The Biblical Lament
As Prayers of Hope

An exploration in the prayers of
Susanna, Esther, Jeremiah, and Jesus

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GENERAL INTRODUCTION

Between disclosures of Hurt and articulations of Hope

1. Introduction

Suffering, and disorientation that derives from it, is one of the great universals of human life. It can strike everyone – rich and poor, old and young, strong and weak, good and wicked. No one is immune from suffering and disorientation. As suffering does not play favourites, then everyone must grapple with it personally at some point.

The bible often reflects on disorientation and suffering through the disclosures of hurt and articulations of hope. (New) Israel's faith arises in an experience of disorder that works against full human existence. While this disorder could be understood "naturally" as in the case of barren mothers (Gen 11,30) or blindness due to bird guano entering into one's eyes (Tobit 2,10), the major experience of disorder that (new) Israel was preoccupied was with those cases that arose out of unjust, exploitative, oppressive arrangements of power.

The exodus event clearly gives the classic expression to this paradigmatic disorder. The exploitative situation of Pharoah is not thought to be natural; it is a disorder which the powerful have perpetrated against the weak and marginal. The situation of being under Pharaoh is identified in Israel as a hurtful disorder.

This reality of hurt, in the bible, is not sidelined or forgotten. Rather, (i) it is experienced and noticed. This in itself is no small matter. To experience and notice hurt already indicates some critical distance from the two extremes of becoming numb to hurt or to think that it is something to be escaped.

(ii) The experienced, noticed reality of hurt is voiced. The act of giving voice to hurt in "cry and groan" (lament) is a bold act of self-assertion. Moreover, the bold act of self-assertion is at the same time a cry for help.

(iii) In fact, the hurt is not only voiced, but also heard. The grief and anger experienced, noticed, and voiced on earth is received, heard, credited and taken seriously in heaven (Ex 2,23-25). When it first cried out in pain, Israel addressed someone – their God, who hears their pain.

In this moment of communication about hurt, we are made aware of this strange diptych: the community has a bold voice for hurt. Israel will speak. On the other side, God has an attentive ear for hurt. God is bonded to Israel around the human reality of hurt which implies that hurt, noticed and voiced, becomes the peculiar mode of linking earth to heaven, Israel to God. The God of Israel hears, and acts, in favour of his people. Thus, the biblical God does not remain silent in front of hurt for he remains the omnipotent creator God who cares for his people.

(iv) This drama of hurt noticed and voiced on earth, heard and acted upon in heaven becomes incorporated into Israel's liturgy. That is, this drama becomes the parlance through which Israel engages in dialogue with God through prayer. Thus, the initial event of voiced hurt shapes Israel to the point that it becomes a part of its self-identity and vocation: we cried out and God heard our cry becomes a typical credo phrase at the heart of what it means to be Israel.

However, this is only one side of the equation. Israel's faith anticipates the decisive resolution of every human disorder so that full, joyous, peaceable human existence will be possible. Most characteristically, Israel's hope is that there will be a decisive and radical reordering of social power and social goods, so that all may have enough, none will have too much and all will live together in harmony (Ex 16,18; Mic 4,4). This hope is obviously a theological act, a conviction that the world is held together by a larger governance – that of God himself.

The bible, then, explains very well that God is "the God of hope" (Rom 15,13) for the concept of biblical hope is not just an expectation or a desire for a sought-after outcome but rather an "attitude"[1] and a virtuous characteristic of those "who put their trust in God."[2]

In being so, biblical hope "is based upon faith in the living God who has revealed himself as he who is and who has established fellowship between him and Israel by means of

[1] EBERHARD BONS, "ΕΛΠΙΣ comme l'espérance de la vie dans l'au-delà dans la littérature Juive Hellénistique", *Ce Dieu Qui Vient*. Études sur l'Ancien et le Nouveau Testament offertes au Professeur Bernard Renaud à l'occasion de son soixante-cinquième anniversaire (ed. RAYMOND KUNTZMANN) (LD 159; Paris: Cerf 1995) 346.
[2] BONS, "ΕΛΠΙΣ comme l'espérance", 365.

his saving acts in history."[3] Thus, biblical hope is grounded in what God has already done and what he has continued to promise to do. In this way, biblical hope is fundamentally a relational concept that centres around trust, trustworthiness, faithfulness, loyalty, and allegiance that form from within a living and intimate relationship.[4]

2. The stories that we will examine in these two days and the significance of prayer

This language of voicing hurt and being listened to by God within the context of a living and intimate relationship is found throughout the scriptures. However, I would like to focus on four different stores: Susanna, Esther, Jeremiah, and Jesus.

The story of Susanna has been chosen because, narratively speaking, it is the simplest of the four. A just and beautiful lady is beset by two wicked elders, who desire her and attempt to rape her. Being falsely accused of adultery, she cries to God for help. God listens to her plea and puts a spirit of understanding in Daniel who alone defends the innocent Susanna. The story ends with the reversal of events, Susanna is freed and the wicked elders and killed.

The story of Esther is one that recounts the heroic deeds of the Jewess Esther who rescued her people from the attempted genocide plotted by Haman, a powerful officer within the Persian royal court.

In a pivotal moment of the story, Mordecai, upon learning about the plot to kill the Jews, implored Esther to talk with the king. Even though she was hesitant at first, Esther eventually listened to her uncle and devised a plan to save her people by inviting both the king and Haman to a banquet, wherein she revealed that she herself is a Jew and Haman sought to kill even her. The king, who favoured Queen Esther, reversed the plot whereby Haman was killed while Esther and her people were saved.

Just like the story of Susanna, while the story is simple enough, what is at stake here is more than a simple rescue of the Jews. Rather, this story explains that, while he may be hidden and work through agents, God remains the omnipotent creator God who cares for his people.

In order to show the power of lament does not concern solely moments of grave injustice but rather with any situation of disorientation, I will turn to the vocational story of

[3] WALTER M. HORTON, "The Meaning of Hope in the Bible", *The Ecumenical Review* 4 (1952) 424.
[4] See JACQUELINE E. LAPSLEY, "Friends with God? Moses and the possibility of covenantal friendship", *Interpretation* 58 (2004) 117-129.

Jeremiah in Jer 1,4-9 to show that disorientation that Jeremiah feels at being called is healed by the God who listens to his people.

Lastly, we will spend some time with the cry of Jesus on the cross. Indeed, as both Mk 15,34 and Mt 27,46 cite from Ps 22,1 (My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?), we will first study Psalm 22 and then show how Jesus, and the first community, understood such a phrase. We will also explain why Luke, in Lk 23,46, changes the text to "Father, into your hands I commend my spirit" – to answer the question if Luke was "watering down" the cry in Mark and Matthew or whether he was explaining what that cry really meant.

What unites all four stories that we will discuss is how, in moments of disorientation, hurt, and despair, they pray out to God to aid them. It is hopefully clear that prayer is all about relationship. The scriptures reveal a deep experience of God's presence in the lives of the people who wrote them. The authors of the bible knew God and experienced God in ways that show that they have a personal relationship with God. In other words, prayer becomes the place where our eyes meet God's and where God, who is fully committed to the relationship, will be attentive to our innermost desires.

In order to better appreciate what I want to say here, we can briefly look at other cases where people in the bible pray to God. For instance, Tobit finds himself blinded when the guano of a bird fell into his eyes (2,10). Sarah, on the other hand, is tormented by a demon who has killed all seven husbands she had before the marriage was consummated (Tob 2,7-9). Thus, both Tobit and Sarah are in situations that call for the intervention of God. In similar situations, they both cry out to God for help: Tob 3,1-6.11-15. We will focus on the important parts:

Tobit	Sarah
You are righteous, O Lord, and all your deeds are righteous, and your ways are mercy and truth	Blessed are you, O Lord my God! And blessed is your holy and honoured name forever. Let all your works praise you forever.
And now you, O Lord, remember me, and look down.	And now, O Lord, I have turned my eyes and my face towards you.
And so now according to what is pleasing to you do with me, and command my spirit to be taken up from me. For it is better for me to die than to live.	Command that I be set free from the earth and hear reproach no more.

In this way, the essence of the prayer of both Tobit and Sarah are the same: (1) the acknowledgement of who God is (righteous, merciful, blessed, holy) and that he is worthy of praise; (2) the call to meet God's gaze (Tobit calls God to look down; Sarah looks up); (3) a lamentation – a call to die. And, as both Tobit and Sarah are known to have an intimate relationship with God, he hears their cry (Tob 3,16).

But he answers them in a surprising way; he does not heed their call to die; rather, he does something else: he sends his messenger, Raphael, to heal Tobit and to defeat the demon tormenting Sarah. In reality, God, always attentive, understands that the call to die is not the true desire of Sarah or Tobit; rather, this call to die is a typical Semitic prod towards persuasion.

Indeed, I have decided to focus on this kind of prayer because in moments of sorrow and of suffering, we often find ourselves praying similar prayers. These *prayers for help, also known as the lament, have the primary function to persuade and motivate God to act on behalf of the petitioner, who is in trouble and needs God's help.* What is more is that this type of prayer indicates that it is the relationship between God and the petitioner which is the main reason for God's response.

In reality, while there are many types of complaints and many ways in which the one praying characterizes God, all these complaints that seek help from God are a declaration about God being sovereign, holy, faithful, loving, and just – and this is one big reason why he comes

to the person's aid. The other big reason is the plight of the poor and needy, the orphan, widow, the innocent, and those who suffer.

These two aspects are two sides of the same coin and always go hand-in-hand. Indeed, it is precisely the emphasis on the injustice in the human situation that implicitly appeals to the justice of God – that this is only possible because there is a relationship between God and the petitioner – or, like Ps 22 (21) states, God is not far but near to those in need!

While we can go on to explain further, we can already grasp a major conclusion: the motivational dimension of these prayers suggests that a primary aim of prayer for help is *to urge and reason with God.* Rarely does a prayer not seek to lay a claim on God in some way. Clearly there is no assumption that prayer is a mechanical matter of simply asking for help and receiving it. Contrary to the soap opera image of God, God is not a light-switch we can turn on and off as we see fit. On the contrary: the rhetoric of prayers seems to suggest that we must make our case before God and appeal to God's nature and character.

We can see this same logic in Jesus' prayer at the garden of sorrows: *He said, "Abba, Father, for you all things are possible; remove this cup from me; yet, not what I want, but what you want."* (Mk 14,36). Here, yet again, we are in the realm of the lament.

This lament highlights both the plight of the petitioner and the nature of God. We know why Jesus laments: he is about to die; this is the cup that he wants removed. In the lament, Jesus highlights the Father's nature: *Abba, Father* and also highlights the reason why the Father should act: *for you all things are possible* – a phrase which highlights not only the Father's dominion over everything but also Jesus' trust in him. In short, this prayer illustrates the great relationship between Jesus and the Father.

While Jesus knew that the Father could not really remove the cup from him – because this is why he came down from heaven –, it is unclear, in Mark, how or in which way the Father heard his plea. This does not go unnoticed by Luke, who adds something which shows that the Father did indeed listen to his plea; and, just as Tobit's and Sarah's *ineffective plea* becomes *effective* because they receive what they needed, so too Jesus: an angel is sent to strengthen Jesus (Lk 22,43) so that he can fulfill his mission.

All that we have said points to the essence of the matter: *The Relational God of Prayer*. In all this, this type of prayer emphasizes that the one who prays can truly engage the deity,

can urge reasons upon God for acting in behalf of the one in need, just as God in giving the law urges reasons upon the people for responding and obeying.

Prayer is the point at which humanity dared to approach the transcendent, holy deity with no restrictions on what could be expressed; we are free not only to cry out in rage, anger, and despair, as in the lament, but also to beseech, urge, and persuade: the mind and heart of God are vulnerable to the pleas and the arguments of humanity.

But it is important to keep in mind the nature of the plea: these pleas do nothing more than to appeal to God to be and to act as God would be and act. Interestingly, as the petitioner goes to much pains to impress his/her will on God, these prayers harness and enrich the idea of 'thy will be done': as Tobit's and Sarah's ineffective plea and Jesus' own prayer in the garden of sorrows show, while God's will is absolute, it does not mean that it is cold-hearted and mean-spirited; if we are praying in the right way, he will indeed help us *because it is God's will that he helps*.

It is, therefore, in the very nature and structure of the relationship between God and humanity that the deliverance from pain and suffering, the overcoming of affliction, guilt, and oppression by others can be counted upon. The is why the prayers of pain and suffering – from the psalms to Jesus himself – are so regularly full of confidence and trust.

Ultimately, this prayer of persuasion is non-mechanical and not automatic as it is based on relationship. In such a relationship, God asks us to make our case in front of him, since he knows our needs but desires our focus on him. And in such a relationship, the petitioner has the certain hope that God will indeed listen and act, not always in the way we want but always in the way we need.

To conclude: I hope that I have illustrated that prayer is only truly possible in the context of intimacy and relationship, that prayer is not mechanistic but requires this relationship between faithful humanity and faithful God, that it is God's own nature to help and save those who are his, and that God hears the cries of the *those who are committed*. And so *be perfect as God is perfect for this is the lifestyle that leads to what we all desire: communion. Amen*

3. Within the context of the Jubilee

The above discourse is all the more significant within this year of the jubilee of hope. Now, the word “jubilee” itself comes from the Hebrew “yobel” which means trumpet. The jubilee in the Old Testament was an event that was celebrated every 50 years (Leviticus 25,18-20) and was proclaimed with a trumpet sound (yobel), an instrument that not only indicated the celebration, but was also associated with decisive acts of God (Isa 27,13; 1 Cor 15,52).

We must remember that, in the book of Leviticus, the people of God have just come out of slavery in Egypt and God has made a covenant with them at Sinai. In fact, throughout the book of Leviticus, the people are still at Sinai waiting and hoping to pass to the promised land. The essence of the Jubilee is to remember and celebrate the great act of redemption that God accomplished in Egypt: in redeeming the people from slavery under Pharaoh, God proved to be the strongest and liberated the people, who are now able to prosper under God.

On this basis, even though there were still 40 years to go, they had hope that God's promise would be fulfilled, because what God had promised to do in Egypt, He did. Thus, the people have the certainty that what God promises now, He will be able to do. From the perspective of the New Testament, the story of the exodus plays a fundamental role in understanding what Jesus did. In the theology of the Gospel, Satan is the new (but old) tyrant who has held humanity under him. Jesus, the strongest, came to redeem us from him; this happened on the cross

Therefore, what the Jubilee is about is (i) the sovereignty of God - only he can redeem us from Satan, (ii) the providence of God: we are saved from sin and Satan as a gift from God, (iii) we remember God's historical act of redemption in our past, (iv) by experiencing forgiveness in the present we remember God's promise to be with us until the end of time. In this way, we can blossom again like a flower that grows in spring and live a renewed life.

In this case, it is very fitting that we reflect on the power of lament within the jubilee year for this prayer is the recognition that we, as creatures, are dependent on God for our flourishing. As such, we can call on God to aid us to overcome those situations that may hinder flourishing with the understanding that God may not always give us what we want but always what we need to overcome the trials of live. In this, we concretely experience God’s mercy which stands at the foundation of biblical hope.

4. The basic thesis of these lessons and how will these lessons unfold?

The basic premise of these lessons is that *prayers of lamentation are not to be considered as cries of abandonment but rather as prayers of persuasion. These laments, then, presuppose that God will indeed heed the cries of his people because he is the God who creates and redeems us so that we may live the life we were created to live if we remain within the boundaries of covenantal friendship*.

Now, in order to explain this, I must first explain what is a biblical lament and to show why often it is understood, wrongly, as a cry of abandonment. In this first part, I will also explain what are the formal aspects that all laments have.

And then we will study the stories and prayers of Susanna, Esther, Jeremiah, and Jesus (together with psalm 22) wherein we will explain that these prayers formally and theologically all are laments which cry out to God for help within the context of relationship.

We will end the lessons with an exhortation to teach and practice this type of prayer without shame within our own lives and concrete communities.

TOWARDS UNDERSTANDING THE BASIC FORM OF THE LAMENT

1. Introduction

Lament is such a key element of the bible that it is hard to read any book without finding an example of it: in Genesis, Exodus, Job, Lamentations, the prophets, the psalms, people complain and cry to God for help.[5] In fact, Old Testament texts describe this form of prayer as constitutive God's identity (as the God who heard cries for help and rescued his people from Egypt; Ex 2,23-25; 3,7-10) as well as Israel's identity (as the people who strive with God; Gen 32,26-27). In the New Testament, the prayers of Jesus in the garden and on the cross are prime examples of laments. Likewise, we can make mention of Acts 4,23-31 as a very good instance of a lament prayed by the first community. All in all, this prayer is saturated within the bible.

2. What is a lament?

While it is found throughout the bible, it is not so clear what "lament" means since the verb "to lament" and the noun "lament" are flexible terms. We do not always use the term in the same way. Lament can mean complaint, an expression of grief, the ritual act of mourning, a dirge for the dead, a cry for help, an accusation directed to God, a public protest over injustice, or wordless wailing.

As scholars who initially started to examine this issue were coming from a German background, lament (*Klage*) tended to mean accusation and thus connected to the problem of theodicy. Following their lead, many, in fact, place the lament within the problem of evil and how this problem can put into question God's omnipotence and care for humanity.

For instance, Ellington states that for "those who live in a relationship with [God], he is both the provider and guarantor of life. The loss of security, then, threatens their sense of an ordered world and touches directly on their relation with God."[6] In this case, "the crisis that

[5] For these few paragraphs, see REBEKAH EKLUND, *Jesus Wept*. The significance of Jesus' Laments in the New Testament (Library of New Testament Studies 515; London: Bloomsbury 2015) 1-20.
[6] SCOTT A. ELLINGTON, *Risking Truth*. Reshaping the World through Prayers of Lament (Princeton Theological Monograph Series 98; Eugene, OR: Pickwick Publications 2008) 13.

confronts the one praying a lament is more than the potential loss of a theological understanding of God; it is the weakening or loss of trust in God."[7]

In other words, in being abandoned by God, in God falling "silent, so that he will not provide, not protect, and not heal"[8], "loitering behind many of the biblical lamentations is the basic question: can this God still be trusted?"[9]

While Ellington goes on to acknowledge that laments "are dialogical in nature"[10] and must be understood "within the context of *relatedness*"[11], I think that it is mistaken to see lament as a "cry of abandonment"[12] that presupposes the "absence of God"[13] and his "silence."[14] Nor is it correct to see these laments as prayers which call "for an end of that silence."[15]

Indeed, if it is true that these prayers are to be witnessed in the context of relationship, they cannot be cries of abandonment for *abandonment* presupposes a rupture in the pact, a rupture that makes any such prayers absurd. In other terms, if the lamenter feels abandoned by God (and God really did abandon her/him), then any such prayer makes no sense – the lamenter would be talking to no one for no one would be there in the first place.

2.1. The problem: German *Klagen* is not biblical lamentation

The problem, as I see it, is found in the cultural background of many of the scholars who first studied this genre, a cultural background that biased and skewed their understanding of the lament. This cultural background was often classical protestant Germany in a time that was rife with antisemitism.[16]

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[7] ELLINGTON, *Risking Truth*, 14.
[8] ELLINGTON, *Risking Truth*, 14.
[9] ELLINGTON, *Risking Truth*, 14.
[10] ELLINGTON, *Risking Truth*, 19.
[11] ELLINGTON, *Risking Truth*, 18.
[12] ELLINGTON, *Risking Truth*, 19.
[13] ELLINGTON, *Risking Truth*, 19.
[14] ELLINGTON, *Risking Truth*, 19.
[15] ELLINGTON, *Risking Truth*, 19.
[16] Of course, this can be seen elsewhere other than Germany; the Swiss scholar Walter Baumgartner (1887-1970), in his book on the lamentations in Jeremiah, was one who fell in the trap of this antisemitic rhetoric by saying that "Israelite prayer is childishly simple." See WALTER BAUMGARTNER, *Jeremiah's Poem of Lament* (Bloomsbury Academic Collections Biblical Studies: Historic Texts; London: Bloomsbury 2015) 25. It of note, that the original German title was *Die Klagegedichte des Jeremia* and was first published in 1917.

To begin with, it is important to note that the German term for lamenting (*Klagen*) has strong juridical and accusatory resonances. Indeed, while it can certainly denote moaning, crying, and despairing, it is also – and more importantly – a formal complaint before a court. This secular legal usage of the term has become the commonsense resonance of the term. The primary association of *Klage* is with, therefore, accusation whether against humans or God.

It is this adversarial relationship toward God that is presupposed in discussions of theodicy and fits well with the juridical, or forensic, terminology that was rampant in German protestant theology. The predominance of this juridical language and the conceptual central place of the problem of theodicy combine to yield a strong emphasis on the sacrosanct status of the victim's perspective. The lamenter is primary regarded as a victim of injustice who has right to accuse God, in a court of law, for their suffering.[17]

God, then, is understood to have wronged Israel and to be guilty of abandoning his people, breaking the pact in the process. Israel (or the individual lamenter) is the innocent one, who takes God to "court" and accuses him for not acting in a way indicative of God.

This is why it was often assumed that the lament was a cry of abandonment because it was thought that, through such an accusation, the accuser was accusing God of not being there, of not listening, of not helping, of abandoning his people.

However, this forensic point of view that overemphasizes the victimization of the lamenter is erroneous and misguided. For one thing, not all laments have to do with *suffering and victimization*. What I mean here is that, while lamentations certainly follow the line of thought that the lamenter finds him/herself in a situation of pain and suffering, this is the not the only kind situation when lamentations occur.

For instance, Jer 1,6 is a lamentation about how Jeremiah feels inadequate to fulfil the mission that God has sent him on without the grace of God.

In Ex 4,10, Moses certainly laments but it is not because *he is suffering* but because he, like Jeremiah after him, feels inadequate for the mission God has just sent him on.

[17] See EVA HARASTA – BRIAN BROCK (ed.) *Evoking Lament*. A theological discussion (New York, NY: T & T Clark 2009) 3-5.

In the NT, we find Mary in Lk 1,34 (*how can this be for I do not know man*) lamenting not from a situation of suffering nor is this a complaint about her virginity; rather, she is crying out for help – if she is to be the mother of God, then she needs grace.

Indeed, it is highly instructive to see the reply of God to all three lamentations. To Jeremiah, God, in Jer 1,7-10, replies *"Do not say, 'I am only a boy'; for you shall go to all to whom I send you, and you shall speak whatever I command you. [8] Do not be afraid of them, for I am with you to deliver you, says the Lord." [9]* ***Then the Lord put out his hand and touched my mouth; and the Lord said to me, "Now I have put my words in your mouth****. [10] See, today I appoint you over nations and over kingdoms, to pluck up and to pull down, to destroy and to overthrow, to build and to plant."*

To Moses, God, in Ex 4,12, replies *Now go, and I will be with your mouth and teach you what you are to speak.*

To Mary, in Lk 1,35, Gabriel replies with "*The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born will be holy; he will be called Son of God.*"

In all three replies, God does not reply to the actual objection; to Jeremiah, God specifically tells the prophet *not to say that*! God replies through the gift of grace and divinely given help so that the person called can effectively do the mission.[18]

What unites the lament, as a cry for help in the midst of suffering as well as the cry for help in the midst of feeling inadequate for the mission, is the basic principle of "conventual friendship", a covenant that often uses familiar categories like marriage and family to express ultimate reality.

2.2. The love and fidelity of God are foundational

The cry for help, then, occurs within the framework of a particular relationship and addresses a specific God: The Creator who made all of humanity, The God of Israel, who made promises to Israel to bless and protect her and be her God.

[18] It is highly indicative that Baumgartner does not even recognize Jer 1,6 as a lament in the first place as it would go against his very thesis! See BAUMGARTNER, *Jeremiah's Poem of Lament*, x-xi.

