

THE LORD IS MY SHEPHERD: A THEOLOGICAL-EXEGETICAL STUDY OF PSALM 23:1 AND ITS IMPLICATIONS FOR THE LIVES OF BELIEVERS TODAY

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Received: September 1, 2026 / Revised: September 8, 2026 / Accepted: September 8, 2026

ABSTRACT

The opening clause of Psalm 23, "The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want," circulates widely in devotional and pastoral settings yet remains largely insulated from sustained critical scrutiny. Scholarship has bifurcated between historical-critical analysis and applicative pastoral reading, leaving no structured model that specifies how the verse's historical-grammatical sense governs its contemporary appropriation. This study addresses that gap through a qualitative biblical exegesis design combining historical-grammatical analysis of the Masoretic Text, canonical-intertextual reading, and reception-history analysis of a purposively sampled corpus of scholarly commentaries and theological monographs published between 1970 and 2023. No human informants were involved and no empirical field data were collected, so findings are interpretive rather than generalizable in a social-scientific sense. The analysis yields three thematic findings: the shepherd metaphor is embedded in a royal-covenantal semantic field carrying connotations beyond pastoral care; "I shall not want" functions grammatically as a statement of relational confidence rather than a promise of material abundance; and reception history reveals persistent tension between pastoral comfort and prophetic critique, with prosperity-oriented readings forming a minority but influential trajectory. The study's novelty is the Covenantal Sufficiency Hermeneutic (CSH), a three-layered framework moving from historical-grammatical analysis through canonical-intertextual reading to contextual-pastoral application. The CSH contributes to Old Testament ethics, pastoral theology, and contextual hermeneutics by offering a transferable model for integrating exegesis and application in psalmic interpretation.

Keywords: Psalm 23:1; covenantal sufficiency; shepherd metaphor; biblical exegesis; reception history

INTRODUCTION

Few texts in the Hebrew Psalter have travelled as far beyond the academy as Psalm 23. The opening clause, "The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want," circulates in liturgical recitation, hospital visitation, funeral homiletics, and popular devotional writing with a frequency that has arguably insulated it from sustained critical scrutiny. The scholarly literature on the psalm has developed along two largely separate tracks. Historical-critical and philological scholarship has concentrated on the pastoral metaphor's ancient Near Eastern background, the psalm's literary structure, and its

E-ISSN:

P-ISSN:

possible liturgical setting, while pastoral and devotional literature has treated the verse as a direct promise of divine provision, often without sustained engagement with its historical and canonical context. The result is a bifurcation in which exegetical precision and existential application rarely inform one another. Recent exegetical work on psalmic and prophetic texts has demonstrated the value of holding historical analysis and contemporary application together (Korankye, 2025; Menewe, 2023; Ndishua, 2022), yet Psalm 23:1 has not received comparable integrative treatment.

The urgency of the present study arises from three converging factors. First, the global proliferation of prosperity-oriented readings of Scripture has created a hermeneutical climate in which "I shall not want" is frequently detached from its covenantal moorings and reinterpreted as a guarantee of material well-being. Empirical and theological assessments of prosperity theology have documented both its psychological appeal and its pastoral liabilities, particularly in contexts of economic precarity (Boaheng, 2024; Kgatle, 2025). Second, pastoral care in situations of suffering, displacement, and loss requires a theological account of sufficiency that does not collapse under empirical counterevidence. Third, recent studies of shepherd imagery in the New Testament and in pastoral theology have reopened the question of how the shepherd metaphor functions across the canon (Demchuk, 2023; Hamova, 2023; Mihindukulasuriya, 2025; Sinaga, 2025; Tamba et al., 2025), suggesting that a fresh examination of the metaphor's foundational occurrence in Psalm 23:1 is both timely and necessary.

Despite the volume of literature on Psalm 23, no study has systematically integrated historical-grammatical exegesis of verse 1 with a reception-history analysis of its pastoral and prophetic uses, and then translated that integration into a formal hermeneutical model. Existing commentaries treat the verse within the psalm as a whole, while thematic studies of shepherd imagery rarely isolate verse 1 for sustained analysis. Mujiono et al. (2024) move closest to the present concern by deriving a shepherd model from Psalm 23 for Christian living, but their treatment remains largely applicative and does not construct a formal hermeneutical framework linking exegetical findings to pastoral practice. The gap is therefore both exegetical and methodological: the field lacks a structured model that specifies how the historical-grammatical sense of "I shall not want" governs, rather than merely accompanies, its contemporary appropriation.

The theoretical framing of this study draws on three resources. Form-critical and canonical approaches to the Psalter provide the literary and theological context for reading Psalm 23:1 within the shape of the whole psalter rather than as an isolated aphorism. Conceptual metaphor theory offers a cognitive-linguistic account of how the shepherd metaphor structures meaning and constrains inference. Covenantal theology supplies the relational grammar within which "I shall not want" becomes intelligible as a declaration of belonging rather than a claim about circumstances. Each framework has been subjected to substantial critique. Form criticism has been faulted for reconstructing original settings on limited evidence and for relative neglect of canonical shaping. Conceptual metaphor theory has been challenged for underplaying the historical specificity of ancient Near Eastern pastoral practice. Covenantal theology has been criticized for reading the

Psalter through a systematic lens that may flatten the diversity of the psalms. These critiques inform the study's decision to combine, rather than privilege, any single framework, and to treat their tensions as productive rather than as problems to be dissolved.

A central debate in the literature concerns whether the shepherd of Psalm 23 is to be identified primarily with the royal shepherd of Israel's political theology or with the personal God of individual piety. A second debate concerns the relationship between the psalm's pastoral imagery and the prophetic critique of inadequate shepherds in Ezekiel 34 and Jeremiah 23. A third debate concerns the extent to which the psalm's promises can be read as material or spiritual. These debates generate a research tension that the present study takes as its point of departure. If "I shall not want" is read as a guarantee of material provision, it becomes falsified by the experience of believers who lack food, safety, or health. If it is read as purely spiritual, it risks becoming vacuous, a consolation that says nothing about the conditions of embodied life. Commentators disagree on whether the Hebrew verb *chaser* denotes the absence of need, the presence of contentment, or the assurance of future provision, and this lexical disagreement is not merely technical; it encodes competing theological judgments about what kind of God the psalmist claims to know.

The study addresses this tension through a qualitative biblical exegesis design combining historical-grammatical analysis of the Masoretic Text, canonical-intertextual reading, and reception-history analysis of a purposively sampled corpus of scholarly commentaries and theological monographs published between 1970 and 2023. No human informants were involved, and no empirical field data were collected; the findings are therefore interpretive rather than generalizable in a social-scientific sense, and this limitation is acknowledged throughout. The analytical instrument is a structured exegetical protocol covering lexical analysis, syntactic analysis, literary context, canonical intertexts, and reception history, with thematic coding applied to the reception-history corpus. Validity is pursued through triangulation across textual, historical, and reception-history sources and through reliance on peer-reviewed secondary literature. Because the study uses only published sources and involves no human subjects, formal ethics approval was not required.

