sense of the phrase (NIV, ESV, NABRE).
  - The phrase can refer to "Yahweh's guidance on the way of life in accordance with his 'ethical code' of conduct, in other words, the Torah."<sup>28</sup> Translations that emphasize this sense include the ESV (*paths of righteousness*) and Hausa CLB (*hanyar adalci*).
  - More than likely, the phrase carries a poetic, intentional double meaning here. It means both that YHWH will keep his sheep safe and provide for him; and that the "sheep" (in this case, David) will obey YHWH's instruction. It may be difficult for some languages to capture both senses of the phrase, and so it may be necessary to supply two words to capture the full sense. Examples might include *safe and right*. For more detail, see [The Text and Meaning of Ps. 23:3b](#).
- The word **name** refers not just to someone's actual name, but also to that person's reputation and character. When it refers to YHWH's name, the word carries "overtones of fame, honor, influence, and power."<sup>29</sup> YHWH's reputation is tied to his commitment to care for his "sheep."
  - In many languages a straightforward rendering of the phrase **for the sake of his name** (or *his name's sake*) would not clearly communicate that the intended meaning is YHWH's reputation and honor. In such cases, translators may consider the following strategies to make the the meaning clear:

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<sup>24</sup> NET.

<sup>25</sup> Ross 2011, 563.

<sup>26</sup> Miller 1986, 115.

<sup>27</sup> NET.

<sup>28</sup> Botha 2015, 296.

<sup>29</sup> TDOT vol 15, 134.

- so that his name may be honored (Hausa CLB).<sup>30</sup>
- to show his glory (French PDV)<sup>31</sup>
- bringing honor to his name (NLT)
- for the sake of his reputation (NET)
- The GNB's rendering as *he has promised* is not very close to the meaning of the Hebrew.

## VERSE 4

**Expanded Paraphrase** – the words in *italics* provide a fuller sense of the psalm; the text itself is in **bold**.

Therefore, **Even when I walk in a valley of darkness** under threat of predators and enemies, **I will not fear harm, because you, YHWH, are with me. Your rod** defends me against predators **and your staff** directs me, making it so I always know where to go: because they offer me both protection and guidance, **they comfort me.**

<p>גַּם כִּי־אֵלֶךְ בַּגִּיא צִלְמוֹת לֹא־אִירָא רָע כִּי־אַתָּה עִמָּדִי שִׁבְטְךָ וּמִשְׁעֶנְיֶךָ תְּחַמֵּנִי יְיָהוָה:</p>	4	<p><b>Even when I walk</b> in a <b>valley of darkness</b>, I will not fear <b>harm</b>, <b>because you are with me.</b> <b>Your rod and your staff</b>, <b>they comfort</b> me.</p>
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- For a number of reasons, verse 4 stands out within this psalm. See the section on [Prominence](#) for discussion.
- The combination **Even when** (גַּם כִּי) is complex, and has several features for the translator to consider:
  - In part, it conveys that the action of the first phrase 'I walk through a valley of darkness' and the action of the second phrase 'I will not fear harm' are normally incompatible.<sup>32</sup> In other words, they do not normally happen at the same time. In English, the word 'even' helps to convey this meaning. The KJV's *yea*, which might be misunderstood to mean *yes*, should be avoided.
  - In part, it conveys that the event described in the phrase 'I walk through a valley of darkness' is a potential event that may or may not be a reality at the time of speaking.<sup>33</sup>
    - Many English translations render this part of the phrase as *if* or *though*, with the resulting phrase *even if* (GNB) or *even though* (ESV, NIV, NRSV). However, these renderings can suggest that going through difficult times is *unlikely* to happen.

<sup>30</sup> *domin a girmama Sunansa.*

<sup>31</sup> *pour montrer sa gloire.*

<sup>32</sup> In other words, it behaves like a *concessive clause*.

<sup>33</sup> In other words, it also behaves like a *conditional clause*.

- In contrast, we believe that the psalmist thought the event 'I walk through a valley of darkness' was *likely* to happen. So, we prefer to render this part of the phrase as 'when,' with the resulting phrase **even when** (as found in NLT, CSB, NET).
- In some languages, rendering a potential-but-likely action may impact the tense, aspect, and/or mood of the verb **I walk**. Furthermore, the relationship between the two phrases may impact the time, aspect and mood of both the verb 'I walk' and the verb **I will not fear**.
- **A valley of darkness** is a valley where the danger of death exists because of wild animals and robbers. Here, the phrase is used as a metaphor for going through difficult times.



