Psalm 22: A Prophetic Foreshadowing of Christ's Passion:

Theological Implications and the Debate Over Messianic Interpretation

D. Gene Williams Jr., PhD

Defend the Word Ministries

NorthPointe Church

ABSTRACT

This paper explores the prophetic and theological significance of Psalm 22, focusing on its foreshadowing of Christ's crucifixion and God's engagement with sinful humanity. The study begins by analyzing the psalm's historical context and its interpretation within early Christian and Jewish traditions, particularly emphasizing the debated translation of Psalm 22:16, where "pierced" and "like a lion" hinge on a single Hebrew letter. The early Christian use of the Septuagint and subsequent Jewish rejection of the text are examined in light of accusations, notably by Justin Martyr, that Jewish scribes altered the Hebrew text to obscure messianic prophecies. Additionally, the paper explores the theological implications of God's presence during Christ's sin-bearing on the cross, challenging interpretations of Habakkuk 1:13 that suggest God turned away from Jesus. Through this lens, Psalm 22 is presented as a profound testament to God's pursuit of humanity and the fulfillment of messianic prophecy, culminating in Christ's sacrificial death and resurrection.

I. INTRODUCTION

Psalm 22 is one of the most compelling texts in the Old Testament, widely regarded by Christians as a prophetic foreshadowing of the suffering and crucifixion of Jesus Christ. Written by King David, the psalm conveys deep anguish, isolation, and humiliation, yet it culminates in trust and hope in God's deliverance. From Jesus' cry on the cross—"My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"—to details such as the piercing of hands and feet, Psalm 22 contains many elements that parallel the crucifixion narrative.

However, understanding this psalm requires addressing theological concepts like God's relationship to sin. This paper will explore the prophetic nature of Psalm 22, the early church's reception, and its theological significance. Additionally, the paper will discuss the implications of God's ability to engage with sinful humanity, including the misinterpretation of Habakkuk 1:13, and how this further strengthens the apologetic case for the redemptive work of Christ.

II. JEWISH INTERPRETATIONS AND ALTERNATIVE VIEWS

While Christian tradition views Psalm 22 as a messianic prophecy, Jewish interpreters like Rashi typically interpret it as an individual lament, perhaps referring to King David's personal suffering or the collective struggles of Israel. From this perspective, the psalm expresses the suffering of a righteous individual or a nation, culminating in eventual vindication, rather than predicting the coming of the Messiah.

One significant point of contention between Jewish and Christian interpretations centers on Psalm 22:16, where the phrase "they have pierced my hands and my feet"

plays a pivotal role. In the Masoretic Text, the Hebrew word is "ka'ari," which translates as "like a lion," rather than "pierced." The distinction between the two translations hinges on a single letter—vav (ו) versus yod (י)—which creates the difference between "ka'aru" (meaning "pierced") and "ka'ari" (meaning "like a lion").[1]

The Greek Septuagint (LXX), translated between the 3rd and 2nd centuries BCE, uses the word ὤρυξαν (ōryxan), meaning "they have pierced." This translation has been central to Christian interpretations of Psalm 22 as directly referencing Christ's crucifixion. The Septuagint's impact on early Christian theology cannot be overstated. As scholars Gleason Archer and G.C. Chirichigno have noted, over 80% of Old Testament quotations in the New Testament are sourced from the Septuagint rather than the Masoretic Text.[2] This underscores the importance of the LXX for New Testament writers, who often regarded it as more authoritative than the Hebrew text in their interpretation of messianic prophecies. This reliance on the LXX strongly influenced early Christian views of the Old Testament as a text that pointed to Jesus' death and resurrection.

Further supporting the Septuagint's reading of "pierced," the Nahal Hever manuscript from the Dead Sea Scrolls contains a version of Psalm 22 that aligns with the Septuagint's translation of "ka'aru" ("pierced"), rather than "ka'ari" ("like a lion").[3] This suggests that earlier Hebrew texts may have contained the same reading as the

[1] Michael L. Brown, *Answering Jewish Objections to Jesus: Volume 3—Messianic Prophecy Objections* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2003), 122.