The *hesed* (love) and *emet* (fidelity) of God provides the foundation for the lament. And Israel can assert that God helps based on the covenantal promises that God made towards Israel. It is the relationship of trust in God's faithfulness and God's responsibility towards those who he created, with whom God covenanted, and over whom God reigns that enables the cry for help and underpins all laments. All the situations of trouble that give rise to cries for help are matters in which humanity's or Israel's relations to God is paramount.

It was thought that lament depends on the idea that attacks from enemies, illness, and so forth are not merely wrong in a general sense, but that they violate something about this relationship with God; suffering disrupts God's promises to be a faithful God to this people and to bring salvation to them.

Because of this, it was thought that God's apparent silence in the face of suffering can create a dilemma. And yet, this dilemma is only *apparent* because the lament presupposes divine faithfulness: it is only because of the belief that God does characteristically so act that they complain that the has not acted *as of yet* in their own case and insist that he must.

In this way, the most fundamental request underlying the petitions of lament is for God to be present – for God's presence and saving activity to be manifest amid illness, enemies and exile. And the request of this presence is based on fidelity – to the point that Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego declare that they will remain loyal to God and believe in God's saving power (Dan 3,16-18).

2.3. What is a lament, then?

Lament is a form of prayer in the midst of trouble and is therefore best understood as a cry for help to a particular God – the creator God who also redeems us so that we can live the life that we were created to live in union with God.

Therefore, the best definition of lament is the "passionate expression of intimate and personal pain"[19] to the Creator God who will come to the aid for those who are his. For this reason, it is better to these prayers as persuasion through which the lamenter cries to God to persuade him to help.

[19] EKLUND, *Jesus Wept*, 4.

Ultimately, can we see this in scriptures – that a lament is not a cry of abandonment but rather a prayer of persuasion? I think that that the best narrative text is, in fact, Exodus 2,23-25. This text could be considered the root of all subsequent lament, narratively speaking, for it contains the essential elements of the lament: the people cry out for help in a situation of suffering, and God hears (based on covenant relationship) and is moved to respond. Indeed, we read:

[23]After a long time the king of Egypt died. The sons of Israel groaned under their slavery, and cried out. Out of the slavery their cry for help rose up to God.

[24] God heard their groaning, and God remembered his covenant with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. [25] And God saw the sons of Israel and God knew.

Here, verse 23 explains that a passage of time as passed and the king died – while God remains alive. Israel was still in a situation of bondage and they cry out to the living God for redemption. In verses 24-25 explains, through a parallel structure, God's movement:

a. Hearing
    a. Remembering
b. Seeing
    a. Knowing

In this way, hearing and seeing are in parallel as it remembering and knowing. In antiquity, however, hearing is not as powerful as seeing – hearing leads to seeing (see 1 Kings 10,6-7).

What is interesting here is that the "God who compels Israel to *shemaʿ* (Deut. 6:4) has first of all '*shemaʿed*' Israel."[20] In all this, then, the Israelites, who cried out to God, are not found at the law courts and they are not questioning God's power or authority (theodicy). Rather, this prayer affirms it since Israel had faith that the God who created them is also the God, in his omnipotence, who can redeem them – after all *shema* means more than just hearing, it is also a movement of the heart, a call to obedience and to be wholehearted focused on the one thing that matters.[21]

[20] WALTER BRUEGGEMANN, "The Rhetoric of Hurt and Hope. Ethics Odd and Crucial", *The Annal of Society of Christian Ethics* 9 (1989) 75.
[21] See BRUEGGEMANN, "The Rhetoric of Hurt and Hope", 75.

3. Understanding the basic *form* of the lament prayer

In understanding the form of the lament, two figures are of great importance: Hermann Gunkel and Claus Westermann.[22] Gunkel's form-critical work, largely followed and supplemented by Westermann, describes the basic form of the lament in the Psalter and other key OT texts.

In the Psalter, there are many psalms which covers this. But, as lamentations are not tied down and isolated to the psalter, all songs of lament have a similar structure and more the most part the same motifs and expressions.

The following constitutes the formal elements of an individual lament psalm, according to form-critical categories:

1. **Invocation**. The invoking of the Lord's name frames the lament as a prayer by directing it toward God and evoking the relationship between the lamenter and the divine hearer (e.g., My God).

2. **Description of the cry or problem.** The nature of the cry can be described through general categories, or it can, at times, be specific. The generality of many laments renders the cry applicable to a wide variety of situations of distress.

    a. Many of the psalms of lament use "stereotypical phraseology"[23] to the point that it is not only very difficult to ascertain what is the exact situation that the psalmist finds him/herself in but also counterproductive to undertake such an endeavor. Indeed, "what we have now are imaginative poetic uses of these occasion to give expression to a much wider range of experiences of injustice."[24]

    b. This point, however, is not relevant in the narrative texts like the story of Susanna, for there we find a specific situation that calls for a very specific and concrete lament.

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[22] See HERMANN GUNKEL – JOACHIM BEGRICH, *Introduction to the Psalms.* The genres of the religious lyric of Israel (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock 2020); WESTERMANN, "The Role of the Lament", 20-38; BRUEGGEMANN, "The Rhetoric of Hurt and Hope", 73-92.

[23] H. G. M. WILLIAMSON, "Reading the Lament Psalms Backwards", *A God So Near*. Essays on Old Testament Theology in honor of Patrick D. Miller (ed. BRENT. A. STRAWN – NANCY R. BOWEN) (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns 2003) 3.

[24] WILLIAMSON, "Lament Psalms", 4.

c. When we find phrases like "why?" or "how long?," we are not to think that the lamenter is assuming that God has abandoned him/her; rather, this is a rhetorical device that desires to instigate, persuade, God to act now.[25]

d. This description can take on three forms:

i. Laments toward God (cry for help to God)

ii. Laments towards others (lamenting to God about an enemy)

iii. Self-lamentation (an I-lament or a We-lament over suffering or sin).

3. Sometimes, but not all times, **there is a confession of sin** (Ps 25 (24),11.18; 51 (50),3-5.9.11) or **an assertion of innocence** (Ps 7,3-5.8; 26 (25),1-8).

4. There is always a **motive why God should hear and help** – many times it is indirect and implicit but other times it can be made explicit.[26] The explicit motive might be a declaration of righteousness, but it is more based on God's own character (*hesed* and *emet*).

5. **Petition or request for help**. The biblical lament is never merely a cry due to a situation of pain or inadequacy. Rather, it requests or even demands a response; it expects redemptive action from the God to whom the cry is directed. The lament always pleads for God to act: Hear! Save! Help! Heal! Rescue!

6. Sometimes **imprecation against enemies** (a curse on the enemy).

7. **Certainty of being heard**. The one who laments acknowledges divine help – in the psalms this is often explicit; however, this is implicit in many laments witnessed throughout the OT.

8. Sometimes, there is **vow or pledge** whereby the lamenter promises to offer sacrifices and praise to God after receiving help.

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[25] *Contra* Davies – see ANDREW DAVIES, "My God … Why? Questioning the Actin and Inaction of YHWH in the Psalms", *Why? ... How Long?* Studies on Voice(s) of Lamentation rooted in Biblical Hebrew Poetry (ed. LEANN SNOW FLESHER – CAROL J. DEMPSY – MARK J. BODA) (Library of the Hebrew Bible / Old Testament Studies 552; London: Bloomsbury T & T Clark 2014) 50-53.

[26] Westermann is right to state that the "petition comes out of lamentation; the two cannot be separated nor can they differentiated in meaning." Said in another way, a lamentation lays a claim on God just as a petition would and this is why sometimes, as in the story of Susanna (c.f. Dan 13,43), all we find is a lament – this lament is implicitly a petition for help. See WESTERMANN, "The Role of the Lament", 26.

a. We should point out that in psalms of lamentation, it is wrong to assume that the psalm's 'time frame' is *only* "*the actual time of suffering*."[27] Indeed, rather than *only incorporating* the actual time of suffering, these psalms of lament incorporate a previous moment of suffering but also after God has heard their plea.

b. In other terms, we should not just look at the *starting point of the psalmist* but where does the psalmist end.[28] The psalmist recognizes on his previous sorry state and recounts how he or she prayed in that state but also recognizes that things in his or her present situation is quite different.

c. In this case, the switch from lament to praise, while abrupt, is not a switch in genre but a different moment in time when God has heard and acted on the lamenter's behalf. The psalmist does not recount the exact moment of redemption – as we witness in narrative texts like Susanna – but the expression of thanksgiving surely expresses that redemption has happened.

d. By reading it backwards, it is sometimes assumed that "lament psalms are actually composed for the purpose of thanksgiving."[29] However, this position is mistaken because lament is a prayer of persuasion, a prayer which ends with acknowledgement that God *did indeed hear*.

e. The movement from praise to lament, in some psalms like psalm 3,7 is not a "reversal" but rather an acknowledgement that we are not God, and we are not to become complacent in our faith; while it is good and right that we have a complete trust in God, we should not take God for granted.

f. This return to lament after the confession of Ps 3,3-6 aims to remind us all that, while it is true that we are naked and vulnerable without God's protection it is also true that, to fully access such protection, we must not only remember our status as creature but also, in light of psalm 1, choose the wise path.

[27] WILLIAMSON, "Lament Psalms", 4.
[28] See WILLIAMSON, "Lament Psalms", 7.
[29] FEDERICO G. VILLANUEVA, *The 'Uncertainty of a Hearing'*. A study of the sudden change of mood in the psalms of lament (Vetus Testamentum Supplement Series 121; Leiden: Brill 2008) 14.

This basic description, with the loopholes for the "sometimes," is the basic description of lament in the Psalter as well as the essential patten of lament elsewhere in the OT: a cry for help to God from within a situation of distress (be it due to suffering or to a feeling of inadequacy), arising from trust that God is faithful to hear and respond to these cries.

To summarize: the lament is not a cry of abandonment. It is a prayer of persuasion wherein the cry for help is a request for God's saving actions: healing, redemption, mercy, vindication, rescue from enemies or from danger, restoration, peace. The cry for redemption arises from any situation of distress, whether it be suffering or sin, feeling inadequate or small in front of mission. Lament is, therefore, an urgent form of speech, a prayer of persuasion, arising from a crisis.

4. More in detail on the more important elements (for you, not to be discussed)

4.1. The invocation

Like every prayer, the lament begins with the invocation, the designation by name, of the deity to whom it is addressed. We thus invariably find in the first line of the lament and often as the very first word, the name of God: *My God, my God, why have you forsaken me* (Ps 22 (21),1) or *Ah! Lord God* (Jer 1,6).

The invocation, however, can be expanded and take the form of a special petition in which God is asked to be attentive and to hear the prayer: *give ear to my words, Lord; give heed to my groaning* (Ps 5,2).

In this way, the Lord is usually *directly* addressed and is only rarely spoken of in the third person (for e.g., Ps 77 (76),2: *In the day of my trouble, I seek the Lord*).

4.2. The Lament

In the actual lament, the lamenter describes his or her plight, in moving and sometimes quite passionate words; after all, our "most candid *speech of lament* permits words that live close to our deepest hurt and our most intimate groan."[30]

These words of hurt and groans may seem hurtful and urgent are characterized by an "unqualified candor. Everything is said, and God is known to be strong enough and willing enough to hear."[31] This is important for how can true friendship be real if we are not honest with each other? These laments, then, are characterized by their fearlessness – these laments are not afraid of either be rejected or being retaliated upon because the lamenter *knows God*.

In other terms, these prayers are really "a guard and guarantee against an *overpolite idolatry*. Such an idolatry imagines that God is fragile, delicate, and easily offended. In much of fraudulent piety, God is too nice and so our prayers must be censored. The outcome of such deference, of course, is that there is never serious and effective address."[32]

Ultimately, "Israel's prayer is rooted in a peculiar *memory*, lives by special *words* of covenantalism, and dares to risk everything on his known named You."[33] The lament, in specific, clearly shows that "*biblical faith, as it faces life fully, is uncompromisingly and unembarrassedly dialogic*."[34] It is, then, based on a faith that requires us to honestly face situations of disorientation with a God who acts in transforming ways.

And this is only possible because Israel has encountered the Creator God who has created us for the sole purpose of communion. In this relationship between Creator and creature, all words are possible if we have a perfect and simple heart, ever clinging to the God who wants us for himself and in whom alone my soul finds rest.

This is, when all is said and done, the power of the lament for it brings home in need for Israel to trust in God wholeheartedly that he will do what he promised: communion.

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[30] WALTER BRUEGGEMANN, "The Psalms as Prayer", *The Psalms and the Life of Faith* (ed. PATRICK D. MILLER) (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press 1995) 34.
[31] BRUEGGEMANN, "The Psalms as Prayer", 58.
[32] BRUEGGEMANN, "The Psalms as Prayer", 58.
[33] BRUEGGEMANN, "The Psalms as Prayer", 65.
[34] WALTER BRUEGGEMANN, "From Hurt to Joy, from Death to Life", *The Psalms and the Life of Faith* (ed. PATRICK D. MILLER) (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press 1995) 68.

4.2.1 The three main groups of laments

Above, we saw that there are three main groups of laments.

(a) In the first group, of lamentations, that to God, we can easily look to Ps 22,1 (My God, my God why have you forsaken me?) as a perfect example.

We can see here how the psalms are "*prayers to a known, named, identifiable You*."[35] This very fact highlights that we are found in a relationship between two protagonists who are known to each other in a way that allows for such direct language.

Moreover, in Jer 1,6, for instance, we see that the plight is the sending of ill-qualified Jeremiah: *look, I do not know how to speak for (*כִּי*) I am only a boy* (נַעַר). Many of these laments to God deal with either feeling distant to him, especially witnessed in Psalm 22, or with a sense that the person is unworthy, unqualified, or simply not the right person for the mission.

When the lamenter laments to God – and this God is the omnipotent Creator God –, we know that this lament is not towards "a detached and unaffected ruler."[36] Rather, God's omnipotence and sovereignty is recast as "urgent, determined solidarity."[37] Indeed, whenever Israel laments, God is there ready to help.

For this reason, in many of the psalms of lament where we hear much about weeping and sighing, anxiety and inner torment, sorrowful days and sleepless nights, sickness and persecution, we find that "Israel prays from that strange conviction of sovereign relatedness and prays back to that same sovereign relatedness."[38]

(b) Laments which concern the second group, that of enemies, can also be about physical and mental pain; but this physical sickness is often intermingled with mockery and harassment, the calamity of war and the threat of floods so that it is often not at all easy to tell what kind of problem is involved – and not even is it easy to divide cases of sickness from simply harassment, mockery, or persecution because they are put into close connection with sickness:

[35] BRUEGGEMANN, "The Psalms as Prayer", 34.
[36] BRUEGGEMANN, "The Psalms as Prayer", 44.
[37] BRUEGGEMANN, "The Psalms as Prayer", 45.
[38] BRUEGGEMANN, "The Psalms as Prayer", 45.

For they persecute those whom you have struck down, and those whom you have wounded, they attack still more (Ps 69 (68),26).

What is strange here is that we should expect a sick person to be looked after and treated caringly; here he is persecuted and tormented even more.

In biblical sapiential tradition, those who act in such ways are wicked and evil, far from God. The psalmist, then, asks God to not only to be healed from sickness but also to be redeemed from wicked people. For this reason, those who are enemies to the sick believe that "there is no God" (Ps 10 (9),4).

(c) In the third category of self-lamentation, the lamenter can draw a pitiful picture of himself: *but I am a worm and no man; scorned by men, and despised by the people* (Ps 22 (21),7). Together with physical sickness, the lamenter laments how s/he is tormented by spiritual pain – has the lamenter been made a fool of: You have deceived me, and I was deceived (Jer 20,7).

4.2.2. From orientation to disorientation, from disorientation to reorientation

Brueggemann rightly points out that what is common in all three forms of lamentation – as well as a feeling of an inadequacy for mission – is the dialectic "of disorientation and reorientation."[39] In reality, any situation of sickness, of injustice, of being called to do something that you do not feel you are up to doing is one that disorients us; these times are times that drive us to "*extremities* of emotion"[40] since we are "not meant for situations of disorientation."[41]

In this case, when we are found in situations that disorient us, we require ways and means to reorient our lives. This reorientation is, of course, not a return to the past; the past is gone, and we now find ourselves in a new situation, a situation that bear the marks and wounds of that time of disorientation. However, if we understand that this time of disorientation is a time of growth and a time when we can reflect on what is important, we can grow and learn from it: in these prayers in times of disorientation "there is a turn from yearning for the old

[39] WALTER BRUEGGEMANN, "Psalms and the Life of Faith. A suggested Typology of Function", *The Psalms and the Life of Faith* (ed. PATRICK D. MILLER) (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press 1995) 8.
[40] BRUEGGEMANN, "Psalms and the Life of Faith", 8.
[41] BRUEGGEMANN, "Psalms and the Life of Faith", 9.

orientation, a recognition that it is gone and not retrievable, and a readiness for a new orientation."[42]

Laments are those prayers typical of times of disorientation. Indeed, they are ways in which we can enter "linguistically into a new distressful situation in which the old orientation has collapsed."[43] And yet, because the lament is based on a trust in the Lord, it is not a lament of resignation; rather, "there is expectation and even insistence that Yahweh can be moved to act, and that Yahweh will act. And when Yahweh acts, Yahweh will bring things to a new life-order."[44]

In all of this, what is important is that, if a lamenter laments in this way, it makes little sense that they feel that God has effectively abandoned them; if one feels abandoned, one will not pray to God in such an intense way – more likely silence or frustration would be more reasonable. The lamenter in the bible feels able to lament in such a way because she or he knows that God is there and will help on account of the pact – these prayers lay claims on God and persuade him to help.

Indeed, after such a lament, the petition, either implicitly or explicitly, would not follow if the lamenter felt abandoned since it would make no sense to ask God of something if that God was not there. After all, Elijah himself mocks the prophets of Baal to *"Shout louder! ... Surely he [Baal] is a god! Perhaps he is deep in thought, or busy, or traveling. Maybe he is sleeping and must be awakened* (1 Kings 18,27).

4.3. When there is a confession of sin or assertion of innocence

When we find a confession of sin, what the lamenter is concerned with is the forgiveness of sins and the re-stabilization (reorientation) of the pact: *according to your mercy blot out my transgressions, wash me thoroughly from my iniquity and cleanse me from my sin!* (Ps 51 (50),3ff).

The assertion of innocence is also linked with the re-stabilization of the pact since what the lamenter wants to remind God that s/he has not abandoned the promise and asks for God to

[42] BRUEGGEMANN, "Psalms and the Life of Faith", 12.
[43] BRUEGGEMANN, "Psalms and the Life of Faith", 11.
[44] BRUEGGEMANN, "Psalms and the Life of Faith", 12.

keep this in mind. For instance: *O Lord my God, if I have done this, if there is wrong in my hands, if I have repaid my ally with harm or plundered my foe without cause, then let the enemy pursue and overtake me, trample my life to the ground, and lay my soul in the dust* (Ps 7,3-5).

4.4. Motive

We will deal with this in the following section. Here, it is enough to say that the prayer of lament, if it is to be a prayer of persuasion, needs to lay a claim on God.

Often, as in Ps 6, God is addressed in imperatives (turn… save… deliver; v. 4) which implies that the psalmist assumes "not only that Yahweh is faithful, steadfast, and just but that God's faithfulness, justice, and steadfastness rightly are to be mobilized on 'my behalf'"[45] and "'for the sake of your steadfast love.' The speaker is thus saying: Do not ack for 'my sake,' or because I deserve it, or because you owe it to me, but act to keep in repair your reputation for *hesed*."[46]

In other terms, Israel laments to God so that God can be "visibly the God that [he] promised to be."[47]

As one can see, the motive often revolves around God's status as creator and redeemer or how God has freely decided to enter a pact with Israel. Ultimately, these motives revolve around God's character. Thus, Israel does not doubt God's character as *hesed* and *emet*; rather Israel "insists that [God] has a precise responsibility to right wrong, to restore order, and to establish justice."[48]

4.5. The Petition

The petition is often introduced by a request for God's intervention: "look down from heaven and see" (Ps 80 (79),15) or "hear my supplication" (Ps 28 (27),2).

[45] BRUEGGEMANN, "The Psalms as Prayer", 55.
[46] BRUEGGEMANN, "The Psalms as Prayer", 55.
[47] BRUEGGEMANN, "The Psalms as Prayer", 55.
[48] BRUEGGEMANN, "The Psalms as Prayer", 55.

The petition can be put into negative terms such as “forsake me not” (Ps 27 (26),9) or “be not far from me” (Ps 22 (21),12). In some cases, as in Jer 1,6, the negative petition could be implied: “Ah, O Lord! I do not know how to speak because I am boy!” implies “do not send me for I am inadequate!”

The petition, of course, can be positive in the sense that it asks for something. For instance, the lamenter can ask for a healing as in Ps 6,3: *heal me, for my bones are troubled*.

It can also be a petition for deliverance from external affliction especially from enemies: *save me from all my pursuers* (Ps 7,2). In this way, the petition can take the form of an imprecation: *let me see your vengeance on them [enemies], for to you I have committed my cause* (Jer 20,12b) (point 6 above).

As usual, the petition can be in general terms: *make me to know your ways, O Lord, teach me your paths. Lead me in your truth and teach me for you are the God of my salvation* (PS 25,4ff).

Sometimes, assertions of innocence can become an indirect plea for help and provide motive for God to help; in other words, one statement can be, at the same time, an assertion of innocence, a petition, and something that provides God with a motive to act on behalf of the petitioner.

For instance, in Dan 13,43, we read: *you know that these men have borne false witness against me. And now I am to die! Yet I have done none of the things that they have wickedly invented against me*.

Here Susanna, on her way to be stoned to death, is not just simply asserting her innocence. She is pleading with God, petitioning God, to help her in her moment of need *because she is innocent of the crime that the elders and this is one motive why God should act on her behalf*. And in fact, in Dan 13,44, The Lord hears her cry!

To summarize, the petition is a petition from the lamenter to God to ask for God to help in a dire situation, be it a situation of sickness, due to enemies, or even in any general circumstance. Petitions can be direct or indirect and even an assertion of innocence can be a plea or petition if understood correctly.

4.6. The Certainty of Being Heard

In Ps 6,8-9, we read *depart from me, all you workers of evil; for the Lord has heard the sound of my weeping. The Lord has heard my supplication*. This shows that the Lord has heard the lamentation of the lamenter.

In Ps 6 (vv. 1-7 and vv. 8-10), the switch from lament to praise is abrupt; many things have happened in-between the two parts. And yet, what is clear is that the Lord has heard the cry of the psalmist.

In Jer 1,7-10, we read *But the Lord said to me, "Do not say, 'I am a boy.' You must go to everyone I send you to and say whatever I command you. Do not be afraid of them, for I am with you and will rescue you," declares the Lord. Then the Lord reached out his hand and touched my mouth and said to me, "I have put my words in your mouth. See, today I appoint you over nations and kingdoms to uproot and tear down, to destroy and overthrow, to build and to plant."*

The Lord certainly hears the plea of Jeremiah – perhaps not in the way that he would like but in a way that will help Jeremiah do what he has been called to do.

Of course, one must be careful here. Certainty of being heard from within the form of the lamentation is not automatic as if God is a divine vending machine. What I mean here is that simply crying out for help is not enough; it must be accompanied with a type of lifestyle, the lifestyle of the simple or perfect one. Simplicity of heart is the necessary lifestyle needed for a certainty of hearing.

Simplicity of heart means that the person is completely focused on God and clings to him even during suffering. James, basing himself on a much older tradition, states that double-souled person "should not *expect* to receive anything from the Lord" (James 1,7) because that person is not found within a living covenantal friendship with God – a friendship, as James 4,4 states, is the basis of everything. If the lamenter is certain that God will hear them it is only because s/he is an active participant in the pact and s/he clings to God no matter the situation.