- The word translated as **valley** (בִּגְיָא - "in a valley") occurs only here in the Psalms. A valley is a long, low area of the earth's surface that is surrounded by hills or mountains. In the hill country of Judah, there were many narrow valleys that were surrounded by steep cliffs. It was difficult to go down into the valleys or to climb out of them. The valleys were often dark, and wild animals and robbers hid in them. It could be very dangerous to travel through the valleys, and it was much safer to go on paths over the hills.<sup>34</sup>
- Although many English translations render this word with the definite article (*the* valley), the definite article does not appear in Hebrew.
  - Some languages may not have a specific word for a **valley**. For example, the Hausa CLB renders it *hole*, which emphasizes that it is an exposed space below the ground-level, is often dark, and is a place where a person might become trapped.<sup>35</sup> The Hausa LMT renders it *road*, which emphasizes the idea that the person is on a journey, as the verb 'walk' suggests.<sup>36</sup>
- The word translated here as **darkness** (צֶלְמָוֶת) is disputed by scholars. There are three possible options for understanding and translating this word:
  - The first option is that it means "shadow of death," and the word is a combination of Hebrew words for "shadow" (צֶל) and "death" (מָוֶת). This is the reading of the ESV, KJV, and NASB.
  - The second option is that it means "deepest darkness" or "dark as death," in other words, it describes the most extreme kind of darkness. This is the reading of the NEB and JPS.
  - The third option is that it means 'darkness,' and comes from a verb meaning "to be dark" (צָלַם). This word tends to be associated with darkness in the Bible and is sometimes

<sup>34</sup> Briggs and Briggs 1907, 209.

<sup>35</sup> *rami*.

<sup>36</sup> *hanya*.

parallel to words related to the category of "darkness." This interpretation fits well in the context of Psalm 23, and it is our preferred reading.

- In any case, the basic sense of the word is that it functions as a metaphor for difficult experiences.
- For an in-depth discussion of the issue, see [The Meaning of צלמות in Ps 23:4](#).
- The Hebrew word translated **harm** (רָעָה) functions here as a noun.
  - Some English translations render it *danger* (ESV, CSB, NET) or *evil* (NIV, NRSV, LEB).
    - In some languages, a person can only fear a volitional being or a negative event. In such cases, it may be best to paraphrase *I will not fear that something harmful will happen to me*.
  - Some translations choose not to render the term at all, but rather focus on the fear: *I will not be afraid* (GNT, NLT), *I have no fear of anything* (French PDV),<sup>37</sup> or *I will not be afraid of anything* (Hausa CLB).<sup>38</sup> However, we recommend translating the Hebrew term for harm/danger, if possible. Including the term will result in a translation that is closer to the meaning of the Hebrew, is more specific, and is more vivid than leaving the term out.
- The phrase **because you are with me** has some important features:
  - For a number of reasons, this phrase is the most prominent part of the psalm. It is at the exact center of the psalm. See the section on [Prominence](#) for more discussion.
  - The pronoun **you** refers to YHWH. This is the point at which the psalm shifts from talking about YHWH to talking *directly* to YHWH.
    - In some languages, it may be necessary to say something like *because you, YHWH, are with me* in order to make it clear that the pronoun refers to YHWH.
  - YHWH is everywhere (Ps 139:7-12) and therefore cannot be limited to one location. At the same time, a person can affirm that YHWH is indeed present in that person's life, and that is what David is doing here. Here, YHWH's presence means that he will support David and act on David's behalf to protect and provide for him.<sup>39</sup>
- The words **your rod and your staff** (שֵׁבִיטְךָ וּמִשְׁעֶנְיֶךָ) are images that symbolize YHWH's presence, protection, and guidance.<sup>40</sup> They are two different instruments used by shepherds:

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<sup>37</sup> *je n'ai peur de rien.*

<sup>38</sup> *ba zan ji tsoro ba.*

<sup>39</sup> Ross 2011, 565.

<sup>40</sup> Craigie 2004, 207; VanGemenen 2008, 254.

- A **rod** was used by shepherds as a weapon to defend the flock against wild animals.<sup>41</sup>
- A **staff** was used as a walking stick, for support when standing, and to prod the sheep in the right direction.<sup>42</sup>
- Some cultures may not have two different words that describe these two different instruments. In this case, one word can be used. It can also be helpful to identify the sticks as the kinds that belong to a shepherd. A translation that does both is the French PDV: *your shepherd's staff*.<sup>43</sup>



- Some cultures may have no concept of a rod and staff for shepherding. In this case, translators may focus on strategies to communicate the main idea of the image, such as:
  - Substitute the function of the rod (which is to defend) and the function of the staff (which is to guide) for the terms themselves. An example of a translation that does this (although in reverse order) is the French NFC: *you guide me, you defend me*.<sup>44</sup> Another is the French S21: *your guidance and your support*,<sup>45</sup> though this translation misses the function of the rod as defending the sheep from predators.
  - Explain the function of each kind of stick within the translation, such as *your rod, which defends me; your staff, which comforts me*.
  - Retain 'your rod and your staff' in the body of the translation, but provide an explanation in a footnote.
- The pronoun **they** (הֵנָּה) refers to 'your rod and your staff.' Some French versions render the pronoun as *presenting* the rod and staff: *your rod and your staff: here they are, my comfort* (NBS, NVS, NFC)<sup>46</sup> or *Your guidance and your support: here they are, what comforts me* (S21).<sup>47</sup> This is a possible function of the pronoun.
- To **comfort** (נָחַם) is associated with bringing relief to someone by providing assurance, security, and safety.
  - See the diagram below for a more detailed look at the Hebrew understanding of the word (green circle on the right), our modern English understanding of the idea (yellow circle on the left), and what the two understandings have in common (the middle section where the two circles intersect):

<sup>41</sup> Goldingay 2006, 351. Kings also used it to beat their enemies; Walton 2009, 340.