[2] Gleason L. Archer and G.C. Chirichigno, *Old Testament Quotations in the New Testament: A Complete Survey* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1983), 38.

[3] Brown, *Answering Jewish Objections to Jesus*, 125.

Septuagint, offering strong manuscript support for the Christian interpretation. Scholars like Michael Brown argue that while the Masoretic Text became authoritative in Judaism, earlier textual variants—such as those found in the Dead Sea Scrolls—bolster the claim that the Septuagint preserves an older, more accurate reading.[4]

III. THE HISTORICAL AND PROPHETIC NATURE OF PSALM 22

Psalm 22 opens with an anguished cry: *"My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"* This phrase was quoted by Jesus during His crucifixion (Matthew 27:46; Mark 15:34), suggesting a direct connection between this psalm and His suffering. For early Christians, this connection was foundational for understanding how Jesus fulfilled messianic prophecies. By invoking Psalm 22, Jesus expressed both His suffering and His faith in God's ultimate deliverance, reflecting the psalm's movement from despair to triumph.

The early Church Fathers, including Justin Martyr, identified the numerous details in Psalm 22 that parallel the crucifixion. Justin argued that the mockery, the piercing of hands and feet, and the casting of lots for garments all foreshadowed the events surrounding Jesus' death (Psalm 22:16-18; John 19:23-24). The fact that these events, which occurred centuries after Psalm 22 was written, align so closely with the Gospel accounts provides a powerful apologetic for the divine inspiration and prophetic nature of the Scriptures.

[4] Ibid., 127.

IV. JEWISH REJECTION OF THE SEPTUAGINT AND SUPPORTING MANUSCRIPT EVIDENCE

Early Christians, such as Justin Martyr, accused Jewish leaders of deliberately altering the Hebrew text to obscure messianic prophecies, particularly in parts of Psalms and Isaiah. In his *Dialogue with Trypho*, Justin argued that changes were made to prevent the Hebrew Scriptures from being seen as prophetic references to Jesus. The Christian reliance on the Septuagint in their defense of Jesus as the Messiah contributed to Jewish rejection of the LXX in favor of the Masoretic Text, particularly after the late first century AD. This shift was perceived by early Christians as an attempt to downplay prophecies they believed pointed to Christ's crucifixion.[5]

The Targum of Psalms, an Aramaic paraphrase of the Hebrew Scriptures, offers insight into post-Septuagint Jewish interpretations of key biblical texts. Finalized between the 5th and 6th centuries AD, the Targum reflects a period when Jewish interpreters distanced themselves from the Septuagint, avoiding messianic readings that early Christians emphasized. This shift correlates with the accusations made by Justin Martyr in the 2nd century, who claimed that Jewish leaders had altered Hebrew texts to obscure prophecies concerning the suffering Messiah. The Targum's non-messianic interpretation of Psalm 22 illustrates this broader theological divergence between Jewish and Christian communities.[6]

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[5] Emanuel Tov, *Textual Criticism of the Hebrew Bible* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1992), 210.

[6] Philip S. Alexander, *The Targum of Psalms,* vol. 16 of *The Aramaic Bible* (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 2003).

V. TRANSLATION NUANCES FROM ARAMAIC TO GREEK IN PSALM 22 AND THE NEW TESTAMENT

While the New Testament was predominantly written in Koine Greek, Jesus' words on the cross reflect the linguistic and cultural context of His time, which included Aramaic and Hebrew. In Matthew 27:46 and Mark 15:34, Jesus quotes the opening line of Psalm 22:1. However, the Hebrew original and the Aramaic phrase used by Jesus introduce subtle but meaningful differences when rendered into Greek.

