

Psalm 22: A Prophetic Foreshadowing of Christ's Passion

D. Gene Williams Jr., PhD
Defend the Word Ministries
NorthPointe Church

INTRODUCTION

Psalm 22 is widely regarded within Christian theology as a prophetic psalm, closely paralleling the suffering and crucifixion of Jesus Christ. The psalm's vivid imagery—from the cry of abandonment to the description of pierced hands and feet—has been central to Christian apologetics. However, Jewish interpreters traditionally view it as an individual lament or a reference to Israel's collective suffering.

KEY SECTIONS AND ARGUMENTS

Jewish Interpretations and the “Pierced” vs. “*Like a Lion*” Debate (Psalm 22:16)

- The Masoretic Text reads “*like a lion*” (ka’ari), while the Septuagint (LXX) translates it as “*they have pierced*” (ka’aru). The distinction depends on a single Hebrew letter (yod vs. vav).
- Nahal Hever Manuscripts (Dead Sea Scrolls) support the Septuagint’s “*pierced*” reading, suggesting that this may reflect an older Hebrew tradition.
- Jewish interpreters like Rashi see Psalm 22 as a lament psalm rather than messianic prophecy, while early Christians interpreted it as foretelling Christ’s crucifixion (e.g., Justin Martyr in *Dialogue with Trypho*).

Historical and Theological Reading: The Crucifixion as Fulfillment

- Jesus' cry from the cross (Matthew 27:46; Mark 15:34) mirrors the opening verse of Psalm 22, connecting His suffering with David's lament.
- Events like the piercing of hands and feet and casting lots for garments (Psalm 22:18) align closely with Gospel accounts, reinforcing the prophetic nature of the psalm (John 19:23-24).
- The early Church Fathers saw these parallels as evidence of divine inspiration and fulfilled prophecy.

Translation Nuances in Aramaic, Hebrew, and Greek

- Jesus' words, "*Eli, Eli, lema sabachthani?*" (Aramaic), convey emotional abandonment but do not imply literal divine separation.
- Matthew's Gospel preserves a closer connection to the Hebrew form of Psalm 22:1, while Mark's version reflects Galilean Aramaic, showing Jesus' cultural connection to His audience.

Theological Implications: Did God Forsake Jesus on the Cross?

- Some argue, based on Habakkuk 1:13, that God cannot look upon sin, implying that the Father "*turned His back*" on Jesus. However, this misinterprets Habakkuk—God does not abandon sinners but engages with them throughout Scripture (Genesis 3).
- **Trinitarian Unity:** The Father, Son, and Spirit remain united during the crucifixion. The cry of abandonment reflects Jesus' human experience of separation due to sin, not a rupture in the Trinity.

- Misunderstanding this unity risks theological errors like Arianism (suggesting inferiority of the Son) or Nestorianism (implying a division between Christ’s divine and human natures).

Symbolism of the “*Crimson Worm*” (Psalm 22:6)

- The use of the word *tola’ath* (crimson worm) in Psalm 22:6 offers symbolic parallels to Christ’s sacrifice.
 - The coccus ilicis worm attaches itself to a tree, dies, stains the tree red, and after three days turns white—mirroring Jesus’ death, burial, and resurrection.
 - This imagery reinforces the atoning nature of Christ’s death and the promise of new life through His resurrection.

EARLY CHURCH RECEPTION OF PSALM 22

- Justin Martyr, Tertullian, and Augustine emphasized Psalm 22’s alignment with the events of the crucifixion, interpreting it as part of God’s redemptive plan.
- Augustine highlighted that the psalm concludes with hope (Psalm 22:27), symbolizing Christ’s ultimate victory over sin and death.

CONCLUSION: APOLOGETIC AND THEOLOGICAL IMPACT

Psalm 22 offers a powerful testimony to the prophetic nature of Scripture and the unity of God’s redemptive plan. The psalm not only predicts the details of Christ’s suffering but also underscores God’s faithfulness in the face of human sin. The use of the Septuagint, supported by the Nahal Hever manuscripts, strengthens the Christian interpretation that Jesus’ death fulfills messianic prophecy.

From a theological perspective, the idea that God abandoned Jesus on the cross is untenable within the framework of Trinitarian unity. Jesus' cry reflects the emotional depth of bearing sin but not a break in the Godhead. The symbolism of the crimson worm further enriches the theological message, illustrating that Christ's sacrifice brings new life to all believers.

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