4.7. Vow and Thanksgiving

The last part of the lamentation can incorporate a vow – which is a ritual act that explains that the pact has been restored and renewed; the lamenter is once again found in right covenantal relationship with God – or a praise of thanksgiving.

In this part of the prayer, where we find "the conclusion of vow, praise, and 'assurance of being heard'"[49], we can see how the lamenter now "faces forward"[50] to a new orientation of life. In this way, there is a turn from disorientation to reorientation, to "an equilibrium that is a gift from God."[51]

Here, the lamenter acknowledges that God has kept his promise to act in favor of the lowly and the sick, of those who need his help and grace. Due to this, this part is often found at the end of the prayer itself.

Often these two ideas go together. For instance, in Ps 22,25, we read *from you / because of you comes my praise in the great congregation; my vows I will pay before those who fear him.* We see here that thanksgiving and "paying" (שלם) (the same root as *shalom*) are united; the lamenter gives thanks to God because s/he is "reconciled" with God, and this must be celebrated in the community.

4.8. The Lament as a whole

As one can see, due to the breath and popularity of this *form*, it is easy to understand and appreciate how important lamentation is for ancient Israel. It was cultivated for centuries – and found as a central aspect of the psalms but also found in many other places of the Bible.

As such the psalms are the best place to see this form because, most often, it contains all the different parts of the lament. However, elsewhere, as in Susanna and even Jeremiah, all we find is the lament, the cry for help.

[49] BRUEGGEMANN, "Psalms and the Life of Faith", 12.
[50] BRUEGGEMANN, "Psalms and the Life of Faith", 12.
[51] BRUEGGEMANN, "Psalms and the Life of Faith", 12.

In this cry for help, the lamenter cries out to God in a situation of deep distress – be it spiritual, physical, due to enemies, of a feeling of inadequacy – for the omnipotent Creator God to help the one who continues to cling on to God for help, come what may.

In this lament, we implicitly see the petition because any cry for help *implies that they are petitioning God to help them* and we also see *implicitly the praise of thanksgiving for the one who has been rescued cannot not praise the God who saves*.

Hopefully, these pages have helped you to understand the beauty of the lament to the point that you too begin to pray through the lament. Indeed, since the lament requires relationship, trust, and a certainty that God will help us as long as we remain faithful to the pact, we can certainly call of God each time we need him in the hope, as the perfect and holy people of God, he will certainly come to our aid.

TEXT AND COMMENTARY ON THE STORY OF SUSANNA

1. Dan 13,1-4: Susanna is beautiful but righteous

13 *There was a man living in Babylon whose name was Jo'akim.* [2] *And he took a wife named Susanna, the daughter of Hilki'ah, a very beautiful woman and one who feared the Lord.* [3] *Her parents were righteous, and had taught their daughter according to the law of Moses.* [4] *Jo'akim was very rich, and had a spacious garden adjoining his house; and the Jews used to come to him because he was the most honored of them all.*

Here, we are firmly placed in the exilic period in Babylon. With the loss of the Temple, starting a new life in diaspora had a profound effect on the way Jews lived their lives and practiced their religion. The cultic aspect waned, and the importance of the Torah increased.

The books of Tobit and Esther (Persian) are vivid and lively stories about Jewish families trying to live a faithful and observant life outside Israel. Without the Temple, the Jew must live the Torah as diligently as possible; the Law of God was the defining feature of Jewish life. It was something that the Jew could cling to as a defining and structuring pattern of life no matter where one is; in being "portable", the law made it possible to be a devout and faithful Jew whether one lived in Babylonia or Judah.

This is the background of this story. It tells the story of how a Jew, man or woman, must put God before man and must remain faithful to his or her faith even amid suffering and injustice.

The first four verse introduces Susanna and her husband. Susanna immediately becomes the protagonist of the story with the remark that she is beautiful and one who feared the Lord. This phrase, of course, not only places this work in the bosom of Wisdom literature but also implies that Susanna herself is wise.

This wisdom is based, as we saw in Proverbs, in education: in v. 3, we are told that her righteous parents taught her the Law of Moses, something which, in Ben Sira, becomes equated with Wisdom itself.

And yet, "the combination of extreme beauty and implacable piety […demonstrates an] ironic paradoxical use of social conventions in the story. The paradox is the coexistence of beauty (which entails sexual temptation) with piety (fear of the Lord) in Susanna."[52]

Indeed, in Jewish tradition (Sir 9,8; 25,21; 42,12-14 or T12P[53]), female beauty and sexual temptation is a potential threat to men's piety. Here, this theory is brought to irrelevance since, as we will see, the elders are wicked men not due to Susanna's beauty but because they are not focused on the Lord.

This part is important as we are told that Susanna knows the Law – and it is through the Law that one can cling to the Lord.

2. Dan 13,5-6: The introduction of two elders, full on iniquity

5 In that year two elders from the people were appointed as judges. Concerning them the Lord had said: "Iniquity came forth from Babylon, from elders who were judges, who were supposed to govern the people." 6 These men were frequently at Jo'akim's house, and all who had suits at law came to them.

We feel the contrast between Susanna and her husband, on the one side, and the elders on the other. Indeed, while Susanna is righteous and just, instructed in the Torah and in Wisdom, the elders – those who are supposed to uphold the Law – are wicked!

This story, as we will see, will greatly contrast the "elders" with "youth" – these two judges against Daniel and Susanna. In typical Wisdom fashion, we have a typical Jewish idea turned on its head (irony) since, in being older, the elders were supposed to embody wisdom itself.

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[52] See DICHK M. KANONGE, "Thematic Irony in the story of Susanna", *HTS Theologiese Studies* 69 (2013) 2.

[53] For a fairly recent article concerning the sexual temptation due to a woman's beauty in T12P, see the discussion on the Testament of Reuben in PETRA VON GEMÜNDEN, "Emotions and Literary Genres in the Testaments of the Twelve Patriarchs and the New Testament", *Biblical Interpretation* 24 (2016) 523-527. Therein, the author rightly shows how the sight of a beautiful woman was thought to provoke evil desire which has bodily consequences (fornication) – there was, thusly, a movement from sight, to thought, to action. The story of Susanna subverts this notion by showing us that desire *precedes* sight.

In the NT, Jesus often tells us that good and evil desire (that springs from the heart) is where the emphasis ought to be since it is from "the heart" that evil thoughts and good thoughts come from (cf. Mk 7,21).

Thus, it is not the sight of a beautiful woman that provokes evil desire but that evil desire, that springs forth from the heart, that provokes the eye to be evil which ends with fornication (Mt 6,22-23; 20,15; Lk 11,34-36).

Now, these elders became judges. We know how important the role of the judge was in ancient Israel. We are invited to remember the judges of old, such like Deborah or Samuel, who not only judged but ruled the people with justice and wisdom.

In the opening verses of the book of Wisdom, there is an invitation to the judges to love the righteousness of God. Here in exile, these elders would have been well versed in Mosaic law and would be in charge of guiding the people to live their faith faithfully outside of the promised land.

Being an elder is often equated to knowledge and wisdom. As in Jer 1,5-6, youthfulness is usually concerned a negative trait when it comes to faith and religious wisdom. Indeed, Jeremiah laments to God that he is only a na'ar (a youth). The elder, the wise and experienced leader of the people, was often considered much more able to discern and lead.

Even in Proverbs 9, the parable of the two houses, if we read in-between the lines, the immature ones who are called to come in are to be considered as young – especially since the book is, more often than naught, a series of lectures of parents to their children.

This being so, it is all-the-more disconcerting that these elders are wicked. These first 6 verses set the stage and we already feel the tension that will arise between the wise and just Susanna and the wicked elders.

3. Dan 13,7-12: The wicked elders, lusting for Susanna, are found out… by each other

7 When the people departed at noon, Susanna would go into her husband's garden to
walk. 8 The two elders used to see her every day, going in and walking about, and they began
to desire her.

9 And they perverted their minds and turned away their eyes from looking to Heaven or
remembering righteous judgments. 10 Both were overwhelmed with passion for her, but they did
not tell each other of their distress, 11 for they were ashamed to disclose their lustful desire to
possess her. 12 And they watched eagerly, day after day, to see her.

The public activity at the house of Joakim would finish at noontime. This is when the sun was at its highest, and therefore, hot; it was also the time when people went to have lunch (v. 13). This allowed Susanna some time to enjoy the garden.

The elders, however, had other ideas. While Susanna's heart remained firmly focused on God, the elders were focused on her! But be careful! While it is true that, in v. 8, sight precedes desire, we already know, in v. 5, that they are wicked. It is still the wickedness of the heart that guides both their desire and their eye and not the other way round.

What we have here is a vicious circle – the wickedness of the heart guides the eye which increases iniquity. Indeed, it is highly indicative that the text states that they "perverted" their minds and "turned away their eyes" from heaven.

The term "perverted" should remind us of Prov 10,9 since the same term ("perverted") is used. There, in Prov 10,9, we had contrasting walking in simplicity with walking in perversity; whoever walks in simplicity, walks with a complete trust in the Lord, but those who walk in perversity will be found out! The not-so-hidden implication being that not only are these elders not simple (and therefore wicked) but also do we know that they will be found out![54]

As for the eyes, in similar fashion to the parable of the Pharisee and the Publican in Lk 18,9-14, the eyes show where one's heart is. Indeed, like the eyes of the Pharisee – who was focused on the tax-collector rather than God –, the eyes of the elders are turned away from Heaven (i.e., God) and focused on Susanna; in their lust, they indicate that their heart was no longer centered on God but on possessing – on having – Susanna for themselves.

We have said that all this happens at noontime. While this is an indication of time, we also must highlight the symbolism. Indeed, as in Job, the wise and the righteous bask in the light of God (Job 33,30 MT).

Susanna, at noon, walks in the garden (like the first man and woman) focused always on God. The elders, perverted in their ways and eyes turned away from the light, are in darkness. In the OT, the wicked are mainly active at night – so that they do their evil deeds in secret and darkness.

A good example is David's sin with Bathsheba and Nathan's remark that that which David did in the dark and in secret, God will do in the sun and in the open (2 Sam 12,11-12).

[54] Of course, this term is not limited to Proverbs. Indeed, a very instructive example is the *Rîb* text Deut 32,5: *yet his degenerate children have dealt falsely with him, a perverse and crooked generation.* As Kanonge notes, the term in Susanna, as in Deut 32,5 LXX, is used "in the context of perversion and rejection of the relationship with God, established by election and covenant." In other words, the elders "did not want to have God in their minds." See KANONGE, "Thematic Irony in the story of Susanna", 3.

While the elders act in secret, they do so in the light of the sun – and all this shows how perverse they are!

4. Dan 13,13-14: The wicked elders collude with each other against Susanna

13 They said to each other, "Let us go home, for it is mealtime." 14 And when they went out, they parted from each other. But turning back, they met again; and when each pressed the other for the reason, they confessed their lust. And then together they arranged for a time when they could find her alone.

These verses are a turning point in the story. Up until now, the lust that each one has for Susanna is only known by the reader since we are told as much by the narrator; each one was lusting for her in the secret of their hearts.

But on this day, both decided to act on their lust. We see here already echoes of Prov 10,9 since each one's perverted ways were found out – by each other. This should have been the moment that, in their shame, they return to the Lord. Rather, in congruence to their wickedness, they are emboldened and collude with one another.

5. Dan 13,15-21: The wicked elders attempt to rape Susanna

15 Once, while they were watching for an opportune day, she went in as before with only two maids, and wished to bathe in the garden, for it was very hot. 16 And no one was there except the two elders, who had hid themselves and were watching her.

17 She said to her maids, "Bring me oil and ointments, and shut the garden doors so that I may bathe." 18 They did as she said, shut the garden doors, and went out by the side doors to bring what they had been commanded; and they did not see the elders, because they were hidden.

19 When the maids had gone out, the two elders rose and ran to her, and said: 20 "Look, the garden doors are shut, no one sees us, and we are in love with you; so give your consent, and lie with us. 21 If you refuse, we will testify against you that a young man was with you, and this was why you sent your maids away."

The text is clear; up until now the men have been watching from afar, waiting for the opportune time to test Susanna's faith and to rape her.[55]

As the text implies (she went in as before), Susanna was going about as she often did (it was routine) and, as with David's lustful knowledge that Bathsheba bathed on the terrace, the elders knew what was going to happen and knew that she would be alone.

Susanna is innocent and the elders are guilty of attempting to rape her. In their delusional wickedness, they think that Susanna will allow herself to be raped. They threaten her and say that they will report that she had consensual sex – not with them of course! – with someone else and committed adultery.

6. Dan 13,22-23: Righteous Susanna's response

22 Susanna sighed deeply, and said, "I am hemmed in on every side. For if I do this thing, it is death for me; and if I do not, I shall not escape your hands.

23 I choose not to do it and to fall into your hands, rather than to sin in the sight of the Lord."

Susanna recognizes the impossible position that she has been put in: she is naked in the water, they are on land, fully clothed; she is a woman and alone, they are powerful men and "friends" of her husband – and there are two of them.

The words that she states are interesting. She knows that if she does not comply with the men and they execute their threat, this means certain death by stoning. And yet, "death" would be the result if she complies!

The implication being is that, like Jesus states in Mt 10,28, the true Jew should not worry about those who can kill the body but about that which that can kill the soul: one should fear the Lord and not men (or Satan)!

She makes her choice. She stands firm in her faith rather than succumbing to the power of powerful and wicked men.

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[55] In agreement with Glancy, in the confrontation between the elders and Susanna, there is a very real threat of force against Susanna; therefore, this is a case of attempted rape and not of attempted seduction. See JENNIFER A. GLANCY, "The Accused. Susanna and her Readers", *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 58 (1993) 104.

7. Dan 13,24-27: The wicked elders implement their wicked plan

[24] Then Susanna cried out with a loud voice, and the two elders shouted against her. [25] And one of them ran and opened the garden doors.

[26] When the household servants heard the shouting in the garden, they rushed in at the side door to see what had happened to her.

[27] And when the elders told their tale, the servants were greatly ashamed, for nothing like this had ever been said about Susanna.

Susanna has no way to physically defend herself – especially in her vulnerable state and in being outnumbered. She does the only thing that she can do: she screams. The elders, then, execute their threat and flip the script: they are the heroes and Susanna the harlot.

8. Dan 13,28-30: The false trial against Susanna begins

[28] The next day, when the people gathered at the house of her husband Jo'akim, the two elders came, full of their wicked plot to have Susanna put to death.

[29] They said before the people, "Send for Susanna, the daughter of Hilki'ah, who is the wife of Jo'akim." [30] So they sent for her. And she came, with her parents, her children, and all her kindred.

The reader would be justified, upon reading this, to become enraged: the law-case against Susanna happens in the house of her husband! The place of sin, the place of lies, the place of lustful desires, the place of attempted rape now becomes the place of justice! The gall of the elders has no limits!

They sent for her both by name and relation; this shows how tense is the mood of the story now; the wickedness of the two men does not just affect Susanna but it also affects the entire household and, by effect, the entire community.

9. Dan 13,31-34: The wicked elders abuse her in front of everyone

[31] Now Susanna was a woman of great refinement, and beautiful in appearance.

[32] As she was veiled, the wicked men ordered her to be unveiled, that they might feed upon her beauty.

[33] But her family and friends and all who saw her wept.

[34] Then the two elders stood up in the midst of the people, and laid their hands upon her head.

Even now, the men cannot help but flaunt their power over Susanna. As the custom of the time, she would be veiled. There is no real reason for her to be unveiled – and the only real reason is given: so that they can *feed* upon her beauty – the symbolism of feeding is apt!

And what is more is that the elders themselves do the unveiling! This act, the act of unveiling, is symbolic of the sexual act itself; thusly, the very wording of the text illustrates the gravity of the situation.

Susanna is raped even now; she is assaulted now, not in the secret of the garden, but in front of everyone: her husband, her family, her friends, the community. That which was symbolically indicated by the noon sun now actually comes to pass: they do everything in the open. They have no shame indeed!

10. Dan 13,35-41: The wicked elders testify falsely against Susanna

[35] And she, weeping, looked up toward heaven, for her heart trusted in the Lord.

[36] The elders said, "As we were walking in the garden alone, this woman came in with two maids, shut the garden doors, and dismissed the maids.[37] Then a young man, who had been hidden, came to her and lay with her. [38] We were in a corner of the garden, and, when we saw this wickedness, we ran to them.

[39] We saw them embracing, but we could not hold the man, for he was too strong for us, and he opened the doors and dashed out. [40] So we seized this woman and asked her who the young man was, but she would not tell us. These things we testify."

[41] The assembly believed them, because they were elders of the people and judges; and they condemned her to death.

Susanna knows that she cannot hope in humanity; her only hope is in God. Notice the eyes. The eyes of the elders were turned away from heaven. Susanna looks up to heaven. The elders' hearts were filled with lust, Susanna's heart focused on God.

The men lay out their story just as they rehearsed, and the crowd believed their testimony simply on account of their status as elders and judges.

But this testimony is weak at best. Often, like today, we already form ideas about guilt or innocence even before the case is heard; Susanna was found guilty by the mob court of public opinion even before she entered in the court.

Indeed, no one asked why where the men there in the first place; no one asked who the young man was; no one asked Susanna to explain herself and no one asked about the integrity of the elders. They just accepted the story as fact! In this way, the crowds – finicky as they always are – become complicit in the sin and condemn her to death.

11. Dan 13,42-43: Susanna's lament

42 Then Susanna cried out with a loud voice, and said, "O eternal God, who discerns what is secret, who are aware of all things before they come to be,

43 you know that these men have borne false witness against me. And now I am to die!

Yet I have done none of the things that they have wickedly invented against me!"

It is to be remembered that the usual form of a prayer of lament has the following characteristics: (i) the invoking of the name of God, (ii) a motive why God should hear and help, (iii) there can be a confession of sin and an assertion of innocence, (iv) the description of the problem, (v) a request for help, and (vi) the certainty of being heard.

Here, (i) Susanna first invokes God: o eternal God! Then (ii) the motive why God should hear and (iii) the assertion of innocence are interconnected since God "discerns what is secret," "aware of all things before they come to be", he know that the elders are bearing false witness against her. Both (iv) the description of the problem and (v) the request for help are likewise interconnected for since she is about to be killed after being falsely convicted, she cries out to God for help. The last point (vi) the certainty of hearing will happen in the following verse.

This prayer, then, is form-critically a prayer of lament which has the aim to persuade God to act on her behalf.

12. Dan 13,44-46: The Lord hears her cry and works through Daniel

44 The Lord heard her cry. 45 And as she was being led away to be put to death, God aroused the holy spirit of a young lad named Daniel; 46 and he cried with a loud voice, "I am innocent of the blood of this woman."

God, knowing all secrets, knows that she is right; he listens where the wicked do not. As we just said, typical of the Second Temple period, God remains a bit distant and does not intervene directly (like he did in days gone by as in the Exodus) but rather through a *young* man, named Daniel.

It is to be remembered that Daniel was one of the young Jewish captives that was taken to Babylon during the exile. Daniel 1–2 also places the young Daniel at the whims of more powerful men; the young Daniel does not succumb to their desires and eat food which would break the law – and this was a big risk! God, who was with him, saw this and kept him safe. Daniel, therefore, is also one who is known for his righteousness and his fidelity.[56]

What Daniel states, the narrator tells us, does not come from himself – but from God. Daniel, illuminated by the Spirit, cries in a loud voice: *I am innocent of this woman's blood* which is simply another way of saying that all this is rubbish – the trial is a farce and she is innocent.

13. Dan 13,47-59: Daniel proves the wickedness of the two elders

47 All the people turned to him, and said, "What is this that you have said?"

48 Taking his stand in the midst of them, he said, "Are you such fools, you sons of Israel? Have you condemned a daughter of Israel without examination and without learning the facts? 49 Return to the place of judgment. For these men have borne false witness against her."

[56] Mattheus, on his death bed, calls Daniel 'the simple/perfect one' in 1 Macc 2,60.

50 Then all the people returned in haste. And the elders said to him, "Come, sit among us and inform us, for God has given you that right." 51 And Daniel said to them, "Separate them far from each other, and I will examine them."

52 When they were separated from each other, he summoned one of them and said to him, "You old relic of wicked days, your sins have now come home, which you have committed in the past, 53 pronouncing unjust judgments, condemning the innocent and letting the guilty go free, though the Lord said, 'Do not put to death an innocent and righteous person.'

54 Now then, if you really saw her, tell me this: Under what tree did you see them being intimate with each other?" He answered, "Under a mastic tree." 55 And Daniel said, "Very well! You have lied against your own head, for the angel of God has received the sentence from God and will immediately cut you in two."

56 Then he put him aside, and commanded them to bring the other. And he said to him, "You offspring of Canaan and not of Judah, beauty has deceived you and lust has perverted your heart. 57 This is how you both have been dealing with the daughters of Israel, and they were intimate with you through fear; but a daughter of Judah would not endure your wickedness.

58 Now then, tell me: Under what tree did you catch them being intimate with each other?" He answered, "Under an evergreen oak." 59 And Daniel said to him, "Very well! You also have lied against your own head, for the angel of God is waiting with his sword to saw[c] you in two, that he may destroy you both."

Daniel employs a good tactic – he separates the witnesses and see if their stories are the same. In a way, he takes on the role of the defence attorney. He begins by questioning the credibility of the elders themselves.

To the first judge, Daniel reminds him that he is wicked: *he is known for pronouncing unjust judgements, condemning the innocent, and acquitting the guilty.*

To the second judge, *he reminds him that he is not even an Israelite but a Canaanite, a pagan, who has been known for sexually assaulting young, socially vulnerable women*.

As with more modern-day sexual assaults and abuse cases, it is often the case that offenders brought to charge are not first-time offenders. These two elders are well-known repeat offenders whose improprieties are well-known by most.

He then goes in to tear their testimony apart: he asks each one under which tree did the couple commit adultery? This is an interesting question; it is a simple enough question but a

question that is secondary; it seems likely that they would have rehearsed more important information, like a description of the man.

But this is something that they would not even have thought about. Since they both lie and answer differently, Daniel knows that their deception – as Prov 10,9 would have informed us already – is found out.

14. Dan 13,60-64: The wicked elders are put to death, Susanna is vindicated

60 Then all the assembly shouted loudly and blessed God, who saves those who hope in him. 61 And they rose against the two elders, for out of their own mouths Daniel had convicted them of bearing false witness; 62 and they did to them as they had wickedly planned to do to their neighbor; acting in accordance with the law of Moses, they put them to death.

Thus, innocent blood was saved that day.

63 And Hilki'ah and his wife praised God for their daughter Susanna, and so did Jo'akim her husband and all her kindred, because nothing shameful was found in her.

64 And from that day onward Daniel had a great reputation among the people.

Here, the text is quite straight-forward: we find the reversal of fates; Susanna is vindicated and the elders, due to their wickedness, are put to death.

Applying the story of Susanna to the present day

1. Introduction

After finishing the story, I want to apply this story to our situation. We need to be careful. We know that many women are raped and stoned to death. We know that women are killed just for being women. So, we cannot use this story to explain that God will protect all women from rape and femicide. Also, we cannot say that women who are killed or raped because they were not like Susanna. That would be an abuse of Scripture and the true meaning of the text.

Some questions we need to ask ourselves are:

- Does God like injustice?
- Should we allow injustice to happen without trying to stop it?
- Should we stand by if we see an act of injustice?
- What kind of person is pleasing to God?
- What does God expect of our elders, our leaders?
- Does God think women are less important than men?

2. What kind of God is God and what kind of person is pleasing to God?

Therefore, although the narrative is about a woman who suffers greatly and is eventually justified because of her standing firm in God, this story deals with many other issues that should help us in our lives today.