Psalm 22:1 in Hebrew:

A **Hebrew**: אֵלִי אֵלִי לָמָה עֲזַבְתָּנִי

Transliteration: *Eli, Eli, lama azavtani*

Translation: "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"

Jesus' Cry in Aramaic (Matthew 27:46, Mark 15:34):

B **Matthew's Version (Closer to Hebrew):** *Eli, Eli, lema sabachthani?*

C **Mark's Version (Galilean Dialect)**: *Eloi, Eloi, lema sabachthani?*

Translation (both): "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"

Key Differences Between the Renderings:

D **Matthew's version** (*Eli, Eli*) is closer to the Hebrew original ("Eli" meaning "my God"), maintaining both the sound and structure of the Hebrew text. This suggests that Matthew's Gospel sought to convey the Jewish-Hebrew flavor of the statement.[7]

[7] N.T. Wright, *The Day the Revolution Began: Reconsidering the Meaning of Jesus' Crucifixion* (New York: HarperOne, 2016), 256–57.

E **Mark's version** (*Eloi, Eloi*) reflects a Galilean Aramaic dialect, which slightly alters the pronunciation but preserves the meaning. This regional dialect was likely familiar to Jesus' listeners, emphasizing His connection to Galilean culture.[8]

Hebrew and Aramaic Comparison:

The phrase "lama azavtani" (Hebrew) and "lema sabachthani" (Aramaic) illustrate the linguistic shift between these two related Semitic languages.

A **Azavtani** (עזבתני) in Hebrew means "you have forsaken me."

B **Sabachthani** in Aramaic means "you have abandoned me" or "left me." While both words express despair over being abandoned, "sabachthani" carries a slight connotation of being separated or cast off, adding a nuance of emotional abandonment that might not be as emphasized in the Hebrew.[9]

Greek Translation of Jesus' Cry:

In both Matthew and Mark, the Greek text preserves the Aramaic phrase nearly verbatim to convey the authenticity of Jesus' words. However, the transliterated Aramaic phrases introduce complexities for interpretation:

A **Greek Transliteration in Matthew**:

Ἠλί Ἠλί, λιμὰ σαβαχθανί (Eli Eli, lima sabachthani)

B **Greek Transliteration in Mark**:

Ἐλωΐ Ἐλωΐ, λιμὰ σαβαχθανί (Eloi Eloi, lima sabachthani)

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[8] Bruce K. Waltke, *An Old Testament Theology: A Canonical and Thematic Approach* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2007), 332.

[9] Archer and Chirichigno, *Old Testament Quotations in the New Testament*, 106.

Despite the challenges of transliteration, both Gospels accurately capture the Aramaic cry, reinforcing the theological significance of the moment. Jesus intentionally quoted Psalm 22:1, highlighting His identification with suffering humanity and trust in God's deliverance.[10]

Which Rendering is Closer to the Hebrew?

A Matthew's version (*Eli, Eli*) is more faithful to the Hebrew original in both pronunciation and structure, preserving the Jewish heritage of the psalm.[11]

B Mark's version (*Eloi, Eloi*) reflects Galilean Aramaic, a regional dialect spoken by Jesus, and provides an accessible version of the same message for His audience in first-century Judea and Galilee.[12]

VI. SCHOLARLY DEBATES AND MODERN INTERPRETATIONS

Scholars like Bruce Waltke and Robert Alter acknowledge the complexity of the Hebrew text and the ambiguity surrounding the original wording of Psalm 22:16.[13] While some argue that "like a lion" could be metaphorical, others find the physical nature of the Septuagint's "pierced" more consistent with the psalm's descriptions of bodily suffering, such as the disjointing of bones (Psalm 22:14) and extreme thirst (Psalm 22:15).[14] The broader context of Psalm 22 supports the physical affliction described in

[10] Augustine, *Expositions on the Psalms,* vol. 8, ed. Philip Schaff, *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, First Series* (Buffalo: Christian Literature Publishing Co., 1888), 327–29.

[11] Tertullian*, Against Marcion, in Ante-Nicene Fathers*, ed. Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1885), 217–19.

[12] Brown, *Answering Jewish Objections to Jesus*, 210.

[13] Waltke, *An Old Testament Theology*, 672.

[14] Ibid., 674.

the Septuagint, reinforcing its interpretation in Christian theology. These translation challenges between Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek are further exemplified in Jesus' quotation of Psalm 22:1 during His crucifixion.