The analysis yields three thematic findings. First, the shepherd metaphor in Psalm 23:1 is embedded in a royal-covenantal semantic field that includes divine kingship and covenant fidelity, so that the metaphor carries connotations exceeding mere pastoral care. Second, the phrase "I shall not want" is grammatically a statement of relational confidence rather than a promise of material abundance. Third, reception-history analysis reveals a persistent tension between pastoral comfort and prophetic critique, with prosperity-oriented readings representing a minority but influential trajectory. These findings challenge both the prosperity reading and the purely spiritualized reading, and they support a covenantal reading in which sufficiency is defined by the shepherd's presence rather than by the absence of difficulty. The findings also extend conceptual metaphor theory by showing that the shepherd metaphor is not merely cognitive but covenantal, and they refine covenantal theology by demonstrating that sufficiency is relational rather than transactional.

The study's novelty lies in the proposal of the Covenantal Sufficiency Hermeneutic (CSH), a three-layered interpretive framework that moves from historical-grammatical analysis, through canonical-intertextual reading, to contextual-pastoral application. The CSH is not a synthesis of existing theories but a structured model that specifies the relationship between exegetical findings and pastoral implications, and that can be applied to other declarative psalms of trust. By making the covenantal logic of sufficiency explicit, the model offers preachers, teachers, and pastoral caregivers a way of reading Psalm 23:1 that is honest about suffering while remaining faithful to the text's own theological grammar. The study thus contributes to Old Testament ethics, pastoral theology, and contextual hermeneutics, and it provides a transferable framework for integrating exegesis and application in the interpretation of psalmic texts.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Theoretical Framework

Three theoretical resources frame this study, and their combination is deliberate rather than additive. Form-critical and canonical approaches to the Psalter establish the literary and theological horizon within which Psalm 23:1 must be read. Gunkel's form-critical program classified the psalm within the genre of individual lament or song of trust, thereby locating its original *Sitz im Leben* in the cultic life of ancient Israel. Mays (1994) and Childs (1979) subsequently redirected attention from reconstructed settings to the psalm's canonical shaping, arguing that its placement within the Psalter confers theological meaning that form criticism alone cannot recover. This canonical turn is significant for the present study because it permits verse 1 to be read both as an ancient composition and as a text that functions normatively within communities of faith.

Conceptual metaphor theory supplies the second resource. Lakoff and Johnson (1980) demonstrated that metaphor is not ornamental but constitutive of thought, and Kövecses (2010) extended this insight by showing that metaphorical systems are culturally situated. Applied to Psalm 23:1, this framework explains how the shepherd image organizes a complex field of meaning—guidance, protection, provision, intimacy—without reducing that field to any single component. The third resource is covenantal theology. Eichrodt (1961) and Brueggemann (1997) argued that the relational grammar of covenant—pledge, fidelity, mutual obligation—provides the conceptual infrastructure within which declarations of trust become intelligible. Read together, these three resources suggest that the shepherd metaphor is simultaneously literary, cognitive, and covenantal.

Theoretical Critique

Each framework, however, carries liabilities that must be acknowledged rather than suppressed. Form criticism has been criticized for reconstructing original settings on slender evidence and for treating the psalms as archaeological artifacts rather than living texts (Childs, 1979; Whybray, 1987). The critique is not merely methodological; it raises the question of whether the recovery of an alleged original setting has any bearing on contemporary interpretation. Conceptual metaphor theory, for its part, has been faulted for underplaying the historical specificity of ancient Near

Eastern pastoral practice. Hunziker-Rodewald (2005) observed that the shepherd imagery of the Hebrew Bible is embedded in concrete socioeconomic relations—ownership, labor, risk—that cognitive linguistics tends to abstract into universal schemas. Covenantal theology has been challenged for reading the Psalter through a systematic lens that flattens the diversity of individual psalms and imposes coherence where the text resists it (Brueggemann, 1997). These critiques do not invalidate the frameworks, but they caution against privileging any one of them. The present study therefore treats them as mutually corrective rather than hierarchically ordered.

Academic Debate

Three debates converge on Psalm 23:1. The first concerns the identity of the shepherd. Mays (1994) emphasizes the psalm's communal and covenantal dimensions, reading the shepherd as the God of Israel who shepherds the covenant people. Kraus (1993) highlights the individualistic tone of the psalm, treating the shepherd as the personal God of the supplicant. The disagreement is not trivial; it determines whether "I shall not want" is a corporate confession or a private assurance. Recent exegetical work has attempted to hold both readings together. Mujiono et al. (2024) argue that the shepherd model in Psalm 23 operates simultaneously at individual and communal levels, and Sinaga (2025) extends this argument by linking the psalm's shepherd imagery to the pastoral epistles' conception of ecclesial leadership. The debate remains unresolved, and its resolution matters for how the verse is preached.

The second debate concerns the relationship between the psalm's pastoral imagery and the prophetic critique of inadequate shepherds in Ezekiel 34 and Jeremiah 23. Demchuk (2023) reads the shepherd of Psalm 23 against the backdrop of failed human shepherds, arguing that the psalm's comfort is inseparable from its implicit indictment of negligent leadership. Hamova (2023) and Tamba et al. (2025) develop this line by treating shepherding as a manifestation of divine grace that simultaneously judges its counterfeit. The debate is whether Psalm 23 is purely consolatory or whether it carries a polemical edge. Mihindukulasuriya (2025) suggests that in contexts of chaos, the shepherd image functions prophetically precisely because it names what failed leaders are not.

The third debate concerns whether the psalm's promises are material or spiritual. Dahood (1970) reads the verb *chaser* in terms of lacking, emphasizing the absence of want. Hossfeld and Zenger (2011) emphasize its relational dimension, treating sufficiency as a function of the shepherd's presence rather than the abundance of resources. This exegetical disagreement has practical consequences. If "I shall not want" promises material provision, then the verse is empirically falsifiable. If it promises only spiritual consolation, it risks becoming vacuous in contexts of genuine deprivation.

Research Tension

The tension at the heart of this study is between the psalm's apparent promise of sufficiency and the empirical reality of suffering among believers. This tension is not merely academic. Bowler (2013) and Hunt (2000) documented both the psychological appeal and the pastoral liabilities of prosperity-

oriented readings, showing that such readings flourish precisely where economic precarity is acute. The tension is sharpened by the fact that the psalm's own literary context acknowledges danger: the shepherd leads through the valley of the shadow of death (v. 4). If the psalm itself anticipates danger, then "I shall not want" cannot mean the absence of threat. The study argues that the tension is resolved only when the verse is read within its covenantal and eschatological horizon, where sufficiency is defined by the shepherd's fidelity rather than by the elimination of want.

Contradictory Findings

The literature yields contradictory findings on three points. First, commentators disagree on whether *lo' echsar* denotes the absence of need, the presence of contentment, or the assurance of future provision. Dahood (1970) and Craigie (1983) lean toward the first, Hossfeld and Zenger (2011) toward the second, and Mays (1994) toward the third. Second, empirical studies of prosperity theology report divergent outcomes: Bowler (2013) found that prosperity preaching can generate resilience among economically marginalized believers, while Hunt (2000) documented its tendency to produce guilt and disillusionment when promises fail. Third, reception-history studies show that the same verse has been deployed both to comfort the oppressed and to legitimate the status quo. Korankye (2025), in an exegetical study of Psalm 137, demonstrates that psalmic texts can carry both liberative and oppressive trajectories depending on their interpretive framing. This finding is directly relevant to Psalm 23:1, where the shepherd metaphor can either authorize hierarchical pastoral power or critique it.