<sup>42</sup> SDBH; Goldingay 2006, 351.

<sup>43</sup> The Hausa CLB calls one of the sticks a *walking stick* (*sanda na tafiya*) and the other a *shepherd's staff* (*sanda na kiwo*).

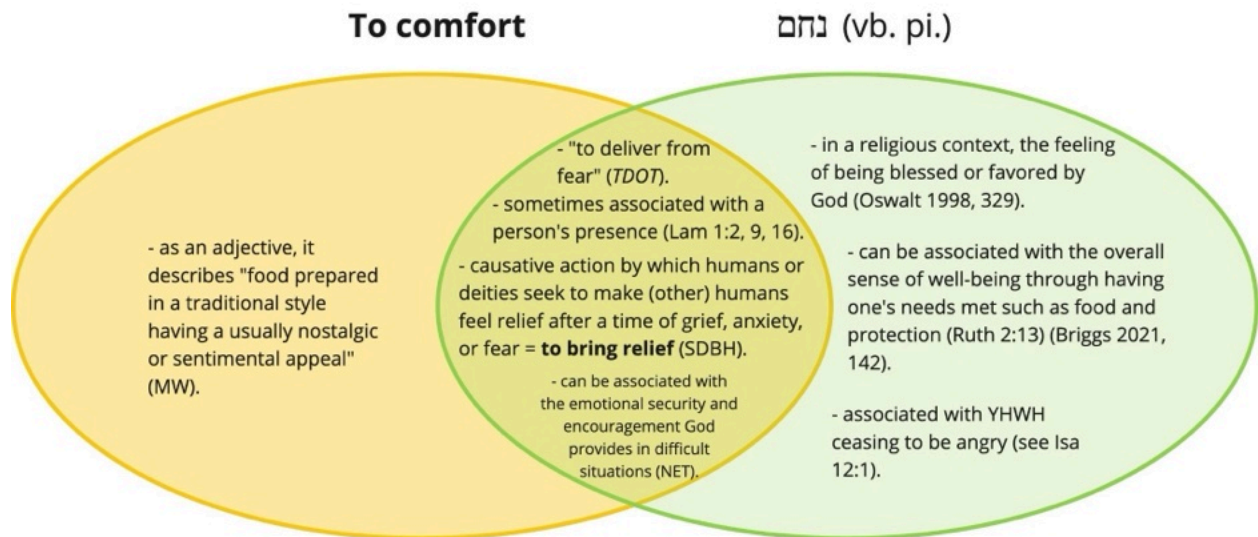
<sup>44</sup> *Tu me conduis, tu me défends.*

<sup>45</sup> *Ta conduite et ton appui.*

<sup>46</sup> *ta houlette et ton bâton, voilà mon réconfort.*

<sup>47</sup> *Ta conduite et ton appui: voilà ce qui me réconforte.*





- This verb is one that is normally performed by humans, which means that 'your rod and your staff' are doing an act that is normally only performed by humans (this is called *personification*).

Gray boxes discuss sections and subsections. The headings (in *green*) are guides, and not part of the Biblical text.

### **VERSES 5—6: *My Host***

- The second section is bound together by three features:
  - 1) YHWH is portrayed through the imagery of David's host
  - 2) in Hebrew, there is a repetition of sounds (לֹאֲרוֹךְ לֵי and לֹאֲרוֹךְ - *ta'arok le and lorek*) at the beginning of verse 5 and the end of verse 6.
  - 3) both verses contain four lines each.
- Just like in the first section, the main emotion expressed here is *confidence*.

### VERSE 5

**Expanded Paraphrase** – the words in *italics* provide a fuller sense of the psalm; the text itself is in **bold**.

*You care for me even more than a shepherd cares for his sheep, though. You treat me like an honored guest, whom you chosen to invite under your protection, to provide for all my needs. You act like a gracious host: **You arrange a table before me**, setting out abundant food and drink. Like the shepherd who ensures both that the sheep eat and drink and*

also that they are protected from predators, you not only provide food and drink, but you do so **in the presence of my adversaries** – my enemies get to see your abundant provision for me! Not only can they not harm me, as long as I am under your protection, but they see and know that I am under your care. They would like to attack and defeat me, but you do the opposite: you treat me as an honorable guest: **You have anointed my head with fine, spiced oil** the way gracious hosts do, and now you fill the table with food and drink. In fact, you provide so much that I cannot even drink it all before you pour more wine. You provide so much that **My cup is overflowing**.