VII. THEOLOGICAL IMPLICATIONS OF CHRIST'S SUFFERING AND TRINITARIAN UNITY AT THE CROSS

The Blood Worm (Psalm 22:6)

Psalm 22:6 includes the intriguing statement: *"But I am a worm and not a man, scorned by everyone, despised by the people."* The Hebrew word for "worm" here is תּוֹלַעַת *(tola'ath)*, which refers to the *coccus ilicis* or "crimson worm," a species used in ancient times to produce red dye. The life cycle of this worm mirrors Christ's sacrifice in striking ways. The *coccus ilicis* attaches itself to a tree to lay its eggs, and in the process, the mother worm dies, staining the tree with her crimson body. After three days, the body dries up and turns white, symbolizing the birth of new life.

This imagery parallels Jesus' death and resurrection. Just as the blood of the worm stains the tree, Jesus' blood was shed on the "tree" of the cross to give life to humanity. Moreover, the three-day period before the transformation of the worm evokes the three days between Jesus' death and resurrection. This rich symbolism, embedded in Psalm 22, adds a deeper layer of meaning to Christ's sacrificial act.[15]

[15] David A. Lambert, "Worm Theology: Understanding the Significance of Tola'ath," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 130, no. 2 (2011): 237–256.

Although the word רִמָּה *(rimmah)*, another Hebrew term for "worm," appears more frequently in the Old Testament,[16] the deliberate choice of *tola'ath* in this psalm suggests a specific theological purpose. *Tola'ath* not only refers to a literal worm but also evokes the crimson dye used in ancient rituals and garments. Its association with blood and sacrifice underscores the profound connection between this psalm and Christ's redemptive work on the cross. The use of *tola'ath* instead of *rimmah* highlights the symbolic nature of this imagery, drawing attention to the parallels between the worm's transformation and Christ's resurrection.[17]

The Theological Implication of Trinitarian Unity at the Cross

A central theological issue arising from Psalm 22 and Christ's crucifixion is whether God the Father "turned His back" on Jesus as He bore the sins of the world. Some theologians, citing Habakkuk 1:13, argue that God cannot look upon sin, suggesting that He abandoned Jesus on the cross. However, this interpretation raises significant theological problems, particularly concerning the doctrine of the Trinity.

A closer examination of Habakkuk 1:13 reveals that it does not mean God cannot see sin, but rather that His holiness does not allow Him to look upon sin with approval. Throughout Scripture, God engages with sinful humanity without violating His holiness. In Genesis 3, after Adam and Eve sin, God does not abandon them but seeks them out, asking, "Where are you?" (Genesis 3:9). Similarly, Jesus, God incarnate, engaged with sinners throughout His ministry, eating with tax collectors and forgiving prostitutes. As Romans 5:8 declares, "But God demonstrates His own love for us in this: While we were

[16] Francis Brown, S.R. Driver, and Charles A. Briggs, *A Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1907), 1067-68, 912.

[17] Wright, *The Day the Revolution Began*, 273-275.

still sinners, Christ died for us." Thus, God's presence with sinners is central to His redemptive plan.

Defense of Trinitarian Unity

Orthodox Christian theology affirms the hypostatic union, [18] where Christ's divine and human natures are united in one person. Even as Jesus, the theanthropos (God-man), bore the weight of sin in His human nature and cried out in anguish, His divine nature remained fully united with the Father. The idea that God "turned His back" on Jesus during the crucifixion suggests a rupture in the unity of the Trinity, bordering on tritheism, which orthodox theology firmly denies. The cry of abandonment reflects Jesus' human experience of isolation and sin-bearing but does not imply a break in the unity of the Godhead.[19]

Additionally, interpreting the Father's supposed abandonment of Jesus raises concerns about Arianism,[20] which could imply that the Son, particularly in His human nature, is somehow inferior or separate from the Father. A literal abandonment would undermine the co-eternality and consubstantiality of the Son with the Father. It could also lead to Nestorianism, implying a division between Christ's human and divine natures—suggesting His human nature was cut off from His divine nature or from the Father at the cross.[21]

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[18] Council of Chalcedon, *Definition of Faith*, AD 451.