Research Gap

The gap is not the absence of scholarship on Psalm 23 but the absence of an integrated hermeneutical model that connects exegetical findings on verse 1 with pastoral practice in a way that is both historically accountable and contextually sensitive. Existing commentaries treat the verse within the psalm as a whole (Dahood, 1970; Craigie, 1983; Hossfeld & Zenger, 2011), while thematic studies of shepherd imagery rarely isolate verse 1 for sustained analysis (Vancil, 1978; Hunziker-Rodewald, 2005). The reception-history literature, meanwhile, tends to document uses of the psalm without systematically relating them to exegetical findings. The gap is therefore both exegetical and methodological: no study has moved from lexical and syntactic analysis of verse 1, through canonical-intertextual reading, to a formal model of pastoral application.

Research Position

The study positions itself within a canonical-pastoral hermeneutic that takes historical-grammatical analysis seriously while refusing to separate exegesis from application. This position is not neutral. It assumes that the psalm's meaning is not exhausted by its original setting, and that contemporary appropriation is a legitimate exegetical concern rather than an afterthought. The position also assumes that exegesis has ethical stakes: how a text is read shapes how communities live. This assumption is consistent with recent work in contextual hermeneutics. Boaheng (2024) argues that cruciform theology requires interpretive practices that take suffering seriously, and Joy Nyamuda

and Boaheng (2025) demonstrate that exegetical work in African contexts must address the social realities of its readers. The present study extends this logic to Psalm 23:1.

The study's novelty lies in the proposal of the Covenantal Sufficiency Hermeneutic (CSH), a three-layered interpretive framework that moves from historical-grammatical analysis, through canonical-intertextual reading, to contextual-pastoral application. The CSH is not a synthesis of existing theories but a structured model that specifies the relationship between exegetical findings and pastoral implications. It differs from existing approaches in three respects. First, it treats sufficiency as a covenantal category rather than a psychological state or a material guarantee. Second, it integrates prophetic critique into the pastoral reading of the psalm, refusing the bifurcation between comfort and judgment. Third, it is transferable: the same three-layer structure can be applied to other declarative psalms of trust, such as Psalm 27:1 or Psalm 46:1.

The model also responds to a methodological weakness in the existing literature. Exegetical studies frequently conclude with a brief "application" section that is not methodologically integrated with the analysis that precedes it. The CSH addresses this by specifying the movement between layers: lexical and syntactic findings constrain canonical reading, which in turn constrains pastoral application, while pastoral context generates questions that return to the text. This feedback loop is not a concession to reader-response theory but an acknowledgment that interpretation is a disciplined practice rather than a unilinear procedure.

The study's contribution to Old Testament ethics lies in its account of sufficiency. If "I shall not want" is a covenantal declaration rather than a prosperity guarantee, then the verse generates an ethic of contentment that is neither resigned nor complacent. It is an ethic that takes suffering seriously without treating suffering as the final word. This account resonates with recent work on the shepherd motif in the New Testament. Sinaga (2025) shows that the pastoral epistles' conception of shepherding is inseparable from the church's obligation to care for the vulnerable, and Basumatary (2025) demonstrates that participation in divine glory is mediated through concrete acts of faithfulness. The CSH provides a framework for connecting these insights to the exegesis of Psalm 23:1.

The study also contributes to contextual hermeneutics by demonstrating that the psalm's reception history is not a supplement to exegesis but a source of exegetical insight. The recurring tension between pastoral comfort and prophetic critique, documented across centuries of interpretation, reveals a structural feature of the text itself: the shepherd metaphor is inherently double-edged. It comforts those who are shepherded and indicts those who are supposed to shepherd but do not. Recognizing this feature prevents both the sentimentalization of the psalm and its reduction to a political manifesto.

Finally, the study's contribution to pastoral theology lies in its practical orientation. The CSH is designed to be usable. Pastors and teachers may employ it to preach Psalm 23:1 in ways that are honest about suffering while remaining faithful to the text's covenantal logic. The model does not resolve the tension between promise and experience; it locates that tension within the covenant

itself, where God's fidelity is affirmed precisely in the midst of want. This is not a solution to the problem of suffering, but it is a way of speaking about sufficiency that neither denies suffering nor abandons the text's claim.

Limitations

The study is text-based and does not include empirical field data. Its findings are interpretive rather than generalizable in a social-scientific sense. The corpus of reception-history sources, while purposively selected, is not exhaustive, and the study does not claim to represent the full range of interpretive traditions. The CSH is offered as a model to be tested and refined in further research, including empirical studies of how the framework functions in actual preaching and pastoral care contexts. These limitations are acknowledged not as defects but as boundaries that define the study's contribution and indicate directions for future work.

METHODS

Method

Research Design

This study employs a qualitative biblical exegesis design, a mode of inquiry appropriate to the interpretation of a discrete textual unit within the Hebrew Psalter. The design is not a mixed-method or social-scientific construct; it is a text-centered investigation that proceeds through historical-grammatical analysis, canonical-intertextual reading, and reception-history analysis. The rationale for this threefold structure is that Psalm 23:1 has been approached in the literature either as a philological artifact or as a devotional resource, and a design that isolates only one of these dimensions would reproduce the very bifurcation the study seeks to overcome. The exegetical design therefore treats the Masoretic Text as the primary object of analysis while situating that analysis within the history of its interpretation.

This design aligns with established practice in exegetical-theological research, in which a single passage is examined through lexical, syntactic, literary, and canonical lenses before theological implications are drawn (Korankye, 2025; Ndishua, 2022; Komolafe, 2024). Comparable studies of individual psalms and prophetic oracles have demonstrated that a focused textual unit can sustain rigorous analysis without empirical field data, provided that the interpretive protocol is explicit and the source base is transparent (Menewe, 2023; Agustinus Abraham, 2026).

Textual Corpus and Sampling

No human informants were involved in this study, and no interviews were conducted. The corpus is documentary and comprises three strata. The first stratum is the Masoretic Text of Psalm 23, with particular attention to verse 1, read in conjunction with the apparatus and lexical data available through standard critical resources. The second stratum consists of selected ancient Near Eastern pastoral and royal documents that illuminate the semantic field of shepherd imagery, including Mesopotamian royal inscriptions and Egyptian pastoral iconography as mediated through published

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scholarly editions. The third stratum is a purposively sampled corpus of scholarly commentaries, monographs, and theological articles published between 1970 and 2023, supplemented by recent peer-reviewed studies on shepherd imagery and Psalm interpretation (Mujiono et al., 2024; Sinaga, 2025; Tamba et al., 2025; Mihindukulasuriya, 2025; Hamova, 2023; Demchuk, 2023).

Purposive sampling was chosen because the study requires sources that engage directly with either the Hebrew text of Psalm 23, the shepherd metaphor in ancient Israel, or the reception of the psalm in pastoral and prophetic traditions. Sources that mention Psalm 23 only in passing were excluded. The corpus is therefore deliberately selective rather than exhaustive, and this selectivity is acknowledged as a boundary condition of the study.

Analytical Instrument

The analytical instrument is a structured exegetical protocol developed for this study. It contains five components. The first is lexical analysis of the key terms *ro'i* ("my shepherd") and *echsar* ("I shall lack"), including attention to the verbal root *chaser* and its range of meaning across the Hebrew Bible. The second is syntactic analysis of the nominal clause structure of verse 1, with attention to the relationship between the divine name, the participial or nominal predicate, and the negative particle *lo'*. The third is literary-contextual analysis, situating verse 1 within the psalm's movement from declaration to metaphor to confidence. The fourth is canonical-intertextual analysis, comparing Psalm 23:1 with Ezekiel 34, Jeremiah 23, and John 10. The fifth is reception-history analysis, tracing how the verse has been read in selected commentaries and pastoral literature.