What kind of God is God and what kind of person is pleasing to God are perhaps the first important questions we should ask and answer.

God is the creator God. In creating, he desires things to flourish. It is not just about "multiplying and growing" but about living life in a way that makes the most of it. Plants that bloom are plants that grow, are healthy, and provide shade and food. A bird that flourishes is a bird that can be the best it can be.

By wanting things to flourish, God explains that He wants things to live the best life possible. This also applies to humanity.

Since humanity is both custodian of creation and ambassador of God, its flourishing is based on living the life for which it was created: being in community with God and creation. By living in conformity with the Creator, the Jew believed that he or she could flourish.

Thus, the heart of life is shalom: when the relationships between God and the creature are healthy and pure, where we live for the benefit of each other, there is peace between God and us. When there is peace between us and God, then there can be peace between us.

In the narrative, therefore, the figures of the two evil judges are those who have no peace with either God or man. They are the opposite of what Wisdom 1,1 tells us: you judges, love righteousness (of God), that is, think of God in goodness and seek him in simplicity of heart.

Susanna, on the other hand, is the example of one who is righteous and has shalom with God and with humanity. Her gaze was always on God, not living for her own benefit but for the benefit of others, living a pure and blessed life.

In the story, therefore, we must see the wicked elders and the righteous Susanna as two lifestyles, one desired by the God who wants flourishing and the other as its opposite, a lifestyle that is "happy" when things wither and die.

Who then is our God? God is the one who desires the creation he created to flourish and be in an intimate relationship with himself and other creatures. The one who is pleasing to God is the one who is at peace with God and with the creature, who not only desires everything to flourish, but who does his best to foster this flourishing by living a life that fosters it.

3. How is it, then, that God allows injustice?

If God is a God of relationships, he cannot create machines that do not have the ability to say no to this project. In every relationship there is risk, and we have all suffered the pain of failed relationships. However, it must be so. If God created us in such a way that we cannot say no to his design, we would be no better than a computer that obeys our every input; I cannot have a real relationship with a computer. This is ever more significant in the age of AI and the emergence of "AI love relationships" wherein AI can mimic but not provide real relationships.

This does not mean that God likes it when someone hurts us. Far from it. But this God is a God of relationships, and if the relationship is to be real, then there must be a risk of one creature causing another creature to wither.

This does not mean that I, God's ambassador, should remain silent in the face of suffering and withering. On the contrary, in the face of suffering and withering, I must do my best to stop it and to do my part to create a better world, a world that flourishes – and that is both from an environmental and a social justice perspective. As the prophets always say, social justice is caused by the lack of shalom. So, we have to be spokesmen for shalom.

But we are spokesmen for shalom in ways that are not often recognized or encouraged in today's world. While we do well to speak out and protest on issues that matter to us, the way that is most normal is at a smaller level: living humble lives, lives that are kenotic and cruciform, lives that are lived for the benefit of each other.

4. What does God expect from our elders?

In Susanna's story there is a great criticism of the elderly and praise for the young. And this is no coincidence. In fact, in a culture like that of ancient Israel, the elders were those who were considered wise and experienced. But they were also those who, most of all, understood – perhaps after many difficult experiences – why it would be good to live in accordance with the God of relationships, for this God of relationships wants everything to flourish.

However, here we have two elders who were not the example they should have been. And it was up to the young people – Susanna and Daniel – to do what they were supposed to do. In all of this, it seems to me that the author of the narrative is particularly disillusioned with the elders of his time; probably, there were many elders who were like the elders in the narrative and who lived a life conducive to withering rather than flourishing.

According to the narrative, what does God expect from the elders? The author is clear that the elders were not living up to their calling. On the contrary, the author expects the elders to be the first to live a life conducive to flourishing, living a life pleasing to God. This means being poor in spirit, living according to the Creator's will and in congruence with the vocation of ambassador.

In the story, therefore, the elders should not have desired Susanna at all and should not have turned their eyes and hearts away from the Creator. But also, while wrong, when they

were caught by each other, they should have repented and returned to God and not done the opposite.

What do we expect from our elders? We expect to look to them to see what it means to live a kenotic and cruciform life, to see what kind of life God desires and is conducive to flourishing, to see what it means to have a heart like God's. This is the great calling that elders have.

5. Do women and men have equal dignity?

In Genesis, we often misunderstand the significance of the fact that woman was formed from the man's rib. Although, in the history of interpretation, this act has been seen as subordinating woman to man, it cannot be further from the truth. The text says that man and woman are made of the same cloth and therefore have equal dignity. Woman and man are "bone from the same bone and flesh from the same flesh" and therefore are equal before God.

This, of course, reverberates throughout Susanna's story. Susanna, a person educated in the law, knows the law and knows what God desires. God loves Susanna and stands by her. It is the evil desires of the two men and the sin of omission of the crowd – men and women – that God hates.

In a world where women are killed simply for being women, abused in the sex trade and pornography, aborted simply because they are women, much more needs to be done to protect women. Both policy and a change of attitude must accompany a change of heart. The Christian community should do more, both catechistically and in social policy, to help put an end to these shameful acts.

6. Conclusion

Do we want a better world? The Christian worldview is one that sees everything flourishing in union and communion. Let us, then, be people pleasing to God. Let us be more like him, living for the benefit of each other. Only then can we remember Susanna's life as a person who truly understood what it means to live the Torah. Amen.

ESTHER'S AND MORDECAI'S PRAYER AS ONE OF LAMENT

1. Introduction

1.1. The Story

As we said above, the story of Esther is one that recounts the heroic deeds of the Jewess Esther who rescued her people from the attempted genocide plotted by Haman, a powerful officer within the Persian royal court.

When King Ahasuerus becomes displeased with Queen Vashti because of her disobedience and disposes her (Est 1,1-22), he initiates a search for a new queen from among all the beautiful young virgins in the kingdom. Only Esther, the daughter of Mordecai's uncle Abihail, is found pleasing in the eyes of king and becomes queen (Est 2,1-18).

Even though Esther kept her heritage a secret, all went well at the beginning. Indeed, Esther gained the trust of the king since she, on the words of her uncle, saved the king from an assassination plot (Est 2,19-23). Things take a turn for the worst, however, when the powerful courier Haman becomes furious that Mordecai refuses to bow down in front of him for to do so would be idolatrous. Upon learning that Mordecai is a Jew, Haman vows to exterminate all the Jews in the territory since they are Mordecai's people (Est 3,1-6)

In a pivotal moment of the story, Mordecai, upon learning about the plot to kill the Jews, implored Esther to talk with the king (Est 4,1-8). On the basis of the unhappy ending of the story of Queen Vashti, Esther understood that what Mordecai was asking her to do was very dangerous. If Vashti was disposed because she did not obey the king when he called for her, then it stands to reason that Esther would be likely disposed of if she goes to the king without his expressed orders to go to him – and she had not been called to go to the king for the last thirty days, she does not see a way that she can help (Est 4,9-11).

In reply, Mordecai expresses poignant truths: (i) while no one knows that she is Jew, it will be found out and therefore her life is in danger whether or not she remains silent; (ii) God is not impotent; if you remain silent, help to the Jews will come from another place – but as you are alone in the palace, you might not escape; (iii) perhaps it is for this reason that Esther became queen so that God may work through her (Est 4,12-14).

Even though she was hesitant at first, Esther eventually listened to her uncle. She prays a prayer of lament wherein she asks for eloquent speech. She then devises a plan to save her people by inviting both the king and Haman to a banquet, wherein she revealed that she herself is a Jew and Haman sought to kill even her. The king, who favoured Queen Esther, reversed the plot whereby Haman was killed while Esther and her people were saved (Est 5,3-7,10). This victory becomes the inspiration for the Jewish feast of Purim wherein the reversal of fate happened since, while Haman had cast a lot (*pur*) against the Jews, he was destroyed in their stead.

1.2. The Text

The book of Esther has some unique characteristics that must be understood before we delve fully into Esther's prayer of lament. The first edition of the book was written in Hebrew, probably around the fifth century BC. This version contains the more simply story of rescue by Esther but it is likely that God is never mentioned and there is no prayer of Esther.

Sometime around the third century BC, when the book was translated into Greek, another author added several sections. When we add these Greek additions, the story now begins with a dream of Mordecai that sets the tone and provides the basis for the danger and conflict that will run through the book (addition A, chapter 11). This forms an inclusion with the final addition F (10,4-11,1), since we find a note that Mordecai's dream is fulfilled.

Additions B and E (chapters 13,1-7 and 16,1-24) are the letters of King Ahasuerus, which are mentioned in the Hebrew version, but not written out in full.

Addition C (13,8-14,19) provides us with the content of Mordecai's (13,8-18) and Esther's (14,1-19) prayer. Both are prayers of lamentation wherein they protest their innocence of humility over against pride and ask God to come to their aid. Thus, similar to Tobit's and Sarah's prayer in the book of Tobit, we have both a man and a woman praying to God a prayer of lament for God to come to their aid.

Lastly, Addition D (15,1-16) explains Esther's approach to the king after her prayer.

The additions together form 107 additional verses that are often, in modern bibles, inserted at the appropriate places in the translation of the Hebrew form of the book. The disordered chapter number comes from the displacement of the additions to the end of the

Hebrew form of the Book of Esther by Jermone in the Latin Vulgate translation and from the subsequent division of the bible into chapters by Stephen Langton, who numbered the additions consecutively as though they formed a direct continuation of the Hebrew text.

2. The prayers of Mordecai and Esther studied synoptically

Prayer of Mordecai (Est 13,8-18)	Prayer of Esther (14,1-19)
	Then Queen Esther, seized with deadly anxiety, fled to the Lord.
	2 She took off her splendid apparel and put on the garments of distress and mourning, and instead of costly perfumes she covered her head with ashes and dung, and she utterly humbled her body; every part that she loved to adorn she covered with her tangled hair.
8 Then Mordecai prayed to the Lord, calling to remembrance all the works of the Lord. **9** He said,	**3** She prayed to the Lord God of Israel, and said:
"O Lord, Lord, you rule as King over all things, for the universe is in your power and there is no one who can oppose you when it is your will to save Israel, **10** for you have made heaven and earth and every wonderful thing under heaven. **11** You are Lord of all, and there is no one who can resist you, the Lord.	"O my Lord, you only are our king;
	help me, who am alone and have no helper but you, **4** for my danger is in my hand.

	[5] Ever since I was born, I have heard in the tribe of my family that you, O Lord, took Israel out of all the nations, and our ancestors from among all their forebears, for an everlasting inheritance, and that you did for them all that you promised. [6] And now we have sinned before you, and you have handed us over to our enemies [7] because we glorified their gods. You are righteous, O Lord! [8] And now they are not satisfied that we are in bitter slavery, but they have covenanted with their idols [9] to abolish what your mouth has ordained, and to destroy your inheritance, to stop the mouths of those who praise you and to quench your altar and the glory of your house, [10] to open the mouths of the nations for the praise of vain idols, and to magnify forever a mortal king. [11] "O Lord, do not surrender your sceptre to what has no being; and do not let them laugh at our downfall; but turn their plan against them, and make an example of him who began this against us. [12] Remember, O Lord; make yourself known in this time of our affliction, and give me courage, O King of the gods and Master of all dominion! [13] Put eloquent speech in my mouth before the lion, and turn his heart to hate the man who is fighting against us, so that there may

	be an end of him and those who agree with him. **14** But save us by your hand, and help me, who am alone and have no helper but you, O Lord.
12 You know all things; you know, O Lord, that it was not in insolence or pride or for any love of glory that I did this, and refused to bow down to this proud Haman; **13** for I would have been willing to kiss the soles of his feet to save Israel!	**15** You have knowledge of all things, and you know that I hate the splendour of the wicked and abhor the bed of the uncircumcised and of any alien.
14 But I did this so that I might not set human glory above the glory of God, and I will not bow down to anyone but you, who are my Lord; and I will not do these things in pride.	**16** You know my necessity—that I abhor the sign of my proud position, which is upon my head on days when I appear in public. I abhor it like a filthy rag, and I do not wear it on the days when I am at leisure. **17** And your servant has not eaten at Haman's table, and I have not honoured the king's feast or drunk the wine of libations. **18** Your servant has had no joy since the day that I was brought here until now, except in you, O Lord God of Abraham.
15 And now, O Lord God and King, God of Abraham, spare your people; for the eyes of our foes are upon us to annihilate us, and they desire to destroy the inheritance that has been yours from the beginning. **16** Do not neglect your portion, which you redeemed for yourself out of the land of Egypt. **17** Hear	**19** O God, whose might is over all, hear the voice of the despairing, and save us from the hands of evildoers. And save me from my fear!"

my prayer, and have mercy upon your inheritance; turn our mourning into feasting that we may live and sing praise to your name, O Lord; do not destroy the lips of those who praise you." **18** And all Israel cried out mightily, for their death was before their eyes.	

3. Are they laments?

It is to be remembered that the usual form of a prayer of lament has the following characteristics: (i) the invoking of the name of God, (ii) a motive why God should hear and help, (iii) there can be a confession of sin and an assertion of innocence, (iv) the description of the problem, (v) a request for help, and (vi) the certainty of being heard.

When we turn to Mordecai's prayer, we can see the following aspects:

(i) Mordecai begins his prayer by invoking God as omnipotent creator and ruler over all things. Due to this, no one can oppose or thwart the will of the Lord (vv. 9-11).

(ii) In fact, the motive of why God should help is that it is the will of God to save Israel. Later on in the prayer, in v. 16, Mordecai likewise makes a special reference to the paradigmatic experience of the Exodus in Egypt as a remembrance and trust that what God did in the past he can do now in the contemporary situation. Of course, this is another way of invoking God's *hesed* and *emet* towards Israel.

(iii) He then moves to provide a protest of innocence: he did not bow down to Haman due to pride (he would have kissed the soles of his feet to save Israel); rather, he did not do so in order that human glory is not set above the glory of God (i.e., due to idolatry) – he will only worship God as the first commandment makes clear (vv. 12-14).

In vv. 15-17, Mordecai gives (iv) the description of the problem and (v) makes the plea to spare his people for Haman is about to destroy them. In v. 18, as a way of conclusion and as an echo of Ex 2,23-25, all of Israel cries out to the Lord due to their dire situation.

While the narrator simply introduces the prayer of Mordecai with a similar introductory note, the narrator gives a much more detailed introduction to the prayer of Esther. Indeed, since Esther's situation is much more imperiled, it is understandable that, in v. 1, she is seized with deadly anxiety. But rather than putting her hopes in something fleeting, she flees to the Lord.

Not only does she flee to the Lord, she also, in v. 2, removes her splendid attire and put on garments of mourning. This act, typical in the scriptures, is an externalization of a humility of heart. This is the right attitude to have when one prays.

Of course, just as Mordecai's prayer, we can find all formal aspects that make up a prayer of lament. Indeed, (i) in Est 14,3, Esther invokes the Lord as her king and Israel's God. By doing so, Esther recognizes that, while the king of Persia's power is "temporary and limited"[57], God is omnipotent. Therefore, although God will work through Esther, the source of such help remains God himself.

Of course, if she can invoke God in such a way, it is only because, as v. 5 explains, Esther "recalls the age-old history of God's relationship with Israel"[58] which she has learned from childhood. Thus, as point (ii) would indicate, any such prayer is borne from the experience that the people of God themselves experienced in the past and is based on the certain hope that what God did in the past God can continue to do in the present.

In contrast to God's covenantal fidelity, Esther, in Est 14,6-7, explains (iii) how idolatry in the past led to the exile. This confession of sin is not only a recognition that the exile was justified but also a recognition that, as long as the people acknowledge their sin and repent, God will not leave his people orphans. Rather, he will act on their behalf because it is God's nature to do so. Esther, in Est 14,15-18, in fact states that she herself is innocent for God "knows" that she hates anything that sullies the relationship between her and God. It is no coincidence, then, that Esther states that God "knows" at least three times since this illustrates

[57] IRENE NOWELL, "The Prayer of Esther", *The Bible Today* 55/6 (November/December 2017) 393.
[58] NOWELL, "The Prayer of Esther", 393.

not only God's omnipotence but also that her "faith assures her that when God knows, God acts."[59]

(iv) In both Est 14,4 (for my danger is in my hand) and Est 14,8-10 (genocide), Esther gives a description of the problem. In the actual lament, Esther describes her plight in moving and passionate words. This is no surprise since our "most candid *speech of lament* permits words that live close to our deepest hurt and our most intimate groan."[60] And yet, Esther knows that such an abhorrent act like the potential genocide of the people cannot be coming from God because doing so would be to destroy God's inherence and treasured possession (c.f. Ex 19,4-6a). Such an act would ultimately give "victory" to "worthless gods" and their "mortal king."[61]

(v) For this reason, Esther makes a request to God to save his people and to give eloquent speech in Esther's mouth as witnessed in Est 14,11-14. Her prayer is interesting on two accounts. Firstly, Esther "boldly asks God to do what God has already committed to do: save this chosen people."[62] This continues to show that her hope in God is grounded in God's saving acts in the past and that, based on this history of salvation, she is certain that God will continue to rescue his people.

Secondly, Esther knows that such a prayer will not magically remove the problem or mysteriously change the mind of Haman to do this evil deed. Rather, she recognizes that she needs to do her part and therefore asks, not for God to intervene in a magical way, but rather to give her what she needs: eloquent speech and the courage to stand up for what is right.

While similar in tone and content, there are slight differences in the prayer of Esther from that of Mordecai. Firstly, the introduction is richer in Esther's than in Mordecai's wherein Esther's attitude and behavior illustrates the humility that must be present in prayer; in Mordecai's prayer, this comes out more in his protest of innocence. Secondly, as we have just highlighted, while Mordecai focuses on a protest of innocence, Esther's prayer also acknowledges the sin of idolatry – that very reason that Mordecai does not want to bow down to Haman – led the people into exile. Thirdly, from within the context of the Exodus, Mordecai's prayer echoes Ex 2,23-25 in being a prayer of deliverance. Instead, Esther's prayer

[59] NOWELL, "The Prayer of Esther", 394.
[60] WALTER BRUEGGEMANN, "The Psalms as Prayer", *The Psalms and the Life of Faith* (ed. PATRICK D. MILLER) (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press 1995) 34.
[61] See NOWELL, "The Prayer of Esther", 393.
[62] NOWELL, "The Prayer of Esther", 394.

is to ask for eloquent speech because she knows that she must do her part in the deliverance of her people.

And yet, both prayers are prayers based on trust that the Lord, God of Israel, will come to their aid. So much so that (vi) the certainty of being heard is witnessed narratively in the story (Est 7,1-10; 8,3-12) wherein the reversal of fates is recounted, Haman's evil falls back on to him while Esther and the people of God are saved.

This, of course, need not have happened. It is not as if Esther desired that Haman be put to death just as it was not God's own desire that that should happen. What happened was an age-old tenet of wisdom that evildoers will be found out and will be tripped up by their own evil (c.f. Prov 11,5; 26,27).

In this case, while both Mordecai's and Esther's prayer was primarily about helping the Jews out of a dire situation, it is also true that such prayers suggest that what God truly desires is that all people live in harmony with his will by not only loving God above all else but also by loving one's neighbor as God loves each and every one of us – just as Mordecai's revealing of the plot to kill the king explains.

In a surprising reversal, it is unfortunate that Haman did not recognize this very significant truth for it was not in desiring the destruction of the Jews that he would flourish but rather by living in harmony with them since this is what God truly desires.

4. Conclusion to our study on Esther

I have attempted to explain how the prayers of Mordecai and Esther are paradigmatic of biblical hope. Indeed, I have clarified how biblical hope is not a leap in the darkness or just one's own projection of a desired future but rather borne from the experience that the people of God had throughout its history.

It is this hope in such a God that spurs people in the scriptures, like Esther and Mordecai, to pray and plea to God for help. By examining their lament, I aimed to illustrate that such a prayer, borne from hope, is only truly possible in the context of intimacy and relationship.

Indeed, since it is God's own nature to not only hear the cries of his people but also to save them, it stands to reason that God will continue to do so even now. And yet, the biblical lament is not something that works mechanistically but requires a relationship between repentant humanity and faithful God; only in such a covenantal relationship can we truly hope and expect that God will help.

If this is true in the Old Testament, how much more is it true in the New since, while we were still enemies, Christ came to save the godless (Rom 5,6). Indeed, now that we have peace with God through Christ (Rom 5,1), Christ will certainly listen to those who call on him (Rom 10,11-13). In this light, the lament should not be consigned to history but rather be a way in which we all pray today. After all, just like Esther and Paul, we have been taught "ever since we were born" (c.f. Est 14,5) about the wonderous and saving deeds of God in the past and, based on this, we can hope that God continues to act in Christ as long as we turn to him in truth, repentance, and simplicity of heart.

Therefore, in order to rekindle hope in us, it is perhaps time to not only explain the beauty of such a kind of prayer but also to start to practice such prayer in our local churches and communities. If we do so, such "hope will not disappoint" (Rom 5,5) for, since the God who acted in the past is the same who acts in the present, we can indeed expect that Christ will give us all the grace and tools that we need to overcome any and all trials that we may face.

And so let us hope in God and pray in this hope for the God of hope will not delude those who come to him in truth and repentance. After all, since we have set our hope on the God who rescued us from so deadly a peril (2 Cor 1,10), in such hope we can continue to pray in great boldness (2 Cor 3,12) that Christ will not abandon us in our day of need but rescue us again and again as is befitting his fidelity and love for those whom he created and redeemed. Amen.

Jeremiah 1,4-9 and being called:
Between Disorientation and Reorientation

1. Introduction

The word of the Lord is the underlying element found throughout the book of Jeremiah. For Jeremiah himself, this word becomes the focal point of his life, enveloping not only his vocation and his preaching but also his very being. "Uncontrollable and all-consuming"[63] it compels Jeremiah to enter into a living relationship with the Lord and, at the same time, to remain united to his people even in the face of hardship.

For this reason, the word of the Lord is the foundation of his prophetic way of life. It is no wonder, then, at the heart of the vocational story of Jeremiah, we find this word of the Lord that the prophet must confront. It is a word that calls Jeremiah to belong to the Lord before he is born. It is also a word which sends him to preach the message of the living God to his people and a word which prevails over him.

Paradoxically, it is a word which generates hostility from those who do not want to listen to it, pitting Jeremiah in the thorny position between the Lord who sent him and the people to whom he was sent to. Thus, it is a word which uproots as well as plants; pulls down as well as builds.

The call narration of Jer 1,4-9 illustrates that the prophet is not simply one who is sent since a mere messenger just repeats what the one who sent him says; a messenger neither has any authority nor is he directly involved in the happenings between the one who sent him and those to whom he is sent. In other words, the messenger simply passes the word of the one who dispatched him to the people to whom it was destined.

In contrast to the mere messenger, though, it can be said that Jeremiah is indeed deeply involved in what happens between the Lord and the people so much so he not only encounters adversity and anguish at the hands of those who oppose him but also puts the Lord and His

[63] C. J. DEMPSEY, *Jeremiah*. Preacher of Grace, Poet of Truth (Interfaces; Collegeville, MN 2007) xxvi.

word to task. In this way, Jeremiah can be seen to be "more than a messenger"[64] – he is the conscience of Israel who is to call the people back to God.

And yet, such a calling disorients Jeremiah to the point that he laments. This "hurt" or disorientation is caused by the fact that (i) he feels inadequate for the mission and (ii) he knows that without being sustained by God, he is unable to accomplish this task that God calls him to do.