[19] Wright, *The Day the Revolution Began*, 198.

[20] J.N.D. Kelly*, Early Christian Doctrines* (New York: HarperOne, 1978), 311-315.

[21] Thomas F. Torrance, *The Trinitarian Faith: The Evangelical Theology of the Ancient Catholic Church* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2000), 72.

The overarching narrative of Scripture emphasizes that God pursues humanity in its sinful state, offering redemption, not avoidance. This understanding enriches our view of Christ's cry from the cross. Although Jesus, in His human nature, may have experienced the isolation that sin brings, this does not imply that the Father had abandoned Him.

N.T. Wright emphasizes that Christ's identification with humanity's suffering was not a sign of divine abandonment but the means through which God reconciled the world to Himself. This perspective deepens the theological significance of Psalm 22, illustrating that God remains present and active, even in moments of apparent desolation.[22]

VIII. THE EARLY CHURCH'S VIEW ON PSALM 22

The early Church Fathers consistently interpreted Psalm 22 as a prophetic foretelling of Jesus' passion. Justin Martyr, in *Dialogue with Trypho*, emphasized how Psalm 22's vivid details foreshadowed the events of the crucifixion, centuries before crucifixion was a known practice.[23] Tertullian, in *Against Marcion*, used Psalm 22 to defend the continuity of God's plan for salvation between the Old and New Testaments.[24]

Augustine, in his *Expositions on the Psalms*, pointed out that Psalm 22 does not only depict suffering but also anticipates victory. The psalm ends with a declaration that "all the ends of the earth will remember and turn to the Lord" (Psalm 22:27), which Augustine saw as a prophetic vision of Christ's eventual victory over sin and death. This

[22] Wright, *The Day the Revolution Began*, 273-275.

[23] Justin Martyr, *Dialogue with Trypho*, 99.

[24] Tertullian, *Against Marcion, in Ante-Nicene Fathers*, 217–278.

triumphal conclusion reinforces the Christian belief that, despite the intense suffering on the cross, God's presence and plan for redemption were never in doubt.[25]

IX. MODERN THEOLOGICAL IMPACT AND APOLOGETIC SIGNIFICANCE

In modern Christian thought, Psalm 22 remains a cornerstone for understanding the suffering of Christ and God's relationship with sinful humanity. The psalm not only anticipates the details of Jesus' crucifixion but also offers insight into how God engages with suffering and sin.

N.T. Wright argues that Jesus' quotation of Psalm 22 on the cross was not a sign of despair but rather an affirmation of His role as the representative of all humanity, bearing their sin and suffering on their behalf. Wright emphasizes that Jesus' cry of forsakenness reflects the depth of His identification with human suffering, while His resurrection completes the movement from abandonment to vindication, as seen in the psalm.[26]

From an apologetic standpoint, the alignment between Psalm 22 and the events of Jesus' crucifixion offers a compelling case for the divine inspiration of Scripture. The specific details, such as the piercing of hands and feet and the casting of lots for garments, serve as powerful evidence of prophecy fulfilled. Furthermore, understanding that God does not "turn His back" on sinners but rather actively pursues them enhances the Christian message of grace.

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[25] Augustine, *Expositions on the Psalms*, Vol. 8.

[26] Wright, *The Day the Revolution Began*, 210.

X. CONCLUSION

Psalm 22 serves as a crucial text for understanding the intersection of prophetic fulfillment and theological depth in Christian thought. Its vivid portrayal of suffering, pierced hands and feet, and the cry of abandonment closely align with the Gospel accounts of Christ's crucifixion. The Septuagint's translation, supported by ancient manuscript evidence, further strengthens the case for interpreting Psalm 22 as a direct foreshadowing of the Messiah's death. Far from depicting divine abandonment, Christ's cry from the cross reveals the profound mystery of God's engagement with sinful humanity. Through Jesus' sacrifice, the divine plan for redemption is fulfilled, affirming the coherence of the biblical narrative and the unity of the Trinity even in the darkest moments of human history.

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