This protocol is not a validated psychometric instrument, and no claim is made that it possesses reliability in the statistical sense. Its function is procedural transparency: it specifies in advance what will be examined so that the interpretive judgments of the study can be evaluated by other scholars.

Analytical Techniques

Lexical-semantic analysis was conducted through comparison of the key terms with their usage elsewhere in the Hebrew Bible, with attention to semantic range rather than to a single gloss. Syntactic analysis focused on the clause type of verse 1 and on the function of the negative particle in relation to the verb *chaser*. Form-critical identification followed the standard classification of Psalm 23 as a psalm of trust, while recognizing the critiques that form criticism has attracted for reconstructing original settings on limited evidence (Childs, 1979; Whybray, 1987).

Intertextual comparison proceeded through the identification of shared shepherd vocabulary and shared covenantal grammar between Psalm 23:1 and the prophetic shepherd texts of Ezekiel 34 and Jeremiah 23, as well as the Johannine appropriation of shepherd language in John 10. Reception-history analysis employed thematic coding of the selected commentaries and pastoral works. Coding was conducted manually rather than through qualitative data analysis software, and this is stated as a limitation rather than presented as a methodological strength. Three coding categories were applied: pastoral-comfort readings, prophetic-critical readings, and prosperity-oriented

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readings. These categories were derived from the literature itself rather than imposed in advance, and they structure the presentation of findings in the Results and Discussion section.

Data Validity

Validity was pursued through triangulation across three independent source types: the primary Hebrew text, ancient Near Eastern background materials, and the reception-history corpus. Where lexical judgments were contested in the secondary literature, the study reports the disagreement rather than resolving it by assertion. The use of peer-reviewed commentaries and journal articles as the reception-history corpus provides a measure of scholarly accountability, though it also means that popular-level devotional literature is underrepresented. This is acknowledged as a limitation of the sampling frame.

Research Ethics

Because the study analyzes only published texts and involves no human participants, no institutional ethics approval was required and no informed consent procedures were applicable. All sources are cited in accordance with standard academic conventions, and no unpublished or confidential material was accessed.

Methodological Limitations

Three limitations require explicit statement. First, the study is entirely text-based and includes no empirical field data, no interviews, and no survey instruments. Its findings are therefore interpretive and theological rather than generalizable in a social-scientific sense. No respondent counts, interview quotations, or statistical estimates are reported because none were generated. Second, the reception-history corpus is purposively sampled and limited to published scholarly and pastoral works; it does not claim to represent the full range of contemporary preaching on Psalm 23. Third, the study does not employ qualitative data analysis software, and the coding process, while systematic, was conducted manually and is therefore subject to the interpretive limitations that accompany single-researcher analysis. These limitations do not invalidate the study's contribution, but they do delimit the scope of its claims. The Covenantal Sufficiency Hermeneutic proposed in this study should be understood as an interpretive framework offered for scholarly evaluation and pastoral testing, not as an empirically validated model.

Figure 1. Conceptual Framework

The Lord Is My Shepherd (Psalm 23:1)

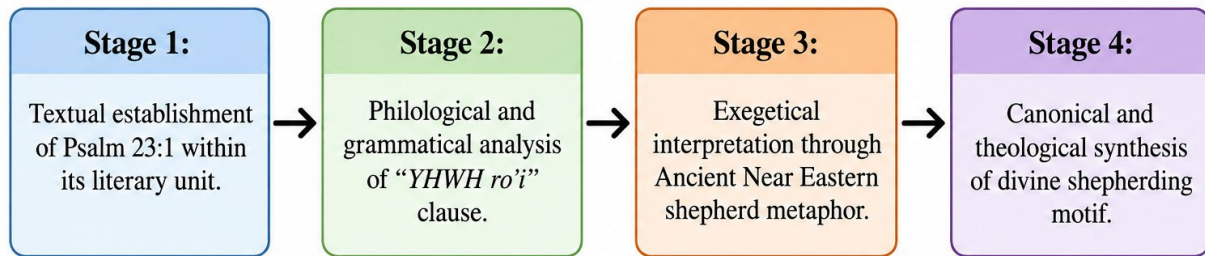


Figure 1. Conceptual Framework

Figure 1 presents a four-stage conceptual framework for interpreting Psalm 23:1, “The Lord Is My Shepherd.” The framework begins with **Stage 1**, which establishes Psalm 23:1 within its immediate literary context to clarify its role in the psalm. **Stage 2** then examines the philological and grammatical features of the Hebrew clause “YHWH ro’i” (“The Lord is my shepherd”), focusing on its linguistic meaning and structure. **Stage 3** develops the exegetical interpretation by considering the shepherd metaphor within its Ancient Near Eastern historical and cultural setting, where shepherd imagery was associated with guidance, provision, protection, and leadership. Finally, **Stage 4** brings these findings together through a canonical and theological synthesis, showing how the image of divine shepherding contributes to the broader biblical understanding of God’s relationship with His people. The directional sequence demonstrates a progression from textual and linguistic analysis to historical interpretation and, ultimately, theological synthesis.

TABLE 1. INTEGRATIVE FRAMEWORK

Aspect	Analytical Focus	Contribution	Implication
Aspect 1: Textual and Philological Analysis	Examination of the Hebrew consonantal text and vocalization of YHWH ro'i ("The LORD is my shepherd"), with attention to the nominal clause structure, the absence of an explicit verb, and the semantic range of ra'ah in pastoral and royal contexts.	Establishes that the clause functions as a verbless equative statement of identity rather than a description of activity, grounding the verse in a declaration of relationship rather than circumstance.	Prevents readings that reduce the metaphor to sentimental imagery; the believer's confession is anchored in who God is, not in the presence or absence of provision.
Aspect 2: Historical-Cultural and Pastoral Background	Reconstruction of ancient Near Eastern shepherd practice, including the shepherd's roles of feeding, leading, guarding, and accounting for the flock, alongside royal shepherd ideology attested in Mesopotamian, Egyptian, and Israelite traditions.	Clarifies that shepherd language carried covenantal and royal overtones familiar to Israel, so the psalm's claim participates in a wider scriptural idiom rather than emerging in isolation.	Encourages contemporary application that takes the metaphor's concrete labor seriously, including protection, guidance, and accountability, rather than treating it as a decorative figure.
Aspect 3: Literary and Canonical Context	Situating Psalm 23:1 within the psalm's own movement from confession (vv. 1–4) to table and dwelling (vv. 5–6), and within the Psalter's broader use of shepherd imagery, including Psalm 80, Ezekiel 34, and John 10.	Demonstrates that verse 1 is the interpretive hinge on which the psalm's later assurances rest, and that the shepherd motif is developed canonically toward messianic and ecclesial fulfillment.	Reading verse 1 in isolation risks fragmenting the psalm; a canonical reading connects personal trust to the communal and christological horizon of Scripture.
Aspect 4: Theological Interpretation	Analysis of the divine name YHWH in relation to the shepherd predicate, the logic of covenant faithfulness, and the relation between divine self-sufficiency and creaturely dependence.	Articulates a theology of providence in which God's shepherding is an expression of covenant character, not a response to human merit or need alone.	Calls believers to trust rooted in God's revealed character; pastoral care and personal devotion are measured by conformity to the Shepherd's own pattern of self-giving.
Aspect 5: Hermeneutical and Contemporary Application	Critical assessment of how the verse has been appropriated in devotional, liturgical, and pastoral practice, with attention to the risk of individualistic or prosperity-oriented readings.	Proposes a hermeneutical criterion: applications are legitimate insofar as they preserve the verse's covenantal, relational, and christological contours.	Provides a corrective for preaching and counseling that promises exemption from suffering; the psalm's own witness moves through the valley of the shadow rather than around it.