Thus, (a) the basis of the call narration is that of a dialogue between the Lord and Jeremiah; (b) it is the Lord who not only initiates the event but also sends his prophet. Consequently, the word which the prophet is commanded to preach does not originate from him which brings out the inadequacy of Jeremiah himself without the sustainment of God; (c) the prophet himself recognizes this and in Jer 1,6 *laments* about this very fact; (d) the Lord furnishes Jeremiah with all that he needs and it is this reassurance of the Lord which is the foundation of Jeremiah's resolution to continue to cling to the Lord and to preach the word, despite all that he must endure due to this word, because the Lord is with him to deliver him.

2. The text of Jer 1,4-9

Now the word of the Lord came to me saying,

5 "Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, and before you were born, I consecrated you; I appointed you a prophet to the nations."

6 Then I said, "Ah, Lord God! Truly I do not know how to speak, for I am only a boy."

7 But the Lord said to me, "Do not say, 'I am only a boy'; for you shall go to all to whom I send you, and you shall speak whatever I command you.

8 Do not be afraid of them, for I am with you to deliver you, says the Lord." 9 Then the Lord put out his hand and touched my mouth; and the Lord said to me, "Now I have put my words in your mouth.

[64] N. HABEL, "The Form and Significance of the Call Narratives", *ZAW* 77 (1965) 309.

3. Is Jer 1,6 a lament?

While most laments that we have seen are within situations of injustice, this vocational story is certainly a moment of disorientation but not a moment of injustice. And so, we ought to ask if this dialogue between God and Jeremiah can be considered to a lament in the first place. It is to be remembered that the usual form of a prayer of lament has the following characteristics: (i) the invoking of the name of God, (ii) a motive why God should hear and help, (iii) there *can* be a confession of sin and an assertion of innocence, (iv) the description of the problem, (v) a request for help, and (vi) the certainty of being heard. Here, it should be noted that, while (iii) is missing, it is to be emphasized that (iii) is not necessary but often found in many laments; the fact that it is not found here is no reason to question whether or not Jer 1,6 is a lament.

Here, the lament is found in Jer 1,6 (*Then I said, "Ah, Lord God! Truly I do not know how to speak, for I am only a boy."*). In this lament, we first find (i) invocation of the name of the Lord. What is more is that this invocation of the name of Lord is preceded by the injection "ah" which is found often in a cry of sorrow.[65]

(ii) The motive behind the reason why God should hear and help is given explicitly in the previous verse (v. 5). Indeed, in this verse, God begins by telling Jeremiah that he *knew* him before he formed Jeremiah in the womb and before he came out of the womb, God consecrated him. Thus, God set Jeremiah a part for God alone since he has a living and intimate relationship with him from the very beginning. In other words, the reason why God should act on Jeremiah's behalf is due to his hesed and emet towards him personally.

(iv) The description of the problem is simple enough: Jeremiah does not know how to speak because he is only a youth. Implicitly, then, Jeremiah explains that he is inadequate for the mission because he is inexperienced and lacks the necessary competence – the word which Jeremiah does not know how to speak is not just any word but is the word of the Lord. Thus, Jeremaih confesses that this authoritative true word is neither in his possession nor can it originate from him.

(v) In this case, the request for help is implicit and found wrapped within the description of the problem. On the one hand, it may seem that Jeremiah is asking for him not to be sent for

[65] P. JOÜON – T. MURAOKA, *A Grammar of Biblical Hebrew* (SubBi 27; Roma [2]2008) § 105b.

he is not right for the job. However, I think what really is being asked is that, if he is to accomplish this task, God must be with him. In other words, what may seem to be an "ineffective plea"[66] turns out to be very effective because, while God does not except him from his charge, it allows the Lord to give him something more – not only that the Lord himself will give him the competence and the skill to undertake the mission by putting his words in Jeremiah's mouth (Jer 1,9) but also the assurance that the Lord will be with him to deliver him (Jer 1,8).

Lastly, (vi) the certainty of hearing is found in v. 9, wherein the Lord extended his hand and touched the mouth of Jeremaih, thereby giving him the word of God in his mouth. Thus, the Lord has done what he has promised, not by taking away the mission from Jeremiah, but rather by giving him what he needs to fulfill it: the word of the Lord.

This is why we see it more suitable to explain Jer 1,6 not as an *objection* but rather as a *plea or lament*. Indeed, v. 6b.c are motivational clauses and it is the motivational clauses within pleas which convey the notion that it is often the "*relationship between God and the petitioner(s)*"[67] which is the reason behind the Lord's reply.

Thus, this *ineffective plea* is *successful* in giving what Jeremiah needs most – reassurance that the Lord will be with him; and it is successful *in as much as* the Lord is close to that which belongs to Him. Consequently, by pleading with the Lord, Jeremiah "seeks to evoke a response"[68] from Him in order for the Lord to act on his behalf – something which the Lord certainly does! By acting on his behalf, Jeremiah moves from disorientation to reorientation; not to how things were before but now, filled with the word of the Lord, he is able to confront the people and be the conscience of the people of God calling them back to relationship.

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[66] B. A. STRAWN, "Jeremiah's In/effective Plea. Another look at נער in Jeremiah I 6", *VT* 55 (2005) 377.
[67] Patrick D. Miller, "Prayer as Persuasion: The Rhetoric and Intention of Prayer," in *Israelite Religion and Biblical Theology*: Collected Essays, ed. Patrick D. Miller (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2000), 337-344, here 337.
[68] Miller, "Prayer," 343.

4. Conclusion

"There is no doubt that at the core of the Book of Jeremiah is the powerful person of Jeremiah, a poet of immense imagination and a man of deep courage and faith."[69] Here, we sought to illustrate this through an examination of the inaugural account of the call of Jeremiah and to illustrate once more the power of the lament.

Through the call narration, we see that Jeremiah is indeed a faithful servant of the Lord who is granted full powers and the authority to preach the word which was placed in his mouth by his Lord and master. Furthermore, the Lord declares that He himself will be with him to deliver him. However, this call disorients Jeremiah who recognises that without God to be with him and to give him his word, he is inadequate for the mission.

This is where we see that the *ineffective plea* of Jeremiah in 1,6 is *marvellously effective* in as much as the Lord confirms everything which He told his prophet in the call narrative by effectively giving him what he needed to fulfil the mission: the word of the Lord which is placed in his mouth.

Therefore, Jeremiah, now emboldened by God, can go out and fulfil his mission. And yet, this is only possible because (a) there is intimacy with the Lord who is the originator and governor of the mission and (b) trust that what God promises he can do. Thus, even if he meets hostility from the very people to whom he is sent to, Jeremiah is able to go on because he is sustained by the word of the Lord, a word which became a joy to him, a word which he ate like a starving man, a word which he was physically dependent on to the point that he was kept alive by it.

In the end, it is this word that is placed in Jeremiah's mouth which allows us to label him as *more than a messenger*, a word, enveloping his life, which burns within him like a fire and leads him to do extraordinary things because it is no ordinary word, but the word of the Lord.

[69] W. BRUEGGEMANN, *Theology of the Book of Jeremiah* (OTT; Cambridge 2007) 27.

THE CRUCIFIXION AND JESUS' CRY

(MT 27,32-56; MK 15,21-41; LK 23,26-49)

1. Presentation of the Synoptic Text

Mk 15,21-41	Mt 27,32-56	Lk 23,26-49
[21]They compelled a passer-by, who was coming in from the country, to carry his cross; it was Simon of Cyrene, the father of Alexander and Rufus.	As they went out, they came upon a man from Cyrene named Simon; they compelled this man to carry his cross.	As they led him away, they seized a man, Simon of Cyrene, who was coming from the country, and they laid the cross on him, and made him carry it behind Jesus. [27] A great number of the people followed him, and among them were women who were beating their breasts and wailing for him. [28] But Jesus turned to them and said, "Daughters of Jerusalem, do not weep for me, but weep for yourselves and for your children. [29] For the days are surely coming when they will say, 'Blessed are the barren, and the wombs that never bore, and the breasts that never nursed.' [30] Then they will begin to say to the mountains, 'Fall on us'; and to the hills, 'Cover us.' [31] For if they do this when the wood is green, what will happen when it is dry?" [32] Two others also, who were criminals, were led away to be put to death with him.
[22] Then they brought Jesus to the place called Golgotha (which means the place of a skull). [23] And they offered him wine mixed with myrrh; but he did not take it.	[33] And when they came to a place called Golgotha (which means Place of a Skull), [34] they offered him wine to drink, mixed with gall; but when he tasted it, he would not drink it.	[33] When they came to the place that is called The Skull,
[24] And they crucified him,	[35] And when they had crucified him,	they crucified Jesus there with the criminals, one on his right and one on his left. [34] Then Jesus said, "Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing."
and divided his clothes among them, casting lots to decide what each should take.	they divided his clothes among themselves by casting lots;	And they cast lots to divide his clothing.

	[36] then they sat down there and kept watch over him.	
[25] It was the third hour when they crucified him.		
[26] The inscription of the charge against him read, "The King of the Jews."	[37] Over his head they put the charge against him, which read, "This is Jesus, the King of the Jews."	
[27] And with him they crucified two bandits, one on his right and one on his left. [28]	[38] Then two bandits were crucified with him, one on his right and one on his left.	
[29] Those who passed by derided him, shaking their heads and saying, "Aha! You who would destroy the temple and build it in three days, [30] save yourself, and come down from the cross!"	[39] Those who passed by derided him, shaking their heads [40] and saying, "You who would destroy the temple and build it in three days, save yourself! If you are the Son of God, come down from the cross."	[35]And the people stood by, watching; but the leaders scoffed at him, saying, "He saved others; let him save himself if he is the Messiah of God, his chosen one!"
		[36] The soldiers also mocked him, coming up and offering him sour wine, [37] and saying, "If you are the King of the Jews, save yourself!" [38] There was also an inscription over him, "This is the King of the Jews."
[31] In the same way the chief priests, along with the scribes, were also mocking him among themselves and saying, "He saved others; he cannot save himself. [32] Let the Messiah, the King of Israel, come down from the cross now, so that we may see and believe."	[41] In the same way the chief priests also, along with the scribes and elders, were mocking him, saying, [42] "He saved others; he cannot save himself. He is the King of Israel; let him come down from the cross now, and we will believe in him. [43] He trusts in God; let God deliver him now, if he wants to; for he said, 'I am God's Son.'"	
Those who were crucified with him also taunted him.	[44] The bandits who were crucified with him also taunted him in the same way.	[39] One of the criminals who were hanged there kept deriding him and saying, "Are you not the Messiah? Save yourself and us!" [40] But the other rebuked him, saying, "Do you not fear God, since you are under the same sentence of condemnation? [41] And we indeed have been condemned justly, for we are getting what we deserve for our deeds, but this man has done nothing wrong." [42] Then he said, "Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom." [43] He replied, "Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in Paradise."

[33] When it was the sixth hour, darkness came over the whole land until the ninth hour.	[45] From the sixth hour on, darkness came over the whole land until the ninth hour.	[44] It was now about the sixth hour, and darkness came over the whole land until ninth hour, [45] while the sun's light failed; and the curtain of the temple was torn in two.
[34] At the ninth hour Jesus cried out with a loud voice, "Eloi, Eloi, lema sabachthani?" which means, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"	[46] And about the ninth hour Jesus cried with a loud voice, "Eli, Eli, lema sabachthani?" that is, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?	[46] Then Jesus, crying with a loud voice, said, "Father, into your hands I commend my spirit."
[35] When some of the bystanders heard it, they said, "Listen, he is calling for Elijah." [36] And someone ran, filled a sponge with sour wine, put it on a stick, and gave it to him to drink, saying, "Wait, let us see whether Elijah will come to take him down."	[47] When some of the bystanders heard it, they said, "This man is calling for Elijah." [48] At once one of them ran and got a sponge, filled it with sour wine, put it on a stick, and gave it to him to drink. [49] But the others said, "Wait, let us see whether Elijah will come to save him."	
[37] Then Jesus gave a loud cry and breathed his last. [38] And the curtain of the temple was torn in two, from top to bottom.	[50] Then Jesus cried again with a loud voice and breathed his last. [51] At that moment the curtain of the temple was torn in two, from top to bottom. The earth shook, and the rocks were split. [52] The tombs also were opened, and many bodies of the saints who had fallen asleep were raised. [53] After his resurrection they came out of the tombs and entered the holy city and appeared to many.	Having said this, he breathed his last.
[39] Now when the centurion, who stood facing him, saw that in this way he breathed his last, he said, "Truly this man was God's Son!"	[54] Now when the centurion and those with him, who were keeping watch over Jesus, saw the earthquake and what took place, they were terrified and said, "Truly this man was God's Son!"	[47] When the centurion saw what had taken place, he praised God and said, "Certainly this man was righteous."
[40] There were also women looking on from a distance; among them were Mary Magdalene, and Mary the mother of James the younger and of Joses, and Salome. [41] These used to follow him and provided for him when he was in Galilee; and there were many other women who had come up with him to Jerusalem.	[55] Many women were also there, looking on from a distance; they had followed Jesus from Galilee and had provided for him. [56] Among them were Mary Magdalene, and Mary the mother of James and Joseph, and the mother of the sons of Zebedee.	[48] And when all the crowds who had gathered there for this spectacle saw what had taken place, they returned home, beating their breasts. [49] But all his acquaintances, including the women who had followed him from Galilee, stood at a distance, watching these things.

2. Exegetical analysis of Mark 15,21-41 and Mt 27,32-44

In order to not complicate matters, for the most part, since Matthew is following Mark very closely, I will treat these two texts together. Luke will be studied on its own.

Mark 15,21-41 can be divided into five parts: (i) the events before the crucifixion (vv. 21-23), (ii) the crucifixion itself (vv. 24-28), (iii) the mocking of the crucified Jesus (vv. 29-32), (iv) the events leading up to his death (vv. 33-38), and (v) the confession of the centurion and the presence of the women (vv. 39-41).

Matthew 27,32-56 follows the same pattern with one major addition: (i) the events before the crucifixion (vv. 32-34), (ii) the crucifixion itself (vv. 35-38), (iii) the mocking of the crucified Jesus (vv. 39-44), (iv) the events leading up to his death (vv. 45-53) – it is here (vv. 51b-53) where the major addition is found since right after his death an earthquake happens. (v) the confession of the centurion and the presence of the women (vv. 54-56).

(i) Mk 15,21-23 // Mt 27,32-34. The text begins, in Mk 15,21 / Mt 27,32, by the Romans pressing a certain Simeon of Cyrene to perform a service for representatives of imperial power. The city of Cyrene was a major Greek colony in North Africa and in the year 96 BC it came under Roman rule. There was a substantial Jewish community in that city. It is possible that Simeon was in Jerusalem as a pilgrim for the feast of Passover but it is more likely that he had settled in Jerusalem since, according to Mark's version, his sons were known to the community. Acts 6,9 supports the idea that there was a synagogue in Jerusalem for the exclusive or joint use of Jews from Cyrene who had settled in Jerusalem and coming back from the country.

Interestingly, this last remark in Mk 15,21, that Simeon was coming back from the country implies that he was not there at the trial and not present with the crowds shouting to crucify him.

Simeon was forced to carry Jesus' cross. The Greek word *stauros* usually refers to the pole or stake driven into the ground at the site where the penalty of crucifixion is carried out. Some Latin writers speak about the condemned person carrying the cross-beam (*patibulum*) to the place of execution, where the stake had already been erected. In this case, it is more reasonable that Jesus is carrying the cross-beam. The reason why the soldiers conscripted Simeon is not stated usually it is thought because Jesus was too weak to carry the cross-beam perhaps due to the whipping.

In Mk 15,22 / Mt 27,33, we arrive at Golgotha. The soldiers *brought* Jesus here explains that Jesus was under the authority of the soldiers and that it was due to their initiative the he moved from the praetorium to Golgotha. Golgotha at the time of Jesus was located outside the walls of Jerusalem and was near well-travelled public roadways so that it can be seen as a spectacle by many.

In Mk 15,23, *they* tried to offer Jesus wine mixed with myrrh. The subject is ambiguous but the context suggests that it is the soldiers who try and give Jesus the drink. Also ambiguous is the properties, effects, and cultural significance of the wine mixed with myrrh. According to Pliny the Elder, the finest wines were those spiced with the scent of myrrh. In this case, such wine spiced with myrrh, wine fit for a king, would be part of the ongoing mocking of Jesus since the soldiers were offering the finest wine to the "king of the Jews."

Another line of interpretation of the wine, based on Prov 31,6-7, the wine or myrrh were intended to deaden the pain. Both are possible and do not cancel each other out; the fact that Jesus refuses it could likewise because he understood it to be a mock and due to the fact that Jesus is to accept the pain in that moment in a redemptive sense – just as he said that he will not drink from the fruit of the vine until that day when he drinks it anew in the kingdom of God (Mk 14,25 and Mt 26,29).

In Mt 27,34, the wine offered was not mixed with myrrh but rather with gall (χολῆς *choles*). Gall embittering the wine makes the wine foul. While perhaps influenced by Ps 68,22 (They gave me gall (χολῆς) for food, and for my thirst they gave me sour wine [ὄξος] to drink), Matthew softens the mocking from offering a "kingly" wine to one that is simply embittered and therefore cannot provide any aid to Jesus, who upon tasting it, refused to take it.

(ii) Mark 15,24-27 // Mt 27,35-38. Since both are roughly the same, I will follow Mark here. The actual crucifixion of Jesus is narrated quite simply as "and they crucified him." Unlike texts like 2 Macc 7, there are no descriptions of the methods of torture and execution. The focus remains the redemptive act of Jesus on the cross and not the physical pain itself.

Mk 15,24b, which reports that the soldiers crucified Jesus and divided his clothes among themselves, casting lots for them, evokes Ps 22,18 (they divided my clothes among themselves and for my clothing they cast lots). Although the portrayal of the incident has been shaped by Ps 22,18, it is credible that it is based on a historical event. It was customary for the executioners to take whatever the condemned person had with him. If the person was executed for treason, his property was taken by the state.

Since Hadrian (reigning from 117-138 AD as emperor) issued new regulations concerning the *spolia* – the goods that the condemned wore or carried on his own person – limiting on what the torturers and executioners could take, it is credible that, prior to that time, they were few limits. The new regulations stipulated that they could not take stuff that exceeded the amount of five gold coins – anything more went to the governor and to be employed for the benefit of his office and not for personal use.

While the crucified Jesus would be largely unclothed, since in the Jewish world nakedness would be something that would offend Jewish senses, it is quite possible that Jesus was not completely naked but kept a loincloth (Jub 3,30-31; 7,20). In Jn 19,23-25, it is clear that the gambling concerned the outer garment that Jesus had received at his trial. The only Matthean addition here is found in Mt 27,36, where it is said that the soldiers sat down there and kept watch over him.

In Mark 15,25, we learn that it was the third hour that Jesus was crucified. Mark alone gives us this detail. The day was divided into twelve equal parts calls "hours". In Jerusalem, the firs hour would begin around the 6.00 am. And so, according to Mark, Jesus was crucified around 9.00 am. This is compatible with the remark in Mark that the chief priests held a consultation early in the morning and took Jesus to Pilate thereafter.

According to Jn 19,14, Pilate handed Jesus over to be crucified at about noon. Mark and John different not only as to the time of the crucifixion but also about the day. According to the Synoptics, Jesus was crucified on the day of the feast of Passover, whereas John places the crucifixion on the day before of preparation for the feast. Both the day and time of the crucifixion have symbolic significance in John. Jesus is crucified at the time that the Passover lambs were slaughtered. However, both are clear that Jesus was crucified in Jerusalem around the time of the Passover.

In Mark 15,26, we read that there was an inscription of the charge (a sort of placard or *titulius*) against Jesus which read "the King of the Jews." In Mt 27,37b, it is similar but more detailed since the inscription read "This is Jesus, the King of the Jews."

This gives the reason of the punishment of execution. This placard and the public display are intended to deter others from committing the same offense. This is historical. For instance, Gaius Caligula (reigning between 37-41 AD) handed over a slave who had stolen a strip of silver from the dining couching at a public banquet and ordered that his hands be cut off and hung around his neck. He was also to be led around among the guests, preceded by a

placard giving the reason for his punishment (C. Caligula 32.2). Eusebius (Hist. Eccl. 5.1.44) also describes how a certain martyr of the faith, Attalus, was conducted around the arena behind a sign on which there was written in Latin "This is Attalus, the Christian."

The placard indicating the crime of which Jesus was convicted, "The King of the Jews" certainly has an ironic tone to insult Jesus. The Pharisees could not have used the religious argument that Jesus was saying that he was the Son of God or that he was the Messiah for, from a Roman perspective, would mean nothing. Rather, the Pharisees had to use a political argument and employ the secular power that was often held by the high priest during the Hasmonaean dynasty: the king of the Jews. Here, however, we also have a case of dramatic irony for that which is stated with derision we know to be the truth: Jesus is *the* king.

We then turn, in Mk 15,27 and Mt 27,38, to the depiction of Jesus being crucified between two robbers (λῃστής *lestes*). In Mk 11,17 and Mt 21,13, Jesus casts out those who in the temple who made the house of God a den of thieves (λῃστής) and Jesus, in Mk 14,48 and Mt 26,55, remarks that they came for him in the garden of Gethsemane as if he was a thief (λῃστής). We know that Jesus is the opposite of a robber as he has come to put things right. This should remind us of the Beelzebul controversy because, there, Satan was the one who stole us from God and Jesus has come to take us back.

This also seems to evoke Isa 53,12 (*for this reason he will be the heir of many and will distribute the spoils of the mighty because he was handed over to death and he was considered to be among the lawless; and he bore the sins of many and was handed over on account of their sins*) – a text that highlights Jesus' righteousness and the palpable dramatic irony that they are killing the one who has come to set them free.

Finally, this portrayal of Jesus' crucifixion between two robbers reprises the request of James and John, in Mk 10,37 and Mt 20,21, that they be granted the privilege of sitting, one on the right and one on the left of Jesus. Here, the two robbers are found one on his right and one on his left. The evocation of the earlier text in the account of the crucifixion elaborates the ironic portrayal of Jesus as king: Jesus hangs on a cross with a placard announcing his kingship but James and John are not with him. Because of their fear of suffering and death they abandoned him and the places of honour are filled by men who are unworthy.[70]

[70] Mk 15,28 is often let blank because it was not part of the earliest recoverable text of Mark. Indeed, the following manuscripts do not have it: ℵ A B C D Ψ k sy^{s} sa bo^{pt}. This means that Codex Sinaiticus (ℵ) and Vaticanus (B) (Alexandrian-type, Category I), codex Alesandrinus (A) (Bzy. type, 5th century, category III), codex Ephraemi

(iii) Mk 15,29-32 // Mt 27,39-44. These verses contain the taunting and mocking by different groups of people: first those who passed by there (Mk 15, 29-30 / Mt 27,39-40), then the chief priests and scribes (Mk 15,31-32a / Mt 27,41-43), and finally those who were crucified with Jesus (Mk 15,32b / Mt 27,44).

The appearance of random passersby fits with the probable location of Golgotha outside the walls of the city and near a gate and one or more roads. The portrayal of the passersby as reviling Jesus and shaking their heads evokes Ps 22,8-9: *all who saw me sneered at me, they spoke with their lips, they shook their heads, "he based his hope on the Lord, let Him rescue him; let Him save him, if He cares for him!"* Both the Markan text and Ps 22 share shaking of heads and the mocking of saving or rescuing of the Jesus / the psalmist.

Also, Ps 109,25 states *and I became an object of insult for them; they saw me, they shook their heads. Help me Lord, my God, save me in accordance with your mercy.*

Both of these psalms and the Markan text refer to a sequence of seeing and shaking heads. These evocations of older texts make a narrative argument that Jesus is indeed the Messiah as testified by scriptures, a reality to which the passersby inadvertently attest by their actions and words.

