

LETTER 43
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"SHADOW OF DEATH" OR "DARKNESS" IN PSALM 23:4

The translation of this Hebrew word is not nearly as clear as most present-day scholars think. However I do not feel that it is a problem of great importance since no doctrine or Biblical principle is affected by the question which of the two translations is correct.

The Hebrew word that is rendered in this way might be transliterated as *salmawet*. If this appeared as two words, there would be little question that *sal* was the normal Hebrew word for "shadow of," and that *mawet* is the normal Hebrew word for "death". However it is extremely rare in Hebrew to have a compound word made up by the combination of two simple words in such a way. The word occurs about twenty times, and almost half of these are in the Book of Job. It is sometimes used in contrast with "light" and sometimes in parallel with another word for "darkness." In many cases the idea of deadly peril or something connected with death is involved in the context.

In view of the extreme rarity of such compound words in Hebrew, and of the fact that the vowel points were not included in our Hebrew Bible until the 5th century A.D., a scholar made the suggestion a good many years ago that the word should be pronounced as *salmuwt*. On the basis of a parallel in Arabic, which language has many relationships with Hebrew, he suggested that such a form might reasonably mean a darkness of an unusually heavy type. This interpretation has been accepted by most modern scholars.

To my mind the strongest argument for maintaining the traditional rendering as "shadow of death" is the fact that it was so rendered by the Greek translation made 200 years before the time of Christ. However, I feel that there is considerable weight in the other suggestion and that in any event no doctrinal point is