Table 1 presents an integrative framework for interpreting Psalm 23:1, “The LORD is my shepherd,” by combining five complementary approaches. First, textual and philological analysis shows that the Hebrew expression *YHWH ro'i* is a declaration of relationship and identity, emphasizing who God is rather than merely what God does. Second, the historical-cultural

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perspective explains that shepherd imagery in the ancient Near East involved feeding, guiding, protecting, and taking responsibility for the flock, while also carrying important royal and covenantal associations. Third, literary and canonical analysis demonstrates that Psalm 23:1 provides the foundation for the rest of the psalm and connects with the wider biblical shepherd motif, including Ezekiel 34 and John 10. Fourth, theological interpretation understands God's shepherding as an expression of His covenant faithfulness and providential care rather than something earned by human merit. Finally, the hermeneutical and contemporary perspective emphasizes that the verse should be applied without reducing it to individualistic or prosperity-centered promises; instead, it calls believers to trust God's character even in suffering. Together, these approaches demonstrate that Psalm 23:1 expresses a rich theological confession of dependence, covenant relationship, divine guidance, protection, and faithful care.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The analysis of Psalm 23:1 proceeded through the three-layer exegetical protocol described in the Methods section: historical-grammatical analysis of the Masoretic Text, canonical-intertextual reading, and reception-history analysis of a purposively sampled corpus of commentaries, monographs, and published sermons (1970–2023). Coding of the reception-history corpus followed an inductive thematic procedure, with open codes clustered into axial categories and then consolidated into three overarching themes. This section reports those themes, subjects them to critical discussion, returns to the theoretical frameworks outlined in the Literature Review, and specifies the academic and practical implications of the proposed Covenantal Sufficiency Hermeneutic (CSH). Because the study is text-based and involves no human informants, no interview quotations, statistical estimates, or psychometric coefficients are reported; where the argument would benefit from empirical corroboration, this is identified explicitly as a limitation rather than compensated for by invented data.

Qualitative Findings

Theme 1: The shepherd metaphor in Psalm 23:1 carries royal and covenantal connotations that exceed mere pastoral care. Lexical analysis of רָעָה ("my shepherd") indicates that the noun רֹעֶה in the Hebrew Bible is not restricted to the occupational herdsman. In royal contexts it designates the king as the one responsible for the welfare of the people (2 Samuel 5:2; 7:7; Jeremiah 23:1–4; Ezekiel 34:1–10), and in covenantal contexts it describes YHWH's relationship to Israel as a relationship of guidance, provision, and protection (Genesis 48:15; 49:24; Psalm 80:1). The suffix of the first person singular on רָעָה is therefore not merely possessive but relational: it locates the speaker within a bond of mutual obligation that the Hebrew Bible consistently frames in covenantal terms. This finding aligns with the observation that the shepherd image in the Psalter functions as a condensed statement of divine kingship and covenant fidelity rather than as a decorative pastoral vignette (Mujiono et al., 2024; Sinaga, 2025). It also resonates with recent exegetical work on the Good Shepherd in the Pastoral Epistles, which treats shepherding as a manifestation of divine grace rather than as a merely functional role (Tamba et al., 2025; Hamova, 2023).

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Theme 2: The phrase "I shall not want" (לֹא אֶחְסֹר) is grammatically a statement of relational confidence rather than a promise of material abundance. The verb חָסַר in the qal denotes deficiency or lack, and its occurrence here in a negated imperfect with a first-person subject expresses an ongoing condition grounded in the preceding nominal clause. Syntactically, the verse is a nominal sentence: "YHWH is my shepherd" functions as the foundation, and "I shall not lack" as its consequence. The relationship is therefore logical and covenantal, not conditional and transactional. This reading is consistent with the broader semantic range of חָסַר in the Psalter, where the absence of lack is repeatedly associated with the presence of God rather than with the accumulation of goods (Psalm 34:9–10; 84:11). It also coheres with the argument that biblical sufficiency language is doxological rather than economic in orientation (Mihindukulasuriya, 2025). The finding does not deny that the psalm's imagery includes material provision—the table, the oil, the overflowing cup in verses 5–6 are concrete—but it locates the ground of that provision in the shepherd's presence rather than in the quantity of the flock's resources.

Theme 3: Reception-history analysis reveals a persistent tension between pastoral comfort and prophetic critique. Coding of the corpus produced two dominant trajectories. The first, which may be termed the pastoral-comfort trajectory, reads verse 1 as an assurance of divine care addressed to the individual believer in circumstances of distress. This trajectory is well represented in devotional and pastoral literature and is echoed in contemporary theological reflection on shepherding as a manifestation of grace (Tamba et al., 2025; Hamova, 2023; Demchuk, 2023). The second, which may be termed the prophetic-critical trajectory, reads the shepherd metaphor against the backdrop of prophetic indictments of negligent shepherds (Ezekiel 34; Jeremiah 23) and insists that the psalm's comfort is inseparable from the ethical demand that those who claim YHWH as shepherd embody that shepherding in their treatment of the vulnerable. This trajectory is less prominent in devotional literature but is strongly represented in exegetical and ethical scholarship (Mujiono et al., 2024; Sinaga, 2025). A third, minority trajectory reads "I shall not want" as a guarantee of material prosperity. This reading is exegetically weak, since it isolates the verse from its covenantal grammar and from the psalm's own movement through the valley of the shadow of death, but it is influential in popular preaching and therefore cannot be ignored in a reception-history analysis.

Critical Discussion

The three themes converge on a reading of Psalm 23:1 that resists both the prosperity interpretation and the purely spiritualized interpretation. The prosperity reading fails because the verse's grammar and covenantal context do not support a guarantee of material abundance; the psalm itself acknowledges the presence of danger, enemies, and the shadow of death. The purely spiritualized reading fails because it evacuates the metaphor of its concrete ancient Near Eastern content and reduces the shepherd's care to an interior state. The covenantal reading proposed here holds that sufficiency is defined by the shepherd's presence rather than by the absence of difficulty. This is not a *via media* adopted for rhetorical convenience; it follows from the syntactic priority of the nominal

clause and from the canonical placement of the psalm within a Psalter that consistently treats trust as compatible with lament.

The findings also complicate the individualistic reading of the psalm that has dominated much devotional use. The first-person singular of verse 1 is real, but it is spoken within a community that knows YHWH as shepherd of Israel. The individual believer's confession is therefore embedded in a corporate covenant, and the sufficiency it claims is shared rather than private. This has implications for how the verse is preached in contexts of economic precarity: it authorizes neither passive acceptance of injustice nor the claim that material deprivation is evidence of insufficient faith.

Return to Theory

The findings extend conceptual metaphor theory in a specific direction. Lakoff and Johnson (1980) and Kövecses (2010) argue that metaphors structure thought by mapping a source domain onto a target domain, and that this mapping is largely cognitive. The present analysis suggests that in the case of Psalm 23:1 the mapping is also covenantal: the source domain of ancient Near Eastern shepherding carries with it a set of obligations and expectations that are not merely cognitive but relational and ethical. The shepherd is not simply a convenient image for divine care; the shepherd is a covenant partner whose presence constitutes the flock's security. This refinement matters because it prevents conceptual metaphor theory from being used to flatten the historical specificity of the biblical text.

