Why Psalm 23 is about the resurrection of Christ

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It struck me the other day that Ps 23 should be, and in fact is, about the resurrection of Jesus. Here is an outline of the reasons why.

1. It seems very clear that Ps 22 is “about” the crucifixion.
   a. The opening words of v 1 are on the lips of the Lord Jesus on the cross.
   b. Other references include
      i. Compare verse 7 “all who see me mock me, they wag their heads; “He trusts in the Lord; let him deliver him; let him rescue him, for he delights in him” with Matt 27:43, “He trusts in God; let God deliver him now, if he desires him.” See also Mark 16:29 “derided him, wagging their heads”.
      ii. The vivid description in vv14-15 sounds exactly like what we know of crucifixion: “my bones are out of joint”, “my tongue sticks to my jaws”.
      iii. See v 16 “they have pierced my hands and feet” - a precise description of the process.
      iv. Again v 17 “they stare and gloat over me”.
      v. Verse 18 is astonishing in the accuracy of its fulfilment at the hands of the Romans who knew nothing of the Psalm: “they divide my garments among them, and for my clothing they case lots”, with Matt 27:35 “they divided his garments among them by casting lots” (also Mk 15:24 adds “to decide what each should take”; Luke 23:34.) John 19:23-24 gives us the extended version: “they took his garments and divided them into four parts, one part for each soldier; also his tunic...(which they had to cast lots for as it could not easily be torn)”, with John actually giving a precise quote from Ps 22:18 on Jn 19:24, noting “This was to fulfil the Scripture...”

2. It then seems to have been acknowledged from an early time that Ps 24 can be read to be about the ascension of Jesus and his return to heaven.
   a. The Psalm opens with celebration of God the king of the universe.
   b. It then turns to envisage the entrance of one of God's people into his heavenly sanctuary. But who could possibly be holy enough to do so as a mere man?
   c. The only one who could would be God’s chosen King, the Messiah!

7 Lift up your heads, O gates! And be lifted up, O ancient doors, that the King of glory may come in. 8 Who is this King of glory? The Lord, strong and mighty, the Lord, mighty in battle!
Ps 23 and the Resurrection of the Messiah

d. How appropriate that the victorious Messiah, who has defeated Death, should be welcomed into the heavenly Palace!

e. The history of this Psalm being read as an allusion to the ascension of Jesus can be traced at least back to Handel’s Messiah, which is where he places this oratorio. But the image of the Messiah ascending on high after a glorious victory is also seen in Ps 68:18, and that verse is applied by Paul to the risen Lord Jesus in Eph 4:8.

f. Spurgeon says, in his comment on v 7:

These last verses reveal to us the great representative man, who answered to the full character laid down, and therefore by his own right ascended the holy hill of Zion. Our Lord Jesus Christ could ascend into the hill of the Lord because his hands were clean and his heart was pure, and if we by faith in him are conformed to his image we shall enter too. We have here a picture of our Lord’s glorious ascent. We see him rising from amidst the little group upon Olivet, and as the cloud receives him, angels reverently escort him to the gates of heaven.

3. If Ps 22 is about the crucifixion, and Ps 24 can be read to be about the ascension - then it would seem to suggest that we will find the resurrection in Ps 23!

a. True, not all Psalms that are adjacent to one another are thematically linked. But they may be. All three Psalms are labelled “A Psalm of David”. (Though a number of other Psalms are also so labelled.)

b. Reference to the resurrection of the Messiah, it turns out, can be discerned in Ps 23, though they are not on the “surface” of the Psalm.

i. What does the Psalmist mean in v 3 when he says “he restores my soul”? We tend to read it in a very subjective, “refreshes me” sort of way. But “soul” was often used a synonym for life as a whole. In Ps 16:10 we read: “you will not abandon my soul to Sheol, or let your holy one see corruption”. There is absolutely no doubt that this verse (16:10) was seen as a direct prophecy of the resurrection of the Messiah- Peter quotes it as such in Acts 2:27, and Paul does so also in Acts 13:35 (both passages being “paradigm” gospel sermons.) Could the reference to the Psalmist’s “soul” being restored in Ps 23:3 also be an allusion to resurrection?

ii. In Ps 23:4 the writer actually walks through “the valley of the shadow of death” but fears no evil, for the Lord’s power comforts him. Again, we can read this in a subjective way, as referring to a “dark time” or a “dark mood”. But is it possible that it is in fact a direct reference to the resurrection of the Messiah from the literal “death” to which he has come?

iii. The joyful tone of the last few verses is completely consistent with a literal rescue from death. Now goodness and mercy are to follow the writer “all the days of [his] life”, and he is to “dwell in the house of the LORD forever”. Having been in death, his life is now proclaimed to never end!

iv. The footnote to v 6 in the ESV raises the possibility that this is even clearer. The word usually translated “dwell” can, it seems, also be translated “shall return (to dwell)”. The writer,
then, has in the past been in a permanent way in “the house of the LORD” and is now to come back. This could describe the King of Israel who in a sense dwelled near the Temple; but it even more closely fits the pre-existent Messiah whom we know from the revelation of the Lord Jesus.

v. There is a very interesting discussion on what seems to be a Jewish website, [http://messiahtruth.yuku.com/topic/3268#To5uer-N4aA](http://messiahtruth.yuku.com/topic/3268#To5uer-N4aA), discussing the translation where the following comment is made:

I did a little more checking on this word to find out if I am missing something. The wordrschein רושבתי is also found in Gen 28:21, Ecc 4:1, Ecc 4:7, Jer 29:14, Jer 30:3, Jer 48:47, Eze 16:53, Eze 29:14, Amo 9:14 and in each case Stone’s Tanach translates this word as “I will return” (except Jer 48:47 where it is translated as “I will bring back”). Only in Psalm 23:6 is it translated as “I will dwell.” Conversely I checked the wordישבתי and found that it is only used once in SofS 2:3, and it is translated in the Stone’s as “I will sit.” From all of this it appears thatראשבתי in Psalm 23:6 should be translated as “I will return,” unless the translators are saying thatיושבתי is an error here and should beירושבתי.

vi. The Hebrew, then, seems most naturally translated “I will return” to the house of the LORD. Translators have perhaps corrected this because at the time of the Psalm, if written by David, the “house of the LORD” if viewed as the physical Temple was not in existence. But viewed from this side of Easter, it can be seen as yet another prediction that the Messiah of Ps 22 would, after his death, go to dwell with the LORD in life! (If it is suggested that this would not necessarily mean “resurrection”, but rather a “disembodied existence” in heaven, the fact is that there was no such hope in the OT.)

4. Ps 23:6, then, expresses the Psalmist’s hope that he will be raised from the dead and live forever with God in his heavenly House. It seems to me to be yet another strand in the evidence from the Old Testament that the Messiah, when he came, would not only die as the Suffering Servant but would rise again!

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