In Mk 15,29, the passersby first word is οὐά (oua) or "aha!" which refers to an expression of scornful wonder. They continue by making a link with what Jesus said about the temple: "you would destroy the temple and build it in three days!" The mocking intensifies with the challenge to "come down from the cross" to prove himself. And yet, the kenotic Jesus would prove nothing by coming down from the cross – rather it is his submission to the cross that proves his divine sonship and his divine nature.

This mocking scene reprises the statement of false witnesses in Mk 14,58 ("we heard him saying: 'I will destroy this sanctuary, which is made with hands, and in the course of three days I will build another, which is not made with hands.'") This mock then contrasts his alleged claim to miraculous power, to be exercised by removing the current temple and building the definitive and eschatological temple, with his current weakness and humiliation. And yet, we

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Rescriptus (C) (Alex. type, 5th century, cat II), codex Bazae (D) (West type, 5th century, cat III), codex Athous Laverensis (Ψ) (Alex/Bzy, 8th-9th cent, II-III), codex Bobiensis (k) (Vet Lat.), Syriac, Sadhic, and Boairic translations. It is often considered as a harmonization of Lk 22,37 and an echo from Isa 53,12. Indeed, some manuscripts like K (Cyrius, Bzy, 9th cent, V), L (Regius, Alex, 8th cent, II), P (Guelferbytanus A, Bzy, 6th cent, V), Γ (Tischendorfinaus IV, Bzy, 10th cent, V) Δ (Sangallensis, mixed Alex/Bzy 9th cent, III) Θ (Coridethianus, mixed Caesarean-Bzy, 9th, II) read "and he was considered to be among the lawless."

know that this is another case of dramatic irony because Jesus, as the new and definitive temple (manifestation and presence of God) is what is actually happening.

In Mt 27,40, while we find the same pathos and same taunt, the words are somewhat different: καὶ λέγοντες· ὁ καταλύων τὸν ναὸν καὶ ἐν τρισὶν ἡμέραις οἰκοδομῶν, σῶσον σεαυτόν, εἰ υἱὸς εἶ τοῦ θεοῦ, καὶ κατάβηθι ἀπὸ τοῦ σταυροῦ. *Kai legontes: ho kataluon ton vaon kai en trisin hemerais oikodomon, soson seauton, ei huios ei tou theou kai katabethi apo tou staurou and saying: you who would destroy the temple and build it in three days, save yourself! If / Since you are the Son of God, come down from the cross*.

This conditional clause finds its parallel to the testing scene of Mt 4,3.6 which can be translated as "since, as you say, you are the son of God, then save yourself and come down from the cross!" Like in Mt 4,3.6, the mock here can be interpreted as a test for Jesus to act in ways that go against divine behaviour. And yet, since Jesus surpassed the test in Mt 4,3.6, he will certainly pass the test here; while the mock is implying that Jesus is impotent to come down from the cross, *it is because he is the omnipotent God he does not come down from the cross*. This certainly fits Matthean theology and redaction.

As for the second group mock Jesus in a similar way (Mk 15,31-32a / Mt 27,41-43). In Mark, we find the chief priests and scribes, which in Matthew is extended to include the πρεσβυτέρων *presbuteron* the elders.

In Mark, rather than focusing on the temple, they mock Jesus by saying "he saved others, himself he cannot save" "come down from the cross so that we may see and believe" alludes to the traditions concerning Jesus' deeds of exorcising, healing, and perhaps also raising from the dead. Again, such a challenge just shows how much the people misunderstood Jesus and what these mighty deeds referred to – and as the stronger man he is certainly able to save himself but this would go against Jesus' kenotic kingship.

In Matthew, we find a similar idea. It is, of course, more fleshed out. In Mt 27,42, we find a very ironic title given to Jesus: βασιλεὺς Ἰσραήλ ἐστιν, *basileus Israel estin the king of Israel he is* which is a binominal clause of identification in the indicative and declarative sense. This is ironic because we know that which is supposed to be a mock and derision, we know to be the truth! In Mt 27,43, the mocking is further developed with the claim that Jesus trusts in God and so let God save him if God wants for Jesus said "I am the Son of God."

The whole phrase is ironic. The Greek verb for trust here is πείθω *peitho* which, in the circumstances, means *to depend on, to trust in, to put one's confidence in*. This trust in God that Jesus has is not disappointed (cf. Rom 5,5) because God did not bring him down from the cross for, contrary to what they think, it is the divine will that requires Jesus to be crucified and Jesus' divine sonship (θεοῦ εἰμι υἱός *theou eimi huios* I am the son of God) is vindicated not in coming down from the cross but by staying on it.

The premise of the mockery, that seeing is believing, is likewise ironic on two-levels since, while they saw Jesus preform these signs and wonders, they still did not believe Jesus during his public ministry and so, even now, even if these outsiders did see Jesus come down from the cross, they probably would still not believe (as the citation of Isa 6,9-10 in Mk 4,11-12 makes clear). One can also recall the reaction of the people of Gerasa to Jesus' healing of the demoniac as, even though, they saw the former demoniac clothed and in his right mind, instead of believing in Jesus, they asked him to leave them alone (Mk 5,14-17; Mt 8,34) – we know well that this is due to their impure, divided, hard heart that is the essence of the leaven of the Pharisees (Mk 8,15). Jesus chose to submit himself to the mysterious plan of God and, in the resurrection, is vindicated for it.

The address, in Mk 15,32, of Jesus as "the Messiah, the king of Israel" is likewise ironic and continues the idea that Jesus was crucified because he claimed to be the Messiah. This theme began with Pilate's question "are you the king of the Jews?" in Mk 15,2 and continues with the mocking of Jesus as the king of the Jews by the soldiers (Mk 15,17-20). Its climax is the announcement concerning the inscription that publicized Jesus' crime as being the king of the Jews (Mk 15,26).

As we stated, this is the secularized version of the crime and is appropriate on the lips of non-Jews. But the chief priests and the scribes, in Mk 15,32, do not primarily use the phrase king of the Jews but the Messiah – a title that would express an inner-Jewish perspective and what the real issue is. Once more, dramatic irony plays its role since we know that, by staying on the cross, Jesus shows who he is.

The third group of mockers (Mk 15,32b / Mt 27,44) are the two criminals crucified with him. While this scene will be certainly expanded upon by Luke, it takes up the echo from Isa 53,12 and recalls the fact that rather than John and James, two men who are unworthy take the place of honour. Different from Luke, we find that both criminals mock Jesus here and are no better than the passersby, the chief priests, and the scribes when they insult Jesus.

(iv) Mk 15,33-38 / Mt 27,45-53. In Mk 15,33 and Mt 27,45, we find out at the sixth hour darkness came over the whole land until the ninth hour. The sixth hour would be the midpoint of the period of daylight when the sun was at its height. The depiction of darkness coming upon the land at midday evokes a passage in Amos 8,9: *and on that day, says the Lord God, the sun will set at midday, and the light will grow dark upon the land at daytime*. This is the dark day of the Lord – and yet the dark day of the Lord in the prophets was a day of punishment; here the dark day of the Lord becomes the day of redemption – the day that was supposed to be like the "mourning of a beloved / only son" (Am 8,10) becomes the day that the beloved son of the Father redeems the many.

The fact that the darkness stayed until the ninth hour, at around 3 pm, likewise has symbolic significance. This was the time of the afternoon Tamid, the second daily sacrifice of a lamb in the temple (c.f. Josephus, *Ant* 14.4.3).[71] This, similar to what we find in John, links Jesus' death to the sacrifice of the lamb.

The announcement of Jesus' death at the ninth hour, roughly equivalent to 3 pm, is the climax of the schema of hours that began in Mk 15,25 with the remark that Jesus was crucified at the third hour. The drama is heightened with the depiction in Mk 15,33 and Mt 27,45 of darkness over the whole land from the sixth hour until the ninth hour.

Later on, we will return to the cry of Jesus (in Mk 15,34 ελωι ελωι λεμα σαβαχθανι *eloi eloi lema sabachthani* and in Mt 27,46 ηλι ηλι λεμα σαβαχθανι *eli eli lema sabachthani*) taken from Ps 22,1. However, it is of note that, together with the tearing of the temple veil which implies the vindication of Jesus, it is already *unlikely* that this cry implies that Jesus, the beloved son of the Father, felt abandoned by the Father.

The remark, in Mk 15,35 and Mt 27,47, of some of the bystanders that Jesus was calling Elijah is linked by a play on with words since "Eloi", "my God" is close to the vocative of a shorter form of the name Eli (Elijah) – especially in Mt 27,46. They are evoking the traditions of Elijah as a miracle-worker, as one taken up to heaven by a chariot in a whirlwind and as one who will return in the last days as God's agent. The powerful, miraculous interpretation of Elijah, has already been rejected by Jesus. Elijah has already come and return, as John the

[71] Which thing when the Romans understood, on those days which we call Sabbaths they threw nothing at the Jews, nor came to any pitched battle with them; but raised up their earthen banks, and brought their engines into such forwardness, that they might do execution the next day. And any one may hence learn how very great piety we exercise towards God, and the observance of his laws, since the priests were not at all hindered from their sacred ministrations by their fear during this siege, but did still twice a-day, in the morning and about the ninth hour, offer their sacrifices on the altar; nor did they omit those sacrifices.

Baptist, and has suffered and died in accordance with the scripture, just as the Son of Man must also suffer and be treated with contempt (c.f. Mk 9,12-13 and Mt 17,11-12).[72]

Since the whole unit regards the misunderstanding of the cry of Jesus, it is clear that they have misunderstood the relationship between Elijah and Jesus – Jesus did not need Elijah's help to come down from the cross nor was Jesus asking Elijah for help! After all, in the transfiguration, Elijah and Moses appear to Jesus and *talk to him* – note, in Mark, Elijah is mentioned before Moses (Ηλίας σὺν Μωϋσεῖ καὶ ἦσαν συλλαλοῦντες τῷ Ἰησοῦ. *Elias sun Mousei kai esan sullalouvtes to Iesou Elijah with Moses and they were speaking with Jesus*; Mk 9,4). It is interesting, however, that while they misunderstood whom Jesus was invoking, they did understand the prayer as one of lament and cry for help and not a cry not of abandonment.

In Mk 15,36 and Mt 27,48, we read that the bystanders give Jesus ὄξος *oxos*, in Latin *acetum*, which here means sour wine of varying qualities and acidity. The placement of the sponge on a reed presupposes that Jesus was crucified on a cross that was high enough that one could not extend him a drink with an upraised arm alone.

This sour wine, when diluted with water, formed the ordinary drink of the common people. When mixed with water, and especially if made from good wine, it was a pleasant, thirst-quenching drink, quite different from modern vinegar. Thus, such wine was given to Jesus to quench his thirst and thus to extend his life a bit longer so that the bystanders could see whether Elijah would come.

It is not clear whether this giving of sour wine is mocking (which such an interpretation is based on the evoking of Ps 68,22: They gave me gall (χολῆς) for food, and for my thirst they gave me sour wine [ὄξος] to drink) or to be based more on a genuine curiosity to see if Elijah would come. The two opinions, in my mind, are not in contradiction for, in the light of the previous mocking scenes, the bystanders could be mocking Jesus since they themselves *do not think that Elijah will come and save him* but are, at the same time, curious to see whether or not they are proven wrong.

In Mk 15,36, different from Mk 15,23, we do not read that Jesus refused such a drink and so, presumably, Jesus did take it. However, in the Greek texts of both Mk 15,36 and Mt 27,48, the verb ποτίζω (*potizo – to give to drink*) is in the imperfect (ἐπότιζεν *epotizen*; imperfect

[72] Mk 9,12-13 reads: *He said to them, "Elijah is indeed coming first to restore all things. How then is it written about the Son of Man, that he is to go through many sufferings and be treated with contempt? [13] But I tell you that Elijah has come, and they did to him whatever they pleased, as it is written about him."*

active third person singular of ποτίζω) and so it is possible to translate this as "he tried to give him to drink" which would imply that Jesus died during the time that the man was getting the sour wine ready. This second interpretation would again be in fulfilment of what Jesus himself states in Mk 14,25 and Mt 26,29 that he would surely not drink again of the fruit of the vine until that day when he drinks it new in the kingdom of God.

In any case, it is another case of dramatic irony in the sense that the audience of the narrative knows that Elijah has already come, in the person of John the Baptist, and that he has already been handed over. They also know that Elijah has already appeared to Jesus at the transfiguration in order to embolden Jesus concerning the cross (this is especially clear in Luke who mentions that they talk about the exodus of Jesus). Thus, the audience knows that Elijah will not come since suffering and death are ordained both for John the Baptist and for Jesus.

In Mk 15,37 and Mt 27,50, Jesus gave a loud cry and breathed his last. The death of Jesus at the ninth hour is then followed by another significant act: the tearing of the temple veil, at the time when the sacrifice of the lamb was happening. This act must be seen as the other side of the coin of the tearing of the heavens in the baptism scene (Mk 1,10): the baptism explained that, in Jesus, the kingdom of God has drawn near, and the tearing of the temple veil that covered the *debir* or the holy of holies implies that this kingdom has a universal quality to it – this implies the vindication of Jesus rather than the destruction of the temple.

In Mt 27,51b-53, we find a unique remark about the earthquake and who the tombs were opened and many bodies of the saints who had fallen asleep were raised. After his resurrection, they came out of the tombs and entered the holy city and appeared to many.

The sign of an earthquake was typical of theophanies in the OT (cf. Ex 19,18; Judg 5,5; 1 Kings 19,11-12; Ps 18,8) – and of particular importance is Ex 19,18 since this occurs at Sinai which stands at the background of the entire Synoptic Gospel account. Earthquakes also belong to God's eschatological self-revelation in the last judgment (cf. Isa 5,25; 24,18; Joel 2,10; 3,26; Nah 1,5-6; Hag 2,6; Zech 14,5). Both ideas are present here. That the rocks split shows that this earthquake is not a normal quake; it is a supernatural quake that upsets the entire natural world and points to what happens in the following verses.

Indeed, in Mt 27,52, we read that the tombs are opened. This can be considered as a divine passive since it is God who is opening the tombs. The formulation follows Ezek 37,12-13 wherein God will open up the graves. Now, here in Mt 27,52, many bodies of dead saints are raised by God's intervention in this context and also in the tradition of biblical language

the saints are to be understood as the righteous. Thus, on the basis of biblical tradition, the audience should understand this raising of the dead as an act of God and as an anticipation of what the audience would have expected only at the end of times.

In Mt 27,53 is a strange verse for it might appear in contradiction with the previous verse. Indeed, while in v. 52 it states that many bodies of the saints were raised but, in v. 53, the text states that they only come out of the tombs after the resurrection of Jesus. They enter the holy city and appear to many.

Thus, while the opening of the tombs is associated with the death of Jesus, the appearance of the saints in the holy city will not occur until after the resurrection of Jesus. If this resurrection of the saints is intended to preview the ultimate resurrection of humanity, it is important that it be as genuine as that of Jesus; a historical resurrection must be based on the resurrection of Jesus but must be based and posterior to that of Jesus'. Thus, the tombs are opened and the people are raised are the signs that the cross, death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus bring in the new age of the kingdom of heaven. Jesus' resurrection means that the gates of hades cannot prevail against Jesus or his church (Mt 16,18) and that his enemies will answer to Jesus' authority (Mt 26,64).

(v) Mk 15,39-41 / Mt 27,54-56. In Mk 15,39, we find the confession of the centurion ἀληθῶς οὗτος ὁ ἄνθρωπος υἱὸς θεοῦ ἦν *alethos houtos ho Anthropos huios theou en*. This phrase is grammatically ambiguous and can be translated as "truly this man was *the* Son of God" or "truly this man was *a son of God*" since the article ὁ ho could go either with the word ἄνθρωπος *anthropos* (man) or the word υἱὸς *huios* (son). In Mt 27,54 it reads ἀληθῶς θεοῦ υἱὸς ἦν οὗτος. This simpler form "truly this one was God's son" heightens the ambiguity but grammatically we can say that the genitival noun θεοῦ is a subjective genitive as well as a genitive of relation which would make the ambiguous phrase θεοῦ υἱὸς definitive "*the* Son of God."

The centurion was probably a Gentile and therefore it is unclear if he would have understood, as a non-Jew, the significance of Jesus' messiahship or divine sonship and could have meant that Jesus is a son of God, a hero after the pagan idea that great warriors or people become adopted by God after dying a good death. Likewise, the phrase "son of God" was common in the imperial cult since Octavian (Gaius Julius Caesar Augustus also known as Octavian, 63 BC-14 AD), after the death of Julius Caesar (100-44 BC) in 42 BC, started to call himself *Divi filius*, the adopted divine son of Julius Caesar (*Divus Iulius*).

Here we have a case of not only irony (on a first level) but also one of dramatic irony. Indeed, it is ironic that a centurion would even say that Jesus was *a son of God* since being crucified meant to die a very dishonourable death and so for one who is crucified to be called a son of God means that that death did not negate the honour that should be afforded to Jesus.

We also have a case of dramatic irony for Mark and the audiences of all ages knows that Jesus is not just *a son of God* but *the son of God*. It is to be recalled that Mark's version of the Gospel revolves around how Jesus is the Son of God [Ἀρχὴ τοῦ εὐαγγελίου Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ υἱοῦ θεοῦ – Mark 1,1]. It is for this reason that the grammar is willed to be ambiguous because it allows Mark to highlight both the noble death of Jesus and the fact that Jesus was the one and only true Son of God.

Both Mark's and Matthew's versions of the crucifixion ends, in Mk 15,40-41 and Mt 27,56, with a note of how the women were looking from a distance. This part acts as a nice transition to the empty tomb. Mark names three of the women in the group: Mary of Magdala, Mary, the mother of James the younger and Joses [aka Joseph], and Salome. Magdala, the native town of the first Mary, also called Tarichea, was a fishing centre on the Sea of Galilee, about three kilometres north of Tiberias and five kilometres south of Capernaum. This verse is the first time in Mark that Mary Magdalene is mentioned (cf. our discussion on Mk 16,9-20).

The second Mary is sometimes thought to be the mother of Jesus since in M 6,3, Jesus is said to have brothers named James and Joses. However, if it was Mary, Mark would have made it explicit and the fact that James is called the younger could be done in order to differentiate between James the relative of Jesus who played an important role in the early church and this James – especially since both Mary and James were common at the time.

The third person maybe different in Mark and Matthew; Mark states that the third woman was Salome while Matthew names the mother of the sons of Zebedee. It could be that Matthew knew that Salome was the mother of the sons of Zebedee or that this is Matthean redaction since, in Mt 20,20-23, it was the mother of the sons of Zebedee who asked Jesus that her children sit on Jesus' right and left and now she sees whose privilege it was and what that privilege means (in Mk 10,35, it was the sons of Zebedee themselves to make such a request).

In Mk 15,41, Mark describes the group of women introduced in Mk 15,40 as those who followed and served Jesus in Galilee and who came up with him to Jerusalem – a remark that reminds us where Jesus began and where Jesus ended up. All of this sets the tone and setting for the narration of the resurrection and the empty tomb (this is presented in reverse order in

Mt 27,55-56 since first Matthew tells us that they followed Jesus from Galilee and had provided for him and then tells us who were among this group).

3. Exegetical analysis of Luke 23,26-49

Luke 23,26-49 can also be divided into five parts: (i) the events before the crucifixion (vv. 26-33a), (ii) the crucifixion itself (vv. 33b-34), (iii) the mocking of the crucified Jesus (vv. 35-43), (iv) the events leading up to his death (vv. 44-46), and (v) the confession of the centurion and the presence of the women (vv. 47-49).

(i) Luke 23,26-33a and the events before the crucifixion. Luke here, for the most part, follows Mark concerning the role of Simeon of Cyrene who, like Mark but unlike Matthew, is coming up from the country implying that Simeon, for both Luke and Mark, was not present at the trial of Jesus. Luke does add an interesting detail that Simeon was carrying the cross *behind Jesus* (ὄπισθεν τοῦ Ἰησοῦ o*pisthen tou Iesou*) which, in the light of Lk 9,23 and 14,27, implies that Simon's behaviour is one of a disciple following the master.[73]

In Lk 23,27-31, we find a text that is unique to Luke. Lk 23,27a opens by telling us that a great number of people (λαός *laos*) were following (ἀκολουθέω *akoloutheo*) him. On the whole the *laos* were sympathetic towards Jesus during his public ministry – so much so that, in Lk 22,1-6 (when Judas goes to the chief priests and scribes in order to betray Jesus) is it mentioned that the chief priests and scribes wanted to kill Jesus but they feared the people (*laos;* Lk 22,2). While sympathetic, the *laos* succumb to the populist cry for Jesus' crucifixion in front of Pilate in Lk 23,13.18, they do not revel in his actual death so much so that here they follow Jesus.

In Lk 23,27b-31, we find a group of women who were mourning the death of Jesus. Here, in v. 27b, the women spontaneously beat their breasts and wail for him (mourning with both visual and audible aspects) in a ritualistic fashion. This ritualization, which can still be seen today in the Near East, does not minimize their sincerity and show of solidarity with Jesus. And while Zech 12,10-11 could be evoked for such an act, it is certainly historically possible.[74]

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[73] Lk 9,23 reads: *Then he said to them all, "If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross daily and follow me.* Lk 14,27 reads: *Whoever does not carry the cross and follow me* [ὀπίσω μου] *cannot be my disciple.*

[74] Zech 12,10-11 reads: *And I will pour out a spirit of compassion and supplication on the house of David and the inhabitants of Jerusalem, so that, when they look on the one whom they have pierced, they shall mourn for him, as one mourns for an only child, and weep bitterly over him, as one weeps over a firstborn. [11] On that day the mourning in Jerusalem will be as great as the mourning for Hadad-rimmon in the plain of Megiddo.*

Then, in Lk 23,28-31, Jesus turns towards these women and speaks to them telling the "daughters of Jerusalem" (only elsewhere in canonical scriptures seen in Song 1,5; 2,7; 3,5; 5,8.16; 8,4) not to weep for him but for themselves and their children. The daughters of Jerusalem refer, in the Song, to the choir of female friends of the woman but here this group are some from the people of Israel where the term refers to the inhabitants of Jerusalem. And yet, just like the woman in Song 5,8.16 refuses the daughters of Jerusalem to feel sorry for her, Jesus encourages these women to look at themselves, their destiny and their descendants. He encourages them to face the situation and to assume responsibility for themselves. Weeping then is the first step in the process of conversion (cf. Lk 13,1-5.34-35).

His refusal to feel sorry about his own fate reflects the fact that Jesus is now fulfilling his mission and echoes the traditions conveyed both by the epistles and by the Gospels unanimously that Jesus's self-denial and his love for others are keys indicators of his conformity with God (cf. Phil 2,5-11).

Jesus, in Lk 23,29, continues by stating that "look, the days are coming." This expression is apocalyptic and is rooted in the prophesy (see, for instance Jer 7,32 and 31,31). It often introduces an oracle, often of woe and punishment. However, as in Jer 31,31, it can introduce an oracle of salvation. Here, it is certainly an oracle of woe since days are coming that it is better to be barren and without children then to have. As the prophets make clear, God's providential protection over Jerusalem is conditional on the fact that Israel is faithful to the pact. In refuting Jesus, they have betrayed that pact and Jerusalem's existence is again in peril. Thus, this oracle is also one open to salvation since Jesus continues the idea of the need of conversion.

In Lk 23,31, we find this puzzling apophthegm: *For if they do this when the wood is green, what will happen when it is dry?"* There have been various interpretations of this proverb: (i) if the Romans treat Jesus, who is innocent, this way, how will they treat those who are guilty? (ii) if the Jews act this way towards the one who came to save them, what treatment will they in turn receive? (iii) if the whole human race behaves this way when its sin is still in its early stages, what will happen when it reaches its high point? (iv) If God did not spare Jesus, how will he spare human beings who do not repent? (v) The proverb speaks of the coming judgment without referring to future events or to specific persons.