<p>תַּעֲרֹךְ לִפְנֵי   שֶׁלֶמֶךְ נֶגֶד צָרָרִי דֹשֶׁנִּי בַשֶּׁמֶן רֹאשִׁי כּוֹסִי רוֹבֵה:</p>	5	<p>You <b>arrange a table</b> before me <b>in the presence of my adversaries</b>. You have <b>anointed my head with oil</b>. <b>My cup is overflowing</b>.</p>
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- In this section, the psalmist uses the image of a host, that is, a person who receives or entertains guests,<sup>48</sup> to describe YHWH. The following table compares various characteristics of a host with characteristics of YHWH:

v. 5-6: "you arrange a table . . . you have anointed my head with oil . . . my cup is overflowing . . . YHWH's house"		
	Host	YHWH
<b>Provider</b>	The host was responsible for providing food and drink for the guests and their animals (cf. DBI 1378; Gen 18:5-7; 19:3; 24:33; 2 Sam 12:4; 2 Kings 4:8). The host may also provide lodging (cf. Josh 2:8; Judg 19:4, 21; 1 Sam 9:25; 2 Kgs 4:10). For example, "Joseph extends hospitality to his brothers, even though they do not yet recognize him. Joseph has them brought into his house, gives them water for washing their feet, and provides them with food and drink at his table (Gen 43:16-34)" (Arterbury and Bellinger 2005, 389).	YHWH provides food and drink for David (cf. Ps 23:5). In Ps 23:5, "my cup is overflowing" depicts the abundant provision YHWH offers to David.
<b>Protector</b>	The host was responsible for protecting guests from harm (cf. Gen 19:1-11; 23:7-9; Judg 19: 22-26; Josh 2:1—6; 2 Kgs 6:22—23).  "The host protects the guests during their stay from abuse by the host's fellow citizens and/or the guests' enemies" (Arterbury and Bellinger 2005, 391).	YHWH protects David from harm.
<b>Honor</b>	A good host treats his guests with honor by anointing the guest's head with fine, spiced oil (Pss 45:7; 92:10; 133:2; Am 6:6; Lk 7:46).	YHWH treats David honorably by anointing David's head (cf. Ps 23:5).
<b>Pursuer</b>	"The host often sees the travelers from a distance and runs out to offer hospitality to them (cf. Gen 18:2; 19:1; 24:29)" (Arterbury and Bellinger 2005, 391).	YHWH pursues David.
<b>Summary</b>	Hosts provide food, water, lodging, and protection to their guests. They also anoint their guest's head with fine, spiced oil as a sign of honor.	YHWH provides food, water, and protection to David. He also treats David as an honorable guest by anointing his head with fine, spiced oil.

- To **arrange a table** does not mean to build a table. It means to set out food and drink for dining.<sup>49</sup> Here it is used as an image to convey a gesture of hospitality by honoring a guest with a meal.<sup>50</sup>

<sup>48</sup> Mirriam-Websters.

<sup>49</sup> TWOT; Ross 2011, 566; VanGemenen 2008, 255.

<sup>50</sup> Gen 18:1-8; Exod 2:18-20. See also Ps 78:19 in which a similar expression (לַעֲרֹךְ שֶׁלֶמֶךְ) symbolizes YHWH's provision for Israel in the wilderness.



- The word translated as **table** (שֻׁלְחָן) was usually a piece of furniture made of wood. It may also refer "to something that has been spread out," like animal skin or leather, to be a flat surface for eating food.<sup>51</sup>
- In the Hebrew culture, to **arrange a table** for someone is a way to honor them. In some cultures, a literal translation of **arrange a table** would not communicate that a guest is being honored at a meal. In such cases, the meaning is more important than the image itself. For example, the Hausa CLB captures the meaning well in its translation: *you prepared a party for me*.<sup>52</sup> In Hausa culture, to prepare a party for someone shows that person high honor, and the party always contains much good food. The French NFC and Spanish NVI are similar, using the word *banquet* instead of 'table'.<sup>53</sup> Another strategy is to retain the image of a table but explain its meaning, such as, *you honor me by arranging a table*.
- The phrase **in the presence of my adversaries** (בְּנֶגְדִי צִרֵּי) emphasizes that the psalmist is safe and secure even when his enemies are near, because YHWH is the host of the banquet. In the world of the Bible, "the host is obliged to protect his guest from all enemies, at all costs."<sup>54</sup>
  - The Hebrew preposition we have rendered **in the presence of** (בְּנֶגְדִי) literally says something like *to the face of*. The NJB renders it *under the eyes of*, but the Hebrew text does not use the preposition *under* or the word *eyes*. In many languages, the simplest way to render the phrase 'in the presence of' would be to use a preposition, like *in front of* (NABRE) or *before* (Hausa CLB).<sup>55</sup> Translators may also consider using a verbal idea: *when my enemies are near*.