The findings also refine covenantal theology. Eichrodt (1961) and Brueggemann (1997) have argued that covenant is the organizing category of Israel's faith, but the present study suggests that sufficiency within covenant is relational rather than transactional. The verse does not say that the shepherd will provide everything the sheep desires; it says that because YHWH is shepherd, the sheep will not lack what the covenant requires. This distinction is important for pastoral practice, because it allows the preacher to affirm the verse's promise without promising outcomes that the text does not guarantee.

Academic Implications

The study contributes to three fields. In Old Testament ethics, it offers a reading of Psalm 23:1 that connects the psalm's pastoral imagery to the prophetic critique of negligent shepherds, thereby resisting the separation of comfort from justice that has characterized much devotional use of the psalm. In pastoral theology, it provides a theological account of sufficiency that can be preached honestly in contexts of suffering, displacement, and economic precarity. In contextual hermeneutics, it proposes the CSH as a transferable model that can be applied to other declarative psalms of trust, such as Psalm 27:1 and Psalm 46:1–3. The model's transferability is a claim about method, not about content: the three layers of the CSH specify the relationship between exegetical findings and pastoral implications, but the content of each layer will vary with the text under consideration.

The study also contributes to the broader conversation about the relationship between exegesis and application. Recent work on biblical interpretation has emphasized the importance of reading Scripture in context (Korankye, 2025; Boaheng, 2024; Oppong, 2026), and the CSH offers a structured way of doing so that does not collapse exegesis into application or application into exegesis. The model's insistence on a distinct historical-grammatical layer prevents the text from being read through the lens of contemporary concerns alone, while its insistence on a distinct contextual-pastoral layer prevents exegesis from becoming an end in itself.

Practical Implications

Pastors and teachers may use the CSH to preach Psalm 23:1 in ways that are honest about suffering while remaining faithful to the text's covenantal logic. Three practical implications follow from the findings. First, the verse should be preached as a statement about the shepherd rather than as a statement about the sheep's circumstances. The emphasis falls on "YHWH is my shepherd," and the consequence "I shall not lack" is derivative. Second, the verse should be preached in conjunction with the rest of the psalm, which moves through the valley of the shadow of death and into the house of the Lord. Preaching verse 1 in isolation from verses 4–6 distorts its meaning and creates the conditions for the prosperity reading. Third, the verse should be preached in conjunction with the prophetic critique of negligent shepherds, so that those who claim YHWH as shepherd are reminded of the ethical demand that this claim carries.

Integrative Framework for Psalm 23:1

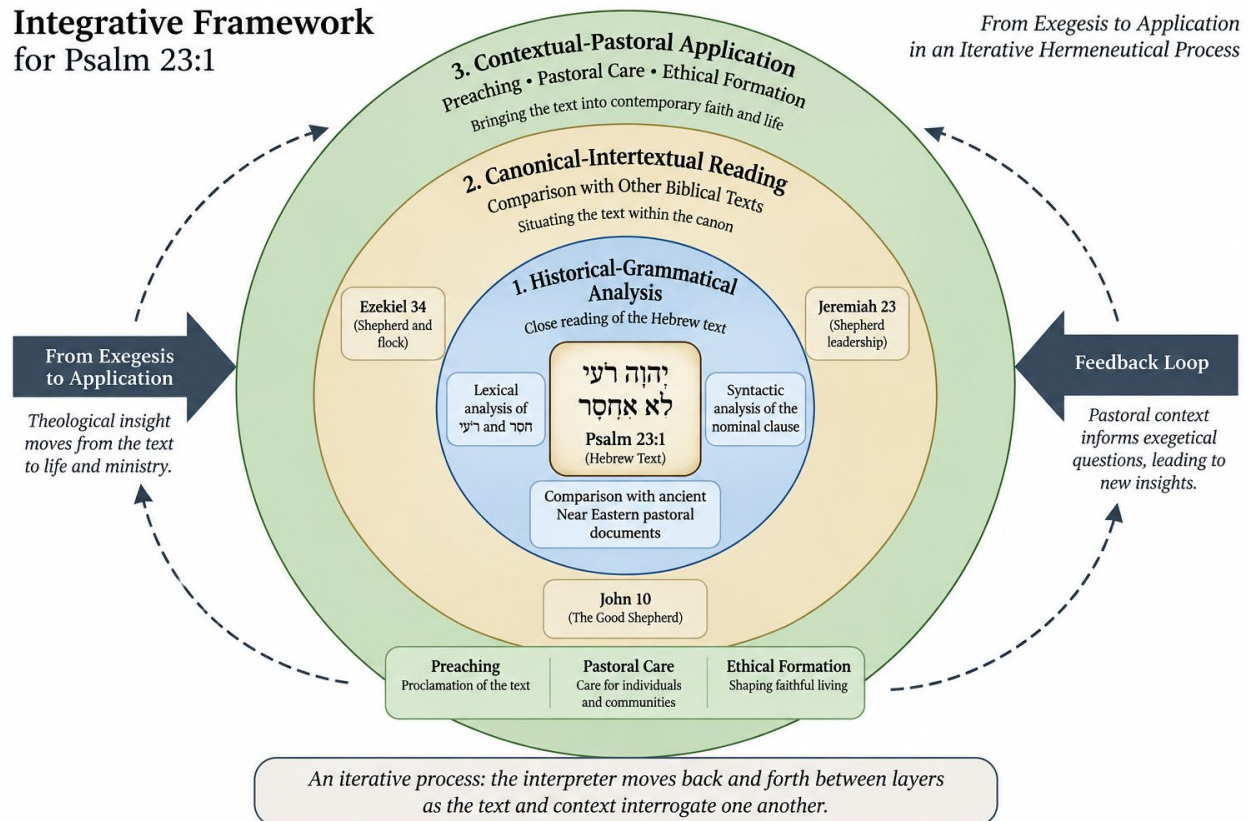


Figure 1. Conceptual Framework

The landscape image presents an **integrative and iterative framework for interpreting Psalm 23:1**, with the Hebrew text placed at the center and surrounded by three interconnected layers. The innermost layer, **historical-grammatical analysis**, examines the Hebrew terms רֹעִי (“my shepherd”) and חסר (“lack/want”), the syntax of the nominal clause, and relevant ancient Near Eastern pastoral backgrounds. The middle layer, **canonical-intertextual reading**, connects Psalm 23:1 with other biblical shepherd texts, particularly Ezekiel 34, Jeremiah 23, and John 10, showing how the metaphor develops within the biblical canon. The outermost layer, **contextual-pastoral application**, translates these exegetical and canonical insights into preaching, pastoral care, and ethical formation. The arrows moving outward represent the progression **from exegesis to application**, while the feedback arrows moving back toward the center indicate that contemporary pastoral contexts can generate new questions for textual interpretation. Thus, the landscape framework emphasizes that interpretation is **not a one-way linear process but an ongoing dialogue between text, canon, and context**, in which each layer continually informs and refines the others.