To solve the puzzle, people have turned to Scripture. They have appealed to Isa 10,16-19l Jer 11,16.19; Ezek 17,24; 21,3; 24,9-10; Prov 11,31; 1 Pet 4,17-18. It is obvious that fire

consumes wood and that dry wood burns better than green wood. It is also clear that God's judgement is easily compared with a purifying fire. It is true that if the righteous receive the natural consequences of their actions so too with the wicked.

It seems to me that the "they" of the proverb is ambiguous on purpose and this highlights anyone who had rejected Jesus; if they treated Jesus in this way, how will they be treated for instigating his execution? And this implies the coming judgment on them.

In Lk 23,32, Luke points out (unlike Matthew and Mark) before Jesus arrived at the place of the Skull that he was accompanied by two other condemned men. Unlike Matthew and Mark, Luke uses the term κακοῦργοι *kakourgoi* which is a more ambiguous term and simply means criminal or lawbreakers. Luke's point is that Jesus is accompanied and then slain as a lawbreaker with criminals. This part ends, in v. 33a, with the mentioning that they came to the place called the Skull (with the Aramaic expression Golgotha left out as per usual for Luke's Hellenistic tendencies and audience).

(ii) Luke 23,33b-34. In Lk 23,33b, the two criminals are on the right and left of Jesus. The first thing that Jesus does, in Lk 23,34, is call for forgiveness. As with Stephen's prayer in Acts 7,60, while this prayer is also for the Roman executioners, it is primarily for the Jews who accused Jesus and participated in this death.

The "not knowing" that Jesus attributes to those who are to be forgiven is not simply a lack of knowledge but an erroneous judgment about God's activity: they do not understand who Jesus is and what his true mission was. And yet, in typical kenotic fashion, Jesus does not curse his enemies; rather, with the very standard he sets for his disciples in the Sermon on the Plain (to forgive enemies, Lk 6,29.35), Jesus acts, showing us the way.

In this light, Jesus' call to be merciful as God is merciful (Lk 6,36), the refusal to punish the Samaritan village in Lk 9,51-56, and the contrast, in Lk 19,1-27, between merciful Jesus and the grumbling onlookers in the house of Zacchaeus – not to mention the king who abuses and kills and the first two slaves in the parable of the minas who follow their master – reaches its climax here: far from being "exact" and asking for those who caused his execution to receive their just desserts and be punished, he asks for mercy and forgiveness. In Lk 23,34b, then, we find the soldiers gambling for Jesus' garments by lots, something that again echoes Ps 22,18.

(iii) Luke 23,35-43 and the mocking of the crucified Jesus. In Lk 23,25, we first find the people (the *laos*). While they do not revel in his actual death, they neither show sign of

remorse: they remain spectators; they stand and watch. The term for watching, *theoron* (θεωρέω) comes from Ps 22,7. In reality, the crucifixion is a spectacle for those who pretend to remain neutral. Seen from the "outside" the cross is an eye-catching dramatic display that highlights curiosity wherein the spectators remain curiously detached from it.

Since Luke makes a difference between "watchers" and "mockers", the *laos* are curious (c.f. 3 Macc 5,24)[75] and try to remain neutral as they want to see the outcome of the event. But we know that you cannot remain in that grey area; either you gather with Jesus or you scatter that which he gathers (Lk 11,23). Thus, as neutral as they try to remain, they are not found on the side of Jesus. Following this, we find three groups of people who are certainly not spectators – they mock: the leaders, the soldiers, and one of the criminals – these groups are somewhat different in Mark (the passersby, the chief priests and scribes, and both thieves) and Matthew (the passersby, the chief priests, scribes, and elders, and both thieves).

The leaders mock Jesus' inability to deliver oneself while he delivered others through signs. Indirectly, the leaders put the same charge as the Pharisees and scribes put on Jesus in the Beelzebul controversy as well as Satan in the trials: show us a sign if (since!) you are the Son of God and save yourself.

Indeed, like in Matthew, we find a first-class conditional clause with the apodosis preceding the protasis and where the "if" can be understood as a "since" with the caveat that, unlike Satan, they do not recognize or know that Jesus is God: σωσάτω ἑαυτόν, εἰ οὗτός ἐστιν ὁ χριστὸς τοῦ θεοῦ ὁ ἐκλεκτός, *sosato heauton, ei houtos estin ho chistos tou theou ho eklektos let him save himself, since he is the Christ of God, the chosen one.* Rather than Matthew's "son of God" we find here "the Christ (messiah) of God, the chosen one" which highlights the real issue behind the crucifixion (the claim of being the Messiah).

Likewise, it is also very ironic since that which the Father said that the transfiguration as a declaration – that Jesus is the chosen one –, here it is a title of derision and mocking. This taunting is sarcastic as they think that they have stopped Jesus and are feeling proud that they have executed him. However, as Wis 2,17-22 makes clear, God will not abandon the perfect one who is tested.[76]

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[75] 3 Macc 5,24 reads: *The crowds of the city had been assembled for this most pitiful spectacle* [θεωρία] *and they were eagerly waiting for daybreak.*

[76] Wisdom 2,17-22 reads*: Let us see if his words are true, and let us test what will happen at the end of his life; [18] for if the righteous man is God's child, he will help him, and will deliver him from the hand of his adversaries. [19] Let us test him with insult and torture, so that we may find out how gentle he is, and make trial of his forbearance.*

The second group who taunts Jesus are the soldiers (Lk 23,36) while offering him some vinegar (ὄξος). Just as in Mark and Matthew, this offering was not out of charity; while its sharp taste was said to remove thirst more effectively than water, it was given as a joke since such an offering was accompanied by a challenge that Jesus, the king, should save himself (Lk 23,37) - εἰ σὺ εἶ ὁ βασιλεὺς τῶν Ἰουδαίων, σῶσον σεαυτόν. *Ei su ei ho basileus ton Ioudaion, soson seauton since you are the king of the Jews, save yourself* – another first-class conditional clause. In Luke, it is not stated if Jesus took it since the verb "to offer" (προσφέροντες *prospherontes*) is a present participle which lacks that ambiguity of the imperfect.

In these scenes, we find many elements present elsewhere. The rhetorical insults 'if / since he is the Christ of God[77], the chosen one' (v. 35) and 'if /since you are the king of the Jews' (v. 37) recall the testing of Jesus, where Satan twice asks Jesus in an insolent manner 'if / since you are the son of God' (Lk 4,3.9).

During the testing, Jesus rebuked Satan by means of citing scriptures – here he shows how foolish the mocking is not only by remaining silence but also – and more importantly – through the dialogue with the good thief. Moreover, the title 'chosen one' is the same title given to Jesus by the Father during the transfiguration scene (Lk 9,35) where it is to be remembered that Moses and Elijah discussed the *exodus* that Jesus was about to accomplish in Jerusalem (Lk 9,31) – something which is taking place now!

Furthermore, even though the soldiers mock Jesus with the title 'king of the Jews', Luke emphasizes its reality not only by focusing our attention on the inscription over his head but also by the words of the good thief. Lastly, the content of the first two mocking scenes is roughly the same: they both appeal to Jesus to save himself – and in saving himself, he will prove that he is the Christ of God and the king of the Jews.

Of course, we should understand how absurd this is. Jesus, who imbues kenotic cruciform living in everything he thinks, says, and does, would never show his divinity in such a way. In reality, it is in remaining on the cross and living to the advantage to the other that Jesus shows his divinity. If he did listen to the mockers and come down from the cross, Satan would have been proven right and Jesus would be an utter failure. In this way, we can

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[20] Let us condemn him to a shameful death, for, according to what he says, he will be protected." [21] Thus they reasoned, but they were led astray, for their wickedness blinded them, [22] and they did not know the secret purposes of God, nor hoped for the wages of holiness, nor discerned the prize for blameless souls.

[77] While εἰ οὗτός ἐστιν ὁ χριστὸς τοῦ θεοῦ is witnessed only here in the NT in Lk 23,35, something similar can be witnessed in Mt 16,16 (σὺ εἶ ὁ χριστὸς ὁ υἱὸς τοῦ θεοῦ τοῦ ζῶντος) and Mt 26,63 (εἰ σὺ εἶ ὁ χριστὸς ὁ υἱὸς τοῦ θεου).

understand better what Luke is doing: *the first two mocking scenes prepares us for the third one and all three are put to rest by means of the dialogue between the good thief and Jesus*.

In Lk 23,39-43, we find the third mocking scene. One of the criminals hanging on the cross, *blasphemes* (βλασφημέω) Jesus (v. 39) and speaks with sarcastic disrespect. Indeed, the Greek verb *blasphemeo* concerns the disrespect of the power and majesty of God and the scepticism of the lawful Messianic claim of Jesus.

His taunt recalls those by the leaders and soldiers but is heightened: the content of the mock is very similar (although rather than an interrogative 'if' we now find a rhetorical question 'are you not') to the first two even if there is the addition of an ironic plea to save them as well: 'are you are not the Christ? Save yourself – and us!'

This plea of salvation is ironic because he says it out of derision and not out of faith – and this is why Jesus remains silent. For this reason, the plea of the good thief is diametrically opposite to the plea of the first three groups – it comes out of faith and not derision.

After the third mocking scene, our attention shifts to what the good thief says to the other criminal hanging there in Lk 23,40-41.[78] The rebuke of the good thief (vv. 40-41) contains the following elements: (i) the call for a fear of God, (ii) affirmation that they both are guilty and (iii) Jesus' innocence.

The fear of the Lord is the principle of biblical wisdom and consists of awe in front of the creator and trepidation in breaking the pact. It refers to the desire to remain united to God in Shalomic rest. Therefore, in light of biblical tradition and Luke's Gospel in particular, "to acknowledge one's guilt and to fear God are […] an act of repentance and the beginning of conversion."[79]

[78] The name Dismas for the good thief and the name Gestas for the other thief does not appear in the canonical Gospel according to Luke. The names appear in the apocryphal text entitled "The Acts of Pilate" which is also known as "the Gospel of Nicodemus." This text, a sort of jumbo gospel story, was written sometime between the second to fourth centuries AD and presents a creative literary expansion of the accounts of Jesus' trial, death, and resurrection with an apologetic tone. While most stories are expanded forms from the canonical gospels (the trial scene in Matthew and John, the crucifixion scene in Luke, and the secondary ending of Mark), there are some extrabiblical stories like the Roman standards bowing to Jesus or the imprisonment and miraculous escape of Joseph of Arimathea. There is no way to know if these stories are based on the author's own redaction or based on older oral tradition. The scope of this text is apologetic and establishes Jesus' divine character, Pilate's innocence, and the Jews' culpability. As I will only comment on the canonical text, I will not entertain the names given to these characters.

[79] FRANÇOIS BOVON, *Luke 3*. A Commentary on the Gospel of Luke 19:28-24:53 (Hermeneia; Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press 2012) 310.

Indeed, we are invited to recall the parable of the Pharisee and the Tax-collector where the Tax-collector's attitude conveys the same two elements: that he fears God can be seen in the fact that the tax-collector was "standing far off [and] would not even look up towards heaven" and, in "beating his breast and saying, 'God, be merciful to me, sinner'" (Lk 18,13), he shows that he recognizes his guilt in front of God. Also, we can recall that Jesus points out it is this two-fold attitude that allows this tax-collector, and not the Pharisee, to return home justified (Lk 18,14).

After this rebuke, the good thief now turns towards Jesus and makes a plea – illuminated by faith – which confirms what the three groups derided Jesus about: Jesus is indeed the Christ and the king of the Jews! Indeed, rather than using the second person (if *you* are; are *you* not), the good thief cries out directly to him by invoking his name: 'Jesus'!

The first word of the plea 'remember' is also theologically significant. Indeed, at very specific and theologically important moments in the OT, God remembers his people and his covenant with them and this is either a prelude to or equivalent of the protection and redemption of the people. For sure this can be seen especially, but not only, in Exodus 2,23-25 where we read:

> After a long time, the king of Egypt died. The sons of Israel groaned under their slavery, and cried out. Out of the slavery their cry for help rose up to God. God heard their groaning and God *remembered* his covenant with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. God *looked* upon the sons of Israel and then God *knew*.

Of course, Moses' meeting with God at the Burning Bush and the subsequent *exodus* occurs exactly following this phrase in Ex 3–15.

It should be noted that we have already emphasized the importance of the *exodus* for Luke as seen in the transfiguration scene. Elsewhere, in the *Magnificant* for instance, Mary sings that the Lord *has helped his servant Israel in remembrance of his mercy* (Lk 1,54). In the end, therefore, the plea to *remember* is a theologically significant term and is implying a plea for redemption.

In the last phrase 'when you come into your kingdom', the good thief confesses that which eluded the others: Jesus' royal messiahship is a messiahship that does not do away with pain, suffering, or death in the present moment. Rather, the messiahship of Jesus will renew creation and, in defeating sin, will transfer creation to a glorious splendour at the second coming. This was the kingdom that Jesus was about to enter.

The reply of Jesus in Lk 23,43, is also three-fold: (i) solemn introduction, (ii) the emphatic *today* and (iii) they will both be in paradise.

The solemn introduction shows that Jesus is now speaking from authority and that which he says needs to be taken seriously.

Secondly, the word *today* is a significant word for Luke. In fact, it appears 11x in Luke and 10x in Acts (while never appearing in John, it occurs only 1x in Mk and 8x in Mt). What this emphasis on *nowness* concerns how the good news proclaimed by the prophets of old is now being fulfilled and being an eye-witness to such nowness is a great privilege, honour, and joy.

It is no coincidence, in fact that, in Lk 2,11, the angels bring good news of great joy to the shepherds when they announce that *today, a saviour has been born to you, who is Christ the Lord* for this is very moment which the promises of old are being fulfilled.

This *nowness* is also seen at the beginning of the public ministry of Jesus where, in Lk 4,21, after reading the passage from Is 61, Jesus says '*today* this scripture has been fulfilled.' Likewise, Jesus tells Zacchaeus that '*today* salvation has come to his house' (Lk 19,9). Of course, it is also seen in our pericope where Jesus tells the *good thief* that '*today*, with me, you will be in Paradise' (Lk 23,43).[80]

A final word must be said concerning *paradise*. As Bovon points out, the term is derived from Persia and designates a garden or park where the king rests.[81] Thusly, it is a fitting place to rest for the one who has acknowledged Jesus' royal messiahship – but also, we cannot but recall the first garden of Genesis and see this as rectifying of that which was lost.[82]

(iv) Lk 23,44-46 and the events leading up to his death. In Lk 23,44, just as in Mark and Matthew, darkness comes over the land at the sixth hour until the ninth. Jesus, in Lk 22,53, had predicted that an hour of darkness was imminent. This hour has come. The natural darkness confirms here in a supernatural way the blackness that is taking place on the plane of history.

As we had previous noted, a reader accustomed to the Old Testament would recognize, in this darkness, the darkness that accompanied the theophanies as well as the eschatological events marking the dark day of the Lord. In Luke, perhaps, the phrase ἐφ' ὅλην τὴν γῆν *eph'*

[80] For much of this commentary, see BOCK, *Luke 9:51–24:53*, 1848-1858.
[81] BOVON, *Luke 3*, 312.
[82] It is also very interesting to note that, in the creation stories of Gen 1–2, God can be seen to be *the divine gardener* who not only takes care of his garden but also helps it to grow and flourish.

holen ten gen over the whole land / earth, could have a greater significance of more than just the area of Judea.

Indeed, just as in Acts 1,8 ἕως ἐσχάτου τῆς γῆς *heos eschatou tes ges* until the ends of the earth, here the darkness could reflect (perhaps symbolically) a more universal connotation particularly in light of Lk 23,45a with the remark concerning the failing of the sun.

While Lk 23,45b, as in Matthew and Mark explains that the temple veil was torn in two, in Luke it is anticipated to happen before the death of Jesus rather than concomitant to or shortly following his death – so as to connect better with the day of the Lord which can be both a day of destruction and a day of salvation.

In Lk 23,46, we find Jesus' plea. He begins with the vocative "Father" (πάτερ) which is consistently used in the third Gospel to address the Father (Lk 10,21; 11,2; 22,42; 23,34). However, the content of the plea is different from Mark and Matthew wherein Jesus cites Ps 22,1. Here, Jesus cites from Ps 31,5 "into your hand I commit my spirit; you have redeemed me, O Lord, faithful God." Further down, we will discuss this change and what do both prayers mean. The verse ends with his death.

(v) Lk 23,47-49 and the confession of the centurion and the presence of the women. In Lk 23,47, we find, as in Mark and Matthew, the confession of the centurion. However, the content of the confession is particular: ὄντως ὁ ἄνθρωπος οὗτος δίκαιος ἦν, *hontos ho anthropos houtos dikaios en* certainly, this man was righteous (or just).

There have been two ways to interpret the fact that the centurion called Jesus just. The first interpretation places Jesus' righteousness in the biblical tradition of moral uprightness, of religious authenticity, or belonging to God's people as part of the covenant. In this interpretation, Jesus' righteousness represents the suffering righteous man of the psalms and of Isaiah.

The second interpretation prefers to stay in the secular framework of Jesus' trial. When the centurion declares Jesus to be righteous, he is doing nothing more than declaring that the accused is innocent. By repeating Pilate's affirmations, the centurion affirms that Jesus was innocent and that as a result he was the victim, of a miscarriage of justice.

I agree that the term δίκαιος here should be translated as righteous and not as innocent for how could a Centurion praise God for the innocence of a crucified Jesus unless if Jesus is

the righteous one? This idea also corresponds to Luke's theological intention as it is expressed in the chapters of the passion (Lk 22,27.51.61; 23,28.31.34.41.43).

As for the reason behind the fact that Luke changes the strong Christological answer that Mark and Matthew use, it seems that Luke wants to wait until Easter and the emergence of the apostolic proclamation before he allows a man, especially a Gentile, to confess a faith that is Christian (cf. the crescendo of the resurrection in Lk 24,7.26.34.35).

In Lk 23,48, the crowds who see this spectacle beat their breasts before going home, that is before they leave the place of the Skull located outside the city walls and go back into the city. This spectacle was supposed to bring joy to those who saw it; and yet, much like the death of Absolom turned a day of joy into mourning (2 Sam 19,2), this spectacle brought no joy at all. Rather, by beating their breasts, they express a regret that could lead to repentance. Here, Jesus' death brings the conscience to a confession and moved the hearts to the sadness of mourning.

The Lucan version ends in Lk 23,49, with a similar description of the women who had followed Jesus from Galilee standing at a distance watching (ὁράω) these things. Different from both Mark and Matthew, Luke does not tell us who were found among this group of women.

4. Did Jesus feel abandoned on the cross (Mk 15,34; Mt 27,46)?

4.1. Psalm 22,1: a cry of abandonment or prayer of persuasion?

I make the claim that Jesus' citation of Ps 22,1 is not a cry of abandonment but a prayer of persuasion wherein Christ asks for the Father's grace and aid to stay true to the mission, even as he hangs on the cross. After all, in the encyclical *Lumen Fidei* § 56, popes Benedict and Francis state "*Christians know that suffering cannot be eliminated, yet it can have meaning and become an act of love and entrustment into the hands of* ***God who does not abandon us****; in this way it can serve as a moment of growth in faith and love.* ***By contemplating Christ's union with the Father even at the height of his sufferings on the cross*** *(cf. Mk 15:34), Christians learn to share in the same gaze of Jesus.*

What I am aim to do here is to give a scriptural foundation to the statement in the encyclical. The problem is that many interpret Ps 22,1 out of context and assume that Jesus feels or is abandoned. Here, I want to delve more into this issue to explain better why the

assumption of abandonment took hold and what is, perhaps, a better way to understand the phrase *my God, my God, why have you forsaken me?*

4.2. Is Ps 22 a lament?

To the leader: according to The Deer of the Dawn. A Psalm of David.
1 My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?
Why are you so far from helping me, from the words of my groaning?
2 O my God, I cry by day, but you do not answer;
and by night, but find no rest.
3 Yet you are holy,
enthroned on the praises of Israel.
4 In you our ancestors trusted;
they trusted, and you delivered them.
5 To you they cried, and were saved;
in you they trusted, and were not put to shame.
6 But I am a worm, and not human;
scorned by others, and despised by the people.
7 All who see me mock at me;
they make mouths at me, they shake their heads;
8 "Commit your cause to the LORD; let him deliver—
let him rescue the one in whom he delights!"
9 Yet it was you who took me from the womb;
you kept me safe on my mother's breast.
10 On you I was cast from my birth,
and since my mother bore me you have been my God.
11 Do not be far from me,
for trouble is near
and there is no one to help.
12 Many bulls encircle me,
strong bulls of Bashan surround me;
13 they open wide their mouths at me,
like a ravening and roaring lion.
14 I am poured out like water,
and all my bones are out of joint;
my heart is like wax;
it is melted within my breast;
15 my mouth is dried up like a potsherd,

and my tongue sticks to my jaws;
you lay me in the dust of death.
16 *For dogs are all around me;*
a company of evildoers encircles me.
My hands and feet have shrivelled;
17 *I can count all my bones.*
They stare and gloat over me;
18 *they divide my clothes among themselves,*
and for my clothing they cast lots.
19 *But you, O LORD, do not be far away!*
O my help, come quickly to my aid!
20 *Deliver my soul from the sword,*
my life from the power of the dog!
21 *Save me from the mouth of the lion!*
From the horns of the wild oxen rescue me.
22 *I will tell of your name to my brothers and sisters;*
in the midst of the congregation I will praise you:
23 *You who fear the LORD, praise him!*
All you offspring of Jacob, glorify him;
stand in awe of him, all you offspring of Israel!
24 *For he did not despise or abhor*
the affliction of the afflicted;
he did not hide his face from me,
but heard when I cried to him.
25 *From you comes my praise in the great congregation;*
my vows I will pay before those who fear him.
26 *The poor shall eat and be satisfied;*
those who seek him shall praise the LORD.
May your hearts live forever!
27 *All the ends of the earth shall remember*
and turn to the LORD;
and all the families of the nations
shall worship before him.
28 *For dominion belongs to the LORD,*
and he rules over the nations.
29 *To him, indeed, shall all who sleep in the earth bow down;*
before him shall bow all who go down to the dust,
and I shall live for him.

30 Posterity will serve him;
future generations will be told about the Lord,
31 and proclaim his deliverance to a people yet unborn,
saying that he has done it.

The psalm is divided into two main parts: vv. 1-21 and vv. 22-31. The two sections differ in tone but not genre. The first part explains the dire situation and contains the prayer for help while the second part is praise and thanksgiving. In-between vv. 1-21 and vv. 22-31, something has happened for, while the change to praise from lament is abrupt and without warning, it is indicative that something decisive has happened. There is no more distress and feeling of being far from God; there is only amazement and gratitude. What this shows is that God *did act,* God *did listen,* and God *did come near*. While we are not told when or how, it is highly indicative that the outcome of such a transformation causes the psalmist to gladly praise God in the midst of the people (v. 22).

Form-critically, Ps 22 (21) is a lament. Indeed, we find the invocation of the Lord in Ps 22 (21),1-2. We also find a description of the sorry state of the psalmist in Ps 22 (21),6-8.12-18. The reason why God should help is witnessed in Ps 22 (21),3-5.9-10 and concerns who God is (holy) and what he did in the past and the relationship with the psalmist in the present. We also find a petition to help in Ps 22 (21),11.19.20-21. The Lord then answers (certainty of hearing) as we see in the psalmist's praise in Ps 22 (21),22-24.27-31. Lastly, we can mention that there is a vow of shalom in Ps 22 (21),25-26.

4.3. The atomistic reading in contrast to a contextual one

Those who focus solely on Ps 22,1 and assume that Jesus was abandoned by God "rely on an atomistic reading"[83] of the psalm wherein they simply take into consideration the verse itself. The problem with this is that it does not take in consideration neither the original context of the psalm nor the genre of the lament which certainly incorporates moments of pain, suffering, and cries but also incorporates other necessary elements.

[83] HOLLY J. CAREY, *Jesus' cry from the Cross.* Towards a First Century understanding of the intertextual relationship between Psalm 22 and the narration of Mark's Gospel (Library of New Testament Studies 398; Bloomsbury T & T Clark: London 2020) 2.

In fact, it is not true that those, like me, who sustain a contextual reading of Ps 22,1 are those who simply "explain away" the suffering of Jesus and are guilty of "happy ending syndrome"[84] since the lament, at its most basic idea, is a *prayer of persuasion* wherein the lamenter prays to God to persuade him to help.

What I find wrong in the atomistic interpretation is that, in focusing solely on the suffering of Jesus, it often claims that those who postulate a contextual reading are "trying to dilute"[85] this suffering. This cannot be farther from the truth. However, while it "cannot be denied"[86] that Jesus experience great suffering and distress, we are not to forget "the vindication"[87] that follows. This is what the atomistic reading forgets.

To understand this, we must understand the basic points of what a prayer of persuasion, also known as the lament, is. As a prayer, the lament needs both a speaker and a listener. The speaker, based on the relationship, asks God to act as God and to help the lamenter in a moment of need. The listener, then, feels compelled to act on behalf of the sufferer does so because it is God's nature to do so, and it is within the context of an inherently intimate and lively relationship.

The paradigmatic text that illustrates just this is Ex 2,23-25 for here we find Israel cries out to God for help on the very basis who God is and within the covenantal relation and God who hears, remembers, sees, and knows. He then, in Ex 3ff, acts on their behalf – and act that finds its climax in Ex 12,1–15,21.[88]

Lamentations, then, are prayers that do not simply talk about suffering – they also talk about being vindicated and helped by God. It is no coincidence, then, that the point of view of most prayers of lamentations are *after God has already heard the cry of the lamenter*. Therefore, to isolate the suffering aspect of the prayer and leave out the vindication side of it is to misunderstand the purpose of the prayer in the first place.

Indeed, if the point of the view of the lamenter is most often after God has already intervened, then the suffering side of the equation is something that happened in the past and is now overcome; it is the vindicated lamenter who is laying out a story that began with

[84] CAREY, *Jesus' cry from the Cross*, 2.
[85] CAREY, *Jesus' cry from the Cross*, 4.
[86] CAREY, *Jesus' cry from the Cross*, 5.
[87] CAREY, *Jesus' cry from the Cross*, 5.
[88] Ex 2,23-25 reads: *After a long time the king of Egypt died. The Israelites groaned under their slavery, and cried out. Out of the slavery their cry for help rose up to God. [24] God heard their groaning, and God remembered his covenant with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. [25] God looked upon the Israelites, and God knew.*

suffering but ended in vindication. Those, then, who come after these lamenters and pray those same prayers in moment of unjust suffering pray with the conviction that they will be vindicated. More to the point, for the lament to work at all, *trust in God* and the knowledge that *one is not abandoned by God* is required in the first place. For, if one feels that there is no one really listening, one will not speak up but remain silent. The fact that Jesus speaks to the Father on the cross shows that *he does not feel abandoned*. Therefore, something else must be happening.

This something else is precisely witnessed in the persuasive aspect of this prayer, which is found in the motivational clauses (the "for" clauses) that highlights the very nature of God and the inherent relationship that there exists between Creator and creature. To my mind, the atomistic reading is misguided because, by focusing on the suffering side of the equation alone, it forgets that vindication after remaining steadfast in suffering is also a part of the equation.

In other terms, the trend that focuses solely on the passion and death of Jesus and forgets that there is the subsequent resurrection "fails to give attention to an event for which [the Gospel writers have] been preparing [their] readers throughout the narrative."[89] The Gospel, after all, is not a story that "concentrates on the bleakness of Jesus' suffering and death and has little interest in his resurrection/vindication."[90]

As meaning is context based, any interpretation that is done from *outside this contextual understand is misguided at best*. Mark, as Matthew, does not just focus on Ps 22,1 but rather "the broader 'plot' of Ps. 22, i.e., the suffering and vindication of God's righteous one."[91]

Of course, I am not advocating a cancelling of the passion and death as a harsh and painful reality. Rather, I am advocating the need to keep both the cross and resurrection in view; it is the juxtaposition of Jesus' fidelity in suffering and subsequent vindication – as Phil 2,5-11 makes clear – that makes the prayer of lamentation and its actualization so powerful.[92]

4.3.1. Would Jesus have understood the entire psalm while only citing Ps 22,1?

[89] CAREY, *Jesus' cry from the Cross*, 46.
[90] CAREY, *Jesus' cry from the Cross*, 46-47.
[91] CAREY, *Jesus' cry from the Cross*, 93.
[92] In Paul, for instance, we saw just this in Phil 2,5-11 where we saw how Christ's kenosis and faithful suffering (vv. 6-8) was then vindicated (vv. 9-11). See CAREY, *Jesus' cry from the Cross*, 48.

In this section, I want to answer the question "would Jesus or even a first century Jew and / or Christian understand the contextual meaning of Ps 22,1 or would such a reader simply interpret that citation on its own atomistic grounds?" To begin with, as Carey illustrates, we can say that, in ancient Jewish tradition, it was often customary to name a book by the first word(s) of the book. For instance, the book "Genesis" in Hebrew is really *b^{e}ré'shît.* Many of the books of scriptures follow such a pattern. So, already here, we see how one word can be used to extrapolate entire books.[93]

It was also typical to use the first line of psalms in liturgical contexts to imply the entire psalm – as can be witnessed in the Mishnah. One example will suffice.[94] In m. Ta'an. 2.3, the blessing said in worship include the incipits of several psalms:

> And these are they:
> The remembrance and the *Shofar* verses[95]
> And *In my distress I cried unto the Lord and he answered me…* (Ps 120)
> And *I will lift up my eyes into the hills…* (Ps 121)
> And *out of the deep have I cried unto you, o Lord …* (Ps 130)

What is important here is that within this prayer, while only the first verses are citied, they are cited in a way that evokes the rest of the psalm that was expected to be prayed as well. By implication, there is no reason to assume that Ps 22,1 in the context of the crucifixion, was not prayed by Jesus in the same way. Indeed, as Carey points out, "both before and after the time of Jesus," in scriptures, the Mishnah, and in Qumran, "there is textual evidence that incipits were used in this way."[96]

Therefore, there is no reason to doubt that, in a moment of worship and prayer – from the cross – that Jesus would not have availed himself to the normal practice of the age whereby Jesus, the Gospel writers, and the original readers of the Gospel would have been able to "'fill in' the rest of the psalm upon […saying or] hearing its opening line"[97] for not only was Ps 22 often prayed but it is found (implicitly or explicitly) in various texts of the age such as the book of Wisdom, the Odes of Solomon, Joseph and Aseneth, and the *Hodayot* of Qumran.[98]

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[93] CAREY, *Jesus' cry from the Cross*, 107.
[94] See CAREY, *Jesus' cry from the Cross*, 110.
[95] The Shofar is a ram horn trumpet that was used in religious ceremonies.
[96] CAREY, *Jesus' cry from the Cross*, 111.
[97] CAREY, *Jesus' cry from the Cross*, 115.
[98] See CAREY, *Jesus' cry from the Cross*, 115. I cannot go into detail here; see CAREY, *Jesus' cry from the Cross*, 115-124.

And so, to end this part of the argument, yes Jesus, the Gospel writers, and their readers would have understood that, while citing from the *incipit* of the psalm, it is the entire psalm, cry for help and vindication, that is implied and kept in mind.

And what is more is that, if the Christian is to conform to Jesus, then Jesus' story must also be our story. The reader, then, would be called to identify with suffering and vindicated Jesus since one "of the primary indicators of true discipleship is for a Christian to follow Jesus in actively accepting the suffering and possible death that will come with this identity."[99]

And just like with Jesus, the Christian who holds true to this identity will be vindicated in the spirit of Phil 2,5-11. In other terms, just as the suffering-vindication cycle is indicative of Jesus' messiahship and his status as God, who always works in cruciform kenotic ways, so too must this paradigmatic cycle be that guide that guides all thoughts, words, and deeds of the Christian.

4.3.2. Towards a contextual understanding of Ps 22,1 in Mark (and Matthew)

If I am right to read Ps 22,1 contextually, it would also make sense that the motifs of suffering-vindication would not be limited to one verse in either Mark or Matthew. Indeed, if we use Mark as a paradigm for the other accounts, we can see that there are strong allusions to psalm 22 throughout the passion-resurrection cycle.

It is to be remembered that Psalm 22 (as all laments – implicitly or explicitly) is a diptych. On one side of the diptych, we find the portrayal of a person who laments due to unjust suffering at the hands of enemies (both internal and external) all the while proclaiming his innocence and calling upon the Lord for help. On the other side of the diptych, we find the psalmist's redemption and vindication. Therefore, this psalm can be seen to ungird the whole passion-resurrection cycle in the same diptychal process.

It is no coincidence, then, that there are echoes of this psalm (and those like it) throughout the passion-resurrection cycle in Mark – something that we can already see in Mk 14,1.[100] By saying that the chief priests and scribes were looking for a way to arrest Jesus

[99] CAREY, *Jesus' cry from the Cross*, 129.
[100] Mark 14,1 reads: *It was two days before the Passover and the festival of Unleavened Bread. The chief priests and the scribes were looking for a way to arrest Jesus through deceit* (Gk: *dolos*) *and kill him.*

through deceit (*dolos*), the verse alludes to those wicked ones who are enemies to the righteous sufferer (Ps 10,7; 35,20; 36,3; 52,2).

What is more is that those who are righteous sufferers and wise are those who do not have any trace of *dolos* in them: Ps 24,4; 32,2; 34,13; Prov 12,5.20; Wis 1,5; 4,11; Isa 53,9.

Specific allusions to psalm 22 in Mark are seen in Mk 15,24.29.30.31.34.39:

Mk 15,24	and divided his clothes among them, casting lots to decide what each should take.	they divide my clothes among themselves, and for my clothing they cast lots	Ps 22,18
Mk 15,29	Those who passed by derided him, shaking their heads	All who see me mock at me; they make mouths at me, they shake their heads	Ps 22,7
Mk 15,30	save yourself	Commit your cause to the Lord; let him deliver— let him rescue the one in whom he delights	Ps 22,8
Mk 15,31	He cannot save himself		
Mk 15,34	My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"	My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?	Ps 22,1
Mk 15,39	"Truly this man was God's Son!"	*Vindication; impossible to cite it*	Ps 22,24-31

There are many other references that Carey goes into; for our purposes, these few examples should suffice to show that Jesus' citation of Ps 22,1 in Mk 15,34 "would have indicated to his […] readers that the whole psalm has interpretive merit for understanding the meaning of Mark's overall presentation of Jesus' suffering, death, and resurrection."[101]

4.3.3. Overall sense of Ps 22,1 considering the overall theological framework of Mark

The crux of the question revolves around the question if the psalmist of psalm 22 was abandoned by God. However, we know that while it may have seemed that God was ignoring the plea of the psalmist, it turns out that God did indeed listen to his cry and acted on his behalf.

[101] CAREY, *Jesus' cry from the Cross*, 157. For all the reference to Ps 22 in Mark, see CAREY, *Jesus' cry from the Cross*, 142-157.

He was never abandoned by God. If this contextual reading is right, then, from the point of view of the Gospel writer, while Jesus was indeed abandoned by his friends and disciples and "abandoned" by those who wanted to kill him, he was *never abandoned by God the Father*.[102]

In fact, Carey is right to question of Mk 15,34 really implies abandonment of "God the Father in the sense of the removal of his presence especially considering the intimate relationship there is between the Father and Son."[103] How could the Father, who spoke at key moments like the baptism and the transfiguration about how he was well pleased with his beloved Son, abandon him at his time of need?

These cases explain very well that the Father "affirms Jesus' ministry and makes clear that his relationship is one of love"[104] (Mk 1,11; 9,7). Also, as we well know, in the garden scene in Mk 14,36, Jesus prays to his father and addresses him as *abba* – all of which highlights the closeness of the Father and the Son.

In all this, it would seem "counterproductive and counterintuitive"[105] for Mark to destabilise their relationship by asserting that God has abandoned his Son at his hour of need – in the act of redemption, both the Father and Son, together with the Holy Spirit, are "in it together."[106]

The presence of God and the inherently dynamic and intimate relationship between the Father and Son could not here be removed for the narrative demands it; if the Father is well pleased with his beloved Son, then it makes no sense for the Son to be abandoned on the cross – especially when one considers that the cross is something that happens in accordance with both the will of God and the scriptures.

There are also other points of references with indicate just this. One example will have to suffice. For instance, there is a thematic link between the "tearing" of the heavens at the baptism of Jesus (Mk 1,9-11) and the "tearing" of the temple veil in Mk 15,38.

The tearing of the heavens explains not only the inbreaking of the kingdom but also that Father is well pleased with his Son. The tearing of the temple veil is the immediate response of vindication of God the Father that Jesus' death will not go unanswered by the Father.

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[102] See CAREY, *Jesus' cry from the Cross*, 158.
[103] CAREY, *Jesus' cry from the Cross*, 161,
[104] CAREY, *Jesus' cry from the Cross*, 163.
[105] CAREY, *Jesus' cry from the Cross*, 163.
[106] CAREY, *Jesus' cry from the Cross*, 163.

That this second tearing is done in connection with the words of the Centurion, that Jesus was the Son of God, explains that the relationship did not come to an end at the crucifixion – on the contrary, the cross confirms and vindicates Jesus' status as Son! Indeed, it is no coincidence that Jesus' vindication is then announced at the empty tomb in Mk 16,6-8.

In all of this, Psalm 22 is aptly used in the context of the crucifixion of Jesus precisely to show that "Jesus is the true righteous sufferer"[107] and worthy of vindication since he remained true to the will of the Father, even to a death on the cross.

All of this gives credence to the position that states that Jesus' status as righteous sufferer and his vindication through the resurrection is not something limited to any one verse but rather imbued throughout the work of the Gospel – something that is specifically foreshadowed in the repeated declarations of the passion-resurrection (Mk 8,31; 9,31; 10,33-34). In this, the reader of the Gospel should know that the vindication after suffering, something which is found in the plot of psalm 22, is also inherent in the plot of the Gospel story.[108]

Indeed, by looking at the underlining tradition of the righteous sufferer, the liturgical use of the psalms in the time of Jesus, and the textual use of psalm 22 in the first century AD provides much support for the hypothesis that Mark's use of Ps 22,1 in Mk 15,34 would have been interpreted contextually which would highlight both suffering and vindication.[109] This would, of course, imply that Jesus would not have felt abandoned by God the Father; on the contrary, Jesus would have been sustained by the Father has he remains faithful to the will of God, all the while hanging on the cross.

4.3.4. Does Luke they justify this contextual reading?

If we hold to Markan priority, both Matthew and Luke would then be representatives of the first community and how would they have read Mk 15,34. Matthew, in Mt 27,46, retains the citation from Ps 22,1 which would seem to indicate that Matthew retains the same meaning of the phrase. As space is limited, I think it is sufficient to conclude just this.[110]

However, we cannot assume the same with Luke for he changes *My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?* into *Father, into your hands I commend my spirit* (Lk 23,46). Is Luke

[107] CAREY, *Jesus' cry from the Cross*, 168.
[108] CAREY, *Jesus' cry from the Cross*, 171.
[109] See CAREY, *Jesus' cry from the Cross*, 172.
[110] For those who want to delve into the situation, see CAREY, *Jesus' cry from the Cross*, 180-183.

emending the text to avoid a sense of abandonment or is Luke adopting another way of saying the same thing?

First, while I cannot go into it here, it is well-known that Luke makes use of the very important *topos* of the righteous suffering prophet in line with prophets like Jeremiah. In other words, Luke does indeed see Jesus as a righteous sufferer and just as the laments of Jeremiah pass through moments of suffering and vindication, so too does the life of Jesus.

This reaches a climax in Lk 23,41 where the "good thief" specifies that Jesus is innocent and undeserving of the cross, implying that Jesus, unlike the two criminals, are righteous. What is more is that, while Luke does not directly cite from psalm 22, it does not mean that he does not allude to it or to the genre of lamentation.

Indeed, like Matthew and Mark, Luke also alludes to Ps 22,18 in Lk 23,34b (*And they cast lots to divide his clothing*) where he identifies those who crucify Jesus as the enemies who divide up righteous sufferer's clothes. Also, Luke, as Mark (Lk 23,35.39; Mk 15,31b), alludes to Ps 22,8 in which Jesus is taunted to save himself as he saved others.

In the resurrection narrative, in Lk 24,7, the two men at the tomb remind the women of Jesus' words concerning his suffering, death, and resurrection to explain why the tomb is indeed empty – and all this recalls Lk 9,22.44; 18,31-34.[111] This same thrust is also witnessed in the episode of the disciples of Emmaus where Jesus interprets the scriptures to illustrate that the Messiah had to pass through suffering to arrive at his glory (Lk 24,26).

While all this information points to Luke as understanding Jesus as the righteous sufferer, there is still the issue of why Luke does not cite from Ps 22,1 like Mark and Matthew. And yet, while the citation of Lk 23,46 is not from psalm 22, it is from psalm 31: *into your hand I commit my spirit; you have redeemed me, O Lord, faithful God* (Ps 31,5), where this psalm is another psalm of lamentation.

While this phrase might seem to water down the poignancy of Ps 22,1, it does not. Indeed, if we read the psalm contextually and not atomistically, then we will find the same pathos as in Ps 22 – one that passes through moments of unjust suffering, fidelity to God, and vindication.

[111] Lk 24,7 reads: "*that the Son of Man must be handed over to sinners, and be crucified, and on the third day rise again.*"

Indeed, Ps 31,2 states "*incline your ear to me; rescue me speedily*" – this implies that the psalmist is in dire need of help. It is no coincidence, in fact, that the psalmist claims that "*my eye wastes away from grief, my soul and body also*" (Ps 31,9).

And yet, the same psalmist commends his spirit to God (Ps 31,5) because he knows that God will hear him. Indeed, upon being heard, the psalmist admits that "*I had said in my alarm, 'I am driven far from your sight.' But you heard my supplications when I cried out to you for help*" (Ps 31,22). Even if the psalmist had some doubts, he remained clinging to the God who redeems his people and because of this, the psalmist is vindicated and can exclaim that the Lord "*preserves the faithful, and fully recompenses the proud doer*" (Ps 31,23).

Therefore, as one can see, psalm 31 like psalm 22 passes through a moment of suffering and a moment of vindication. What is more, as Ps 31,22 makes clear, the point of view of the psalmist is at the end of the story – it is the vindicated psalmist who is writing the story that began with suffering but ended in vindication.

It is unclear why Luke would change the words. My intuition is that he wanted to make it clear to a Hellenistic audience, who perhaps would not have understood the genre of lamentation, that Jesus was not abandoned at all; rather, Jesus commits his case to the Father who will vindicate Jesus' fidelity to the will of the Father. More to the point, Carey is right to assert that, notwithstanding the absence of Ps 22,1, "Luke adapts and adapts much of the psalmic and Righteous Sufferer language in his own portrayer of Jesus' suffering, death, and resurrection."[112]

4.4. Jesus, never abandoned by the Father, is *the* vindicated righteous sufferer

It is hoped that in this short study on the use of Ps 22,1 in the Gospel account has persuaded you all that the contextual understanding of Ps 22,1 is a much more reasonable and solid reading than the atomistic one. In ignoring both the tone and meaning of psalms of lament such as Pss 22 and 31, the atomistic reading is really *eis-egesis and not ex-egesis* because it places the scholar's assumptions on the text rather than bringing forth meaning through the search for authorial intent. Indeed, both Matthew and Luke, in their reading of Mark, provide the same theological framework of righteous sufferer and vindication.

Moreover, if we look to the larger theological framework of all Gospel writers, we find a similar pattern. Indeed, if the scope of the Gospel is to show how Jesus, the heavenly-earthly

[112] CAREY, *Jesus' cry from the Cross*, 186.

person and the God-Man, unites heaven and earth once again through the suffering, death, and resurrection, then it *cannot be that Jesus was ever abandoned by the Father*.

After all, if he were abandoned by God the Father, we would have to subscribe to either Arianism or Adoptionism for we would have to admit that either that there was a time when Jesus was not God or that we can identify a moment when Jesus *began* to be God and thus divide the historical Jesus from the Christ of faith.

In this way, both dogmatic theology and biblical theology agree that Jesus could not have been abandoned. What we have done here is to show this also exegetically by looking to the genre of the lament, the intention of the author, and the way that Ps 22,1 and Ps 31,5 would have been interpreted in the context of the first community.

Ultimately, all evidence points to the fact that faithful Jesus, who suffered and died in accordance with the will of God and the scriptures, was then subsequently vindicated and took his rightful place at the righthand of God. The Father, who was well-pleased with his beloved Son, was there all along the journey to hear, see, and know it.

General Conclusion

These lessons have hopefully provided you with a new appreciation of prayers of lament. In my home country of Malta, while I find that many people pray to God in this way, many people often think it is a wrong kind of prayer to pray because they are "taking it against God" – or even perhaps complaining against God. Any yet, this could not be father from the truth.

Of course, it is not automatically so since, for one to pray this prayer correctly, it must be done in the right way: in an attitude of trust and within a living relationship with God who hears our voiced hurts and comes to our aid – not always in the way we want but always in the way we need.

For this reason, these prayers are borne from biblical hope for hope is based on this living and intimate relationship that there is between us and God. It is no coincidence that Pope Francis, in the bull *Spes non confunditat* the beginning of this year of Jubilee, highlights the fact that hope is born of love and is based on the love that flows from the cross. From the cross, the Holy Spirit guides our feet, illuminating the eyes of our heart so that, even if we may stumble, we do not fall. Hope does not deceive because it is based on the certainty that nothing can separate us from the love of God; God has done everything to redeem us and therefore it would be foolish to now let our sins separate us from him.

Therefore, laments cannot be cries of abandonment for nothing can separate us from God and God certainly does not abandon us.

All that we have said points to the *Relational God of Prayer*. In all this, this type of prayer emphasizes that the one who prays can truly engage the deity, can urge reasons upon God for acting in behalf of the one in need, just as God in giving the law urges reasons upon the people for responding and obeying.

Prayer is the point at which humanity dared to approach the transcendent, holy deity with no restrictions on what could be expressed; we are free not only to cry out in rage, anger, and despair, as in the lament, but also to beseech, urge, and persuade: the mind and heart of God are vulnerable to the pleas and the arguments of humanity.

But it is important to keep in mind the nature of the plea: these pleas do nothing more than to appeal to God to be and to act as God would be and act. Interestingly, as the petitioner goes to much pains to impress his/her will on God, these prayers harness and enrich the idea of 'thy will be done': as Tobit's and Sarah's ineffective plea and Jesus' own prayer in the garden of sorrows show, while God's will is absolute, it does not mean that it is coldhearted and mean-spirited; if we are praying in the right way (in perfection, of course!), and if we ask for help, he will indeed help us *because it is God's will that he helps*.

It is, therefore, in the very nature and structure of the relationship between God and humanity that the deliverance from pain and suffering, the overcoming of affliction, guilt, and oppression by others can be counted upon. The is why the prayers of pain and suffering – from the psalms to Jesus himself – are so regularly full of confidence and trust.

Ultimately, this prayer of persuasion is risky and non-mechanical as it is based on relationship. In such a relationship, God asks us to make our case in front of him, since he knows our needs but desires our perfection. And in such a relationship, the petitioner has the certain hope that God will indeed listen and act, not always in the way we want but always in the way we need. Amen.