Graphic representation of a guest being anointed by Freeman 1998, 314.

- The phrase **you have anointed my head with oil** (שָׁחַ) refers to rubbing a fine, spiced, sweet-smelling oil upon the psalmist's head. It is a sign "of the blessing of God."<sup>56</sup> Moreover,

<sup>51</sup> SDBH.

<sup>52</sup> *Ka shirya mini biki*.

<sup>53</sup> French NFC: *tu prépares un banquet pour moi*; Spanish NVI: *dispones ante mí un banquete*.

<sup>54</sup> Briggs and Briggs 1906–1907, 210.

<sup>55</sup> *a gaban*.

<sup>56</sup> TWOT.

"anointing with oil was a customary expression of hospitality" to welcome guests and refresh their skin in an arid climate.<sup>57</sup>

- The verb we have rendered **you have anointed** has some important features for translators:
  - This is not the typical Hebrew verb for "to anoint." The Hebrew verb used here in Psalm 23:5 normally means "to make fat" (שָׁן in the *piel* stem). As it is used here, the verb means anointing in terms of "an honoring of the guest and also echoes the idea of abundance."<sup>58</sup> But it does not carry the meaning of marking someone for a change in status, such as when someone becomes a priest or king. That meaning is tied to the typical verb "to anoint," which is from a different Hebrew root (מָשַׁח).
  - The tense of the verb **you have anointed** is unique within this psalm. Most of the other verbs in this psalm are in a form (*yiqtol*) that normally indicates future or present habitual action.<sup>59</sup> However, **anointed** is in a form (*qatal*) that normally indicates an event has happened in the past. So, we have chosen to render it as a past event, though the past event continues to have an effect in the present time (using the *present perfect* tense, as the NASB does).
    - In ancient times, anointing happened before a meal. So, the psalmist is drawing the audience into the scene where he has already been anointed and is sitting to eat. This fits with the description of his **cup** that is currently **overflowing**.
- Many cultures have no familiarity with anointing the head with oil, or the act of anointing someone's head means something very different in the local culture than it did in the Bible. In such cases, it will be important to make the meaning of the action clear.
  - One possible strategy is to make the meaning clear within the translation. For example:
    - *rubbed my head with oil like [I am] a great guest* (Hausa CLB).<sup>60</sup>
    - *you honored me by anointing my head with oil* (see NLT)
    - *you have anointed my head with oil to welcome me.*
  - Another strategy is to add the information in a footnote.
- In some cultures, the default meaning of **oil** is cooking oil. In other cultures, the default meaning of oil is petroleum, that is, gasoline. Either cooking oil or gasoline would clearly be an odd thing to rub on a person's head and are not what the psalmist is referring to here. So, it may be necessary in translation to be clear that this oil is a kind that is often rubbed on the body. For example, in French culture, oil rubbed on the body is perfumed, as it was in Hebrew culture (Songs 1:3; 4:10). So, some French translations render it as *huile parfumée* (BDS, PDV, NFC). Other languages may adopt similar strategies. For more on oil (שֶׁן), see the diagram below:

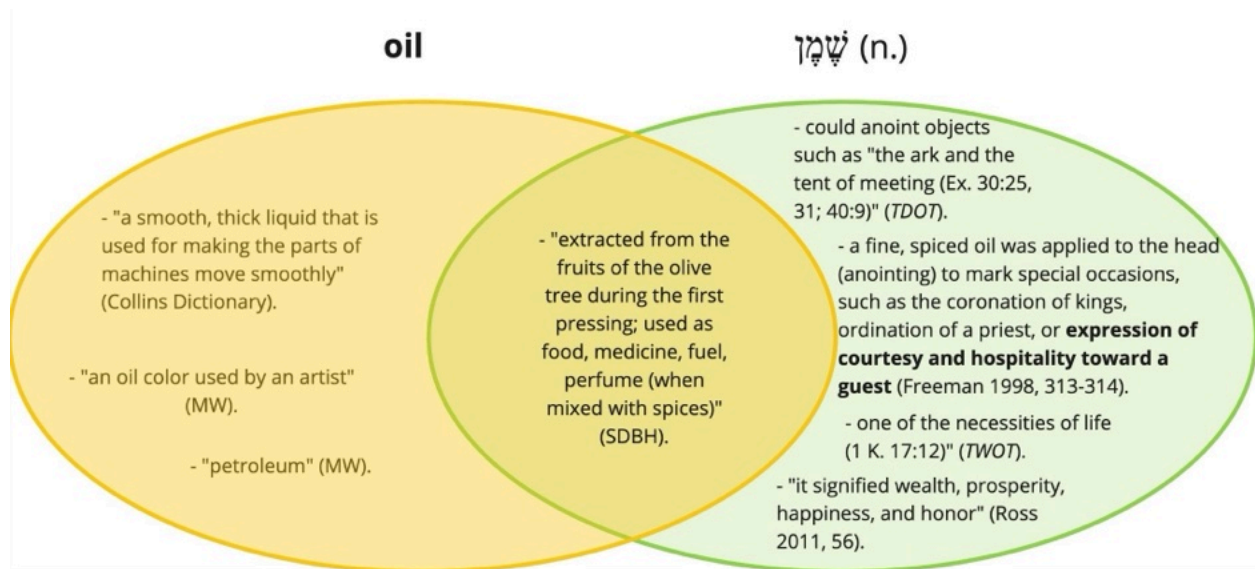
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<sup>57</sup> Futato 2009, 101.