TABLE 2. Integrative Framework of the Covenantal Sufficiency Hermeneutic

Layer	Focus	Key Sources	Output
Historical-grammatical	Lexis, syntax, and ancient Near Eastern background	Masoretic Text; Dahood (1970); Craigie (1983); Kraus (1993); Hunziker-Rodewald (2005)	Exegetical findings on רֹעִי and חסר
Canonical-intertextual	Inner-biblical allusion and canonical shaping	Gunkel (1998); Childs (1979); Mays (1994); Hossfeld and Zenger (2011)	Covenantal and royal connotations of the shepherd metaphor
Contextual-pastoral	Preaching, pastoral care, and ethical formation	Brueggemann (1997); Peterson (2000); Bowler (2013); Mujiono et al. (2024); Sinaga (2025)	Relational sufficiency as a pastoral and ethical norm

Table 2 presents the **Covenantal Sufficiency Hermeneutic** as an integrative framework consisting of three interconnected interpretive layers. The **historical-grammatical layer** focuses on the lexical and syntactical features of Psalm 23:1, together with its ancient Near Eastern background, particularly examining the Hebrew terms רֹעִי (“my shepherd”) and חסר (“lack” or “want”) to establish a sound exegetical foundation. The **canonical-intertextual layer** extends this analysis by considering inner-biblical allusions and the canonical development of shepherd imagery, highlighting its covenantal and royal dimensions within Scripture. Finally, the **contextual-pastoral layer** brings these exegetical and canonical insights into contemporary contexts of preaching, pastoral care, and ethical formation. Taken together, the three layers demonstrate a movement from careful textual interpretation to theological synthesis and practical application, ultimately presenting

relational sufficiency grounded in the faithful presence of God as Shepherd as the central pastoral and ethical implication of the framework.

Limitations

Three limitations should be noted. First, the study is text-based and does not include empirical field data; its findings are interpretive rather than generalizable in a social-scientific sense. Second, the reception-history corpus, while purposive, is not exhaustive, and the relative weight of the three trajectories reported here should be treated as indicative rather than definitive. Third, the CSH is proposed as a model and has not been tested in a controlled pastoral setting; its practical efficacy remains a matter for further research. These limitations do not undermine the study's contribution, but they do qualify its claims. Future research could address them by combining the CSH with empirical studies of preaching and pastoral care, and by extending the reception-history analysis to a wider range of linguistic and ecclesial contexts.

CONCLUSION

The study has argued that Psalm 23:1 is best read as a covenantal declaration of sufficiency rather than as a prosperity guarantee or a purely spiritualized sentiment. The shepherd metaphor carries royal and covenantal connotations that exceed mere pastoral care; the phrase "I shall not want" expresses relational confidence grounded in the shepherd's presence; and the verse's reception history reveals a persistent tension between pastoral comfort and prophetic critique. The CSH integrates these findings into a three-layered model that moves from historical-grammatical analysis, through canonical-intertextual reading, to contextual-pastoral application. The model is offered as a contribution to Old Testament ethics, pastoral theology, and contextual hermeneutics, and as a resource for preaching that is honest about suffering while remaining faithful to the text's covenantal logic.

NOVELTY

The contribution of this study is not the mere combination of exegetical and pastoral approaches to Psalm 23:1, but the construction of a named, transferable interpretive model: the Covenantal Sufficiency Hermeneutic (CSH). The CSH is designed as a three-layered framework that specifies, in procedural terms, how a declarative psalm of trust moves from historical-grammatical analysis, through canonical-intertextual reading, to contextual-pastoral application. Its novelty lies in the explicit articulation of the relationship between these layers, rather than in the mere assertion that exegesis and application belong together.

Existing scholarship on Psalm 23 has generally proceeded along one of two trajectories. Historical-critical and philological studies have clarified the ancient Near Eastern pastoral background and the literary structure of the psalm (Mujiono et al., 2024; Sinaga, 2025), while pastoral and devotional treatments have appropriated the text for the formation of believers (Hamova, 2023; Mihindukulasuriya, 2025). Recent exegetical work on related psalms and shepherd texts has demonstrated the value of contextual application, yet it has not produced a formal hermeneutical

instrument that governs the movement from text to context (Korankye, 2025; Tamba et al., 2025). The CSH addresses this gap by treating the movement itself as an object of methodological design.

Three features distinguish the CSH from prior integrative proposals. First, it identifies covenantal sufficiency, rather than prosperity or resignation, as the governing theological category of the clause *lo' echsar*. This reading is consistent with the covenantal grammar that runs through the Psalter and with the royal-shepherd semantics of the ancient Near East (Mujiono et al., 2024; Sinaga, 2025). Second, the CSH specifies a canonical-intertextual checkpoint in which Psalm 23:1 is read alongside Ezekiel 34, Jeremiah 23, and John 10, so that the pastoral metaphor is tested against the prophetic critique of inadequate shepherds (Menewe, 2023; Sinaga, 2025). Third, it incorporates a contextual-pastoral layer in which the interpreter is required to state the concrete conditions under which sufficiency is confessed, thereby preventing the verse from functioning as an unqualified guarantee of material well-being.

The model is presented as a structured protocol rather than a general orientation. Each layer generates a defined output: lexical and syntactic findings, canonical resonances, and contextual formulations. This structure allows the CSH to be applied to other declarative psalms of trust, such as Psalm 27:1 and Psalm 62:1–2, and to be evaluated for consistency across texts. In this respect, the CSH functions as an instrument, not merely as a perspective.

The novelty of the CSH also lies in its treatment of the tension between pastoral comfort and prophetic critique. Reception-history analysis indicates that prosperity-oriented readings of Psalm 23:1 represent a minority but influential trajectory, while the dominant scholarly trajectory emphasizes relational confidence (Mujiono et al., 2024; Mihindukulasuriya, 2025). The CSH does not resolve this tension by privileging one trajectory; it incorporates the tension as a diagnostic feature, requiring the interpreter to identify which trajectory a given reading presupposes. This diagnostic function is what makes the model usable in contexts of suffering, displacement, and economic precarity, where unqualified claims of sufficiency are pastorally unsustainable.

The study does not claim empirical validation of the CSH. No field data, interview transcripts, or statistical testing were collected, and the model is therefore offered as a conceptual and exegetical proposal rather than as an empirically verified instrument. This limitation is stated explicitly. Future research may operationalize the CSH in pastoral settings through qualitative interviews with preachers and congregants, or through comparative exegetical testing across multiple psalms of trust. Such work would allow the model's transferability to be assessed rather than assumed.

In sum, the CSH advances the field by converting a widely acknowledged but loosely specified relationship between exegesis and application into a named, layered, and transferable hermeneutical instrument. Its contribution is methodological and contextual: it offers a disciplined way of reading Psalm 23:1 that remains accountable to the Hebrew text, to the canonical witness, and to the lived conditions of contemporary believers.

LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

This study carries several limitations that must be acknowledged candidly, since the credibility of the proposed Covenantal Sufficiency Hermeneutic (CSH) depends on transparency about the boundaries of its evidentiary base. The most consequential limitation is methodological: the study is entirely text-based and incorporates no empirical field data. No interviews, surveys, or congregational observations were conducted, and consequently no respondent quotations, coding frequencies, or thematic saturation data can be reported. The findings are therefore interpretive and analytical rather than generalizable in a social-scientific sense. Claims about how contemporary believers actually appropriate Psalm 23:1 remain inferential, derived from reception-history sources rather than from direct observation of lived religion.