<sup>58</sup> TDOT vol. 3, 311.

<sup>59</sup> There are also two substantive participles, and in verse 6 there is an infinitive construct.

<sup>60</sup> *Ka shafa kaina da mai kamar babban bafo.*



- The phrase **my cup is overflowing** has some important features:
  - In the Bible, the word **cup** (כּוּץ) is often used in its literal sense (as in Gen 40, 44:2), but it may also be used figuratively. When the term "cup" (כּוּץ) is used figuratively, as it is here, it is often "a symbol of one's portion or lot in life."<sup>61</sup> In other words, it is a symbol for the things a person has in life. In Ps 23:5, the cup is a symbol for *all* the benefits God provides for the psalmist.<sup>62</sup>
  - The word **overflowing** (רָוַיָּה) means that a container has been filled beyond capacity and liquid begins to spill out of it. It symbolizes "having more than enough of something."<sup>63</sup> The image portrays YHWH as the host who provides in abundance for the psalmist (see the note on verse 1, "I lack nothing").
  - Thus, the meaning of the phrase 'my cup is overflowing' is not limited to having enough to drink, but rather it is a figure of speech that conveys *having more than enough in life*. So, translations like the French PDV *you give me to drink in abundance*<sup>64</sup> should be avoided, if possible.

<sup>61</sup> Ross 2011, 568.

<sup>62</sup> Ibid. Additionally, YHWH may fill a person's "cup" with blessing or judgment based on their obedience or disobedience. For example, the prophets pronounced judgment upon sinful nations, saying that they would drink from the cup of God's wrath (Jer 25:15). Therefore, the cup symbolizes God's judgment against sin. Alternatively, the cup may represent God's blessing (Pss 16:5; 23:5; 116:13; 1 Cor 10:16). Typically, the cup of blessing refers to deliverance or salvation, but it may simply represent a life filled with good things. In any case, obedience and disobedience are not clear themes in Psalm 23, and so it would be a mistake to try to read these themes into a translation of the word **cup** here.

<sup>63</sup> DBL Hebrew.

<sup>64</sup> *tu me donnes à boire en abondance*.

- Some languages will require that the translation make clear *who* is filling the cup to overflowing. So, for example, the Hausa CLB say *you filled my cup til it overflows*<sup>65</sup> and the French BDS says *you make my cup overflow*.<sup>66</sup> In both cases, *you* refers to YHWH.

## VERSE 6

**Expanded Paraphrase** – the words in *italics* provide a fuller sense of the psalm; the text itself is in **bold**.

With you as my shepherd and host, **Surely** your **goodness and loyalty**, *instead of anything or anyone that could cause me harm*, **will pursue me all the days of my life**, and **I will dwell in YHWH's house**, *that is, I will continue to receive all the privileges and blessings of being your guest, in your presence*, **for as long as I live**.

אֶד   טוֹב וְחֶסֶד יִרְדּוּכִנִּי כָּל-יְמֵי חַיִּי וְשָׁכְנִי בְּבֵית-יְהוָה לְאֶרֶךְ יָמִים:	6	<b>Surely goodness and loyalty will pursue me</b> all the days of my life, and <b>I will dwell in YHWH's house</b> for <b>as long as I live</b> .
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- The word we have rendered **surely** (אֶד) can be understood in one of two ways:
  - It could mean *only*, so that it restricts the scope of what follows (CSB). In this case, what pursues the psalmist is restricted to 'goodness and loyalty.'
  - It could mean 'surely,' *certainly*, or *indeed* (as in most English translations; most French translations say *oui*).<sup>67</sup> In this case, the psalmist expresses confidence in God's 'goodness and loyalty' to pursue him all the days of his life. Since Psalm 23 is widely regarded as a psalm expressing confidence and trust, we prefer this option.
- Both **goodness and loyalty** are characteristics of YHWH.
  - In some languages, it will be necessary to be clear that the goodness and loyalty are attributes of YHWH. To do this, several translations add the 2nd person possessive pronoun: *your goodness and your loyalty*.<sup>68</sup> However, the rest of this verse refers to YHWH in the 3rd person, not the 2nd person (see the Poetic Feature [Not Alone, Not Afraid](#) for more detail). So, it may be best to supply 3rd person pronouns here: *his goodness and his loyalty*.
  - The word we have rendered as the noun **goodness** is the Hebrew adjective that means *good* (טוֹב). Most translations render it as a noun because an adjective cannot be the subject of a verb (in this case, the verb *pursue*). Many languages lack a word for goodness that is related to the language's adjective for *good*, but may have another noun that is a close translation

<sup>65</sup> *ka cika kwaf nawa fal har yana zubowa*. Similar is the French NFC: *Tu remplis ma coupe, elle déborde* and the Spanish NVI: *has llenado mi copa a rebosar* (see also Spanish DHH).

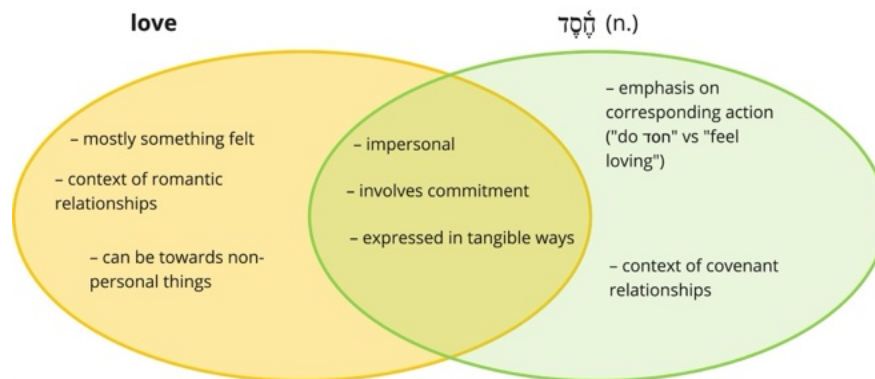
<sup>66</sup> *tu fais déborder ma coupe*. See also the French translation S21.

<sup>67</sup> In this reading, the word is an asseverative particle.

<sup>68</sup> Such as the Hausa CLB.

for goodness. For example, the Hausa CLB uses the word *alheri*, which can mean "grace, a kindness, or a good turn," that is, a good act.<sup>69</sup>

- The key word we have rendered as **loyalty** (לֵוָה) is one of the most theologically rich words in the Bible, and it appears many times in the psalms. The word refers a person or a deity's being committed to their obligations, which they show through their actions;<sup>70</sup> often, it refers to YHWH's being lovingly committed to his people, for the sake of his covenant.
  - Most languages lack a single term that communicates the full meaning of the Hebrew term **loyalty** (לֵוָה). It includes both the idea of loving kindness and commitment. Some translations choose to render it simply as *love*, but this single word may be misleading in many languages because it is not descriptive enough and suggests other kinds of love besides what is meant by the Hebrew term. For example, the following diagram shows the similarities and differences between the English word *love* and the Hebrew term:



- Other translations render the word as *fidelity*<sup>71</sup> or *grace*,<sup>72</sup> but these words also limit the meaning of the Hebrew term. Since the word includes both loving kindness and commitment, one possible strategy is to render the single Hebrew with more than one word in the local language. For example, the Hausa CLB renders it *your unchanging love*. Other options include *covenant loyalty* (SEB) or *faithful love*.
- The phrase 'goodness and loyalty' is in an unusual order in Hebrew. This order emphasizes 'goodness and loyalty' as *the* things that pursue the psalmist amongst all the possible things that could pursue him, such as such as disaster (Prov 13:21); the angel of the Lord (Ps 35:6); sword, famine, and pestilence (Jer 29:18); and adversaries (Ps 71:10-11). So, verse 6a should be understood to mean *Surely it is YHWH's goodness and loyalty that will pursue me all the days of my life*. Translators should seek to imitate this emphasis in their translations, if possible.
- The phrase **will pursue me** (יִרְדֵּפֵנִי) combines with the phrases "he leads me" (verses 2b and 3b) and "because you are with me" (verse 4) to form a key poetic feature of this psalm. These verbs draw attention to the various ways in which the psalmist has felt YHWH's presence. The description of

<sup>69</sup> Bargery Hausa Dictionary.

<sup>70</sup> SDBH.

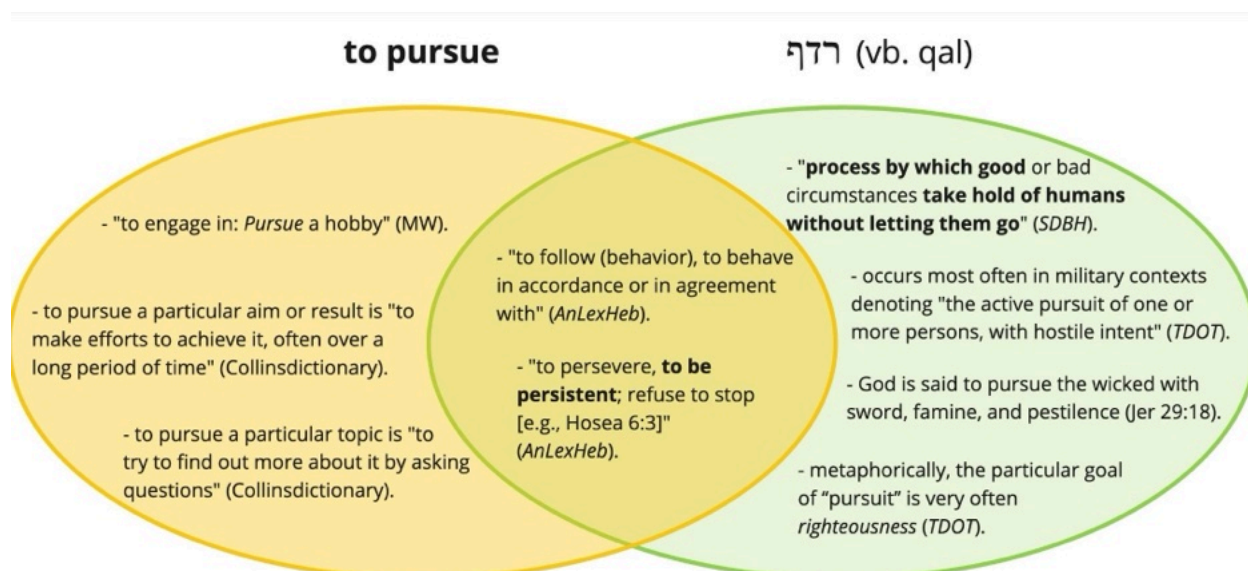
<sup>71</sup> French NBS: *la fidélité*.

<sup>72</sup> French NVS: *la grâce*.



YHWH's position as "before, beside, and behind" means that the psalmist cannot escape God's presence. See the poetic feature "[Before, Beside, Behind](#)" for further discussion.

- The Hebrew verb we have rendered as **pursue** (רדף) often has a sense that the person pursuing desires to cause harm to the person they are chasing.<sup>73</sup> So, the use of this verb with "goodness and loyalty" as the subject is surprising.<sup>74</sup> The diagram below compares the Hebrew verb (רדף) with the English word pursue:



- It is important that the verb 'will pursue me' conveys the idea of YHWH's attributes being *behind* the psalmist. So, rendering this verb as *will accompany me* (most French translations)<sup>75</sup> or *will be with me* (GNT) hides a key poetic feature of the psalm. To avoid overtones of doing harm, translators may consider something like *will follow me* (ESV, NIV).
- The phrase **I will dwell in YHWH's house** is a figure of speech that has some important elements to consider:
  - The verb we have rendered as **I will dwell** (וַיִּשְׁכֵּן) is sometimes translated as *I will return*, due to the way the word is pointed in the Hebrew text.<sup>76</sup> However, there are three reasons against this rendering: 1) the theme of dwelling in YHWH's house is common in other psalms, 2) the ancient translations rendered it as 'I will dwell,' and 3) taking the verb as *I will return* causes some challenges in terms of Hebrew grammar. So, the reading 'I will dwell' is preferred. For more detail, see the discussion here: [The Text of Ps. 23:6b](#).
  - The psalmist does not literally dwell in YHWH's house in the same way a Levite resides in the temple. Instead, dwelling in YHWH's house is used to refer to living in YHWH's *presence*.

<sup>73</sup> For example, Pss 7:2; 18:38; 69:27; 71:11; etc.

<sup>74</sup> Futato 2009, 101.

<sup>75</sup> French NBS, NVS, NFC; see also French PDV: *ton amour m'accompagne*.

<sup>76</sup> For example, this is the reading of all the major French translations.

- The expression for **as long as I live** (אֶרְדֵּי יָמַיִם) literally says *length of days*, which in Hebrew was a way to say "length of life, long life."<sup>77</sup> It "does not mean 'forever'" since the psalm is about the psalmist's situation in the here and now, and there is no indication elsewhere in the psalm that it is about eternity.<sup>78</sup> Additionally, the expression 'as long as I live' is parallel with the expression 'all the days of my life' in the previous line, and so the two most likely mean the same thing. The idea is that the psalmist will continue to receive all the privileges and blessings of being YHWH's guest for as long as he lives. Modern translations that follow this rendering include:
  - NVSR: *pour la durée de mes jours*
  - GNT: *as long as I live*
  - NRSV: *my whole life long*
  - Hausa CLB: *dukan kwanakin raina.*

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<sup>77</sup> HALOT.

<sup>78</sup> Alter 2019, 71.

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