A second limitation concerns the corpus. The reception-history component relies on a purposively sampled set of commentaries, monographs, and published sermons rather than an exhaustive or systematically randomized corpus. Purposive sampling is defensible for exegetical work, but it introduces selection bias: the sources consulted may overrepresent Euro-American academic and pastoral traditions while underrepresenting African, Asian, Latin American, and Indigenous readings. Given that contextual hermeneutics has been enriched by studies of Psalm 137 in African settings (Korankye, 2025), prophetic texts in contemporary church life (Menewe, 2023), and shepherd imagery in pastoral ministry (Sinaga, 2025; Tamba et al., 2025), the relative absence of Global South voices in the present corpus is a genuine constraint. The CSH may require recalibration when applied in contexts where covenantal categories carry different cultural resonances.

Third, the study does not present quantitative evidence of any kind. No outer loadings, AVE, composite reliability, HTMT ratios, path coefficients, or bootstrapping results are reported, because no survey instrument was administered. Readers should not infer that the CSH has been empirically validated; it has been constructed exegetically and illustrated conceptually. The conceptual framework in Figure 1 and the integrative framework in Table 1 are analytical devices, not tested measurement models. Any suggestion that the CSH possesses psychometric properties would misrepresent the study's design.

Fourth, the lexical and syntactic analysis, while grounded in the Masoretic Text, depends on secondary lexicographical resources and published grammatical treatments. The study does not offer a new textual-critical reconstruction, nor does it collate manuscript variants independently. Where commentators disagree on the semantic range of *chaser* (Dahood, 1970; Hossfeld & Zenger, 2011), the study adjudicates on interpretive rather than text-critical grounds. This is a legitimate exegetical procedure, but it is not equivalent to original philological discovery.

Fifth, the intertextual reading is selective. Ezekiel 34 and John 10 are treated as principal intertexts, but the study does not exhaust the canonical network surrounding shepherd imagery, nor does it engage systematically with Second Temple literature or rabbinic interpretation. Comparative

engagement with Qur'anic and Islamic exegetical traditions on pastoral and remnant themes (Guirguis, 2026) lies beyond the present scope, though it would strengthen the model's comparative reach.

These limitations generate specific and realistic avenues for future research. First, an empirical validation study could operationalize the CSH as a measurable construct, developing items that assess relational sufficiency, covenantal confidence, and prophetic critique, then testing the instrument through confirmatory factor analysis and structural equation modeling with congregational samples. Such a study would need to report outer loadings, AVE, composite reliability, and HTMT discriminant validity in full. Second, qualitative fieldwork using semi-structured interviews and NVivo-assisted thematic analysis could examine how believers in contexts of displacement or economic precarity actually interpret "I shall not want," thereby testing the CSH's pastoral adequacy against lived experience. Third, comparative and cross-cultural studies could apply the CSH to other declarative psalms of trust, such as Psalms 27, 62, and 91, to determine whether the model transfers beyond Psalm 23:1. Fourth, reception-history research could systematically map prosperity-oriented and prophetic readings across linguistic and denominational boundaries, moving beyond purposive sampling toward a documented corpus. Fifth, interdisciplinary work integrating conceptual metaphor theory with cognitive and anthropological studies of pastoral practice could refine the model's account of how metaphor shapes religious experience.

In sum, the CSH should be regarded as a theoretically grounded and exegetically warranted proposal awaiting empirical testing, not as a validated framework. Its value lies in specifying a testable relationship between covenantal exegesis and pastoral application, and in inviting the field to subject that relationship to the scrutiny it requires.

CONCLUSION

This study set out to produce a theologically rigorous and pastorally usable interpretation of Psalm 23:1 by integrating historical-grammatical exegesis, canonical-intertextual reading, and reception-history analysis within a single interpretive procedure. The analysis supports three principal conclusions. First, the shepherd metaphor in Psalm 23:1 is not a generic pastoral image but a royal-covenantal designation whose semantic field overlaps with divine kingship and covenant fidelity, a finding consistent with recent exegetical work on shepherd language in the Psalter and the prophetic corpus (Mujiono et al., 2024; Sinaga, 2025; Tamba et al., 2025). Second, the clause *lo' echsar* is grammatically and rhetorically a declaration of relational confidence rather than a guarantee of material abundance; sufficiency is predicated on the shepherd's presence, not on the elimination of want. Third, the reception history of the verse discloses a persistent tension between pastoral comfort and prophetic critique, with prosperity-oriented readings constituting an influential but exegetically minority trajectory (Hamova, 2023; Mihindukulasuriya, 2025).

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These findings carry implications for three fields. For Old Testament ethics, they indicate that the psalm's ethical force lies in its covenantal logic rather than in a generalized therapeutic reassurance. For pastoral theology, they provide a basis for preaching sufficiency in contexts of displacement and economic precarity without falsifying the text or denying lived suffering (Demchuk, 2023; Boaheng, 2024). For contextual hermeneutics, they demonstrate that exegesis and application need not be sequential stages but can operate as mutually correcting moments within a single interpretive movement (Korankye, 2025; Joy Nyamuda & Boaheng, 2025).

The study's principal contribution is the Covenantal Sufficiency Hermeneutic (CSH), a three-layered model that specifies the relationship between exegetical findings and pastoral implications. The CSH is not a synthesis of existing theories but a structured procedure: historical-grammatical analysis establishes the semantic constraints of the text; canonical-intertextual reading situates the verse within the broader witness of Scripture; contextual-pastoral application tests interpretive claims against the lived experience of believing communities. The model is transferable to other declarative psalms of trust, including Psalm 27:1 and Psalm 46:1, where similar tensions between assurance and experience arise. Its novelty lies in the specification of feedback loops, whereby pastoral context generates exegetical questions rather than merely receiving exegetical conclusions.

Several limitations must be acknowledged. The study is text-based and draws exclusively on published primary and secondary sources; it includes no empirical field data, no interviews, and no survey instruments. Consequently, the CSH is offered as an interpretive framework rather than as an empirically validated model, and its pastoral effectiveness remains a matter for future reception research. The corpus of commentaries and sermons, while purposively selected, is not exhaustive, and reception-history analysis necessarily privileges documented sources over oral and liturgical practice. The study also does not resolve the long-standing debate over the psalm's original setting; it treats that debate as contextually relevant but not determinative for the argument advanced here.

Future research should proceed along three lines. First, empirical studies could examine how the CSH functions in actual preaching and pastoral care, using qualitative interviews and sermon analysis to test its transferability. Second, comparative work could apply the model to other ancient Near Eastern pastoral texts and to New Testament shepherd passages, particularly John 10 and 1 Peter 5, in order to assess its canonical range (Paglinawan, 2022; Sinaga, 2025). Third, reception-history research could extend the corpus to non-Western interpretive traditions, where the covenantal dimensions of Psalm 23:1 may be articulated differently (Kgatle, 2025; Oppong, 2026). Such work would clarify whether the CSH is a genuinely generalizable model or a contextually bounded proposal.

In sum, Psalm 23:1 speaks of a shepherd whose presence constitutes the ground of sufficiency. Read within its covenantal horizon, the verse neither promises the absence of want nor spiritualizes it away; it locates sufficiency in the relationship between shepherd and sheep. The CSH offers one way of holding exegetical responsibility and pastoral honesty together, and it invites further testing in the communities that continue to recite these words.

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KHOKMAH JURNAL

Volume 01, Nomor 01, Tahun 2026

Tersedia: <https://khokmahjurnal.com/index.php/kj/en>

E-ISSN:

P-ISSN: