



Theological Reflections on Psalm 22: From King David to the Crucified Christ

Yusak Tanasyah,¹ Robby Robert Repi,² Maju Halawa³

^{1,2,3} Sekolah Tinggi Teologi Indoneisa, Jakarta, Indonesia

Email: ytanasyah@gmail.com

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Abstract

The phrase "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" is one of the most poignant and widely recognized lines in the Bible, and it carries profound significance within both Christian and Jewish traditions. This statement is found in Psalm 22, a psalm attributed to King David. Understanding its context within Psalm 22 sheds light on its meaning and significance. From a Christian perspective, the words of Psalm 22:1 take on added significance in light of their connection to the crucifixion of Jesus Christ. According to the Gospels of Matthew and Mark, Jesus quotes Psalm 22:1 while hanging on the cross, thereby identifying himself with the suffering described in the Psalm. This connection between Psalm 22 and the crucifixion underscores the idea that Jesus, in his humanity, experienced the depths of human suffering and anguish. For Christians, Jesus' cry of abandonment on the cross is not merely an expression of personal agony but also a reflection of his role as the sacrificial Lamb of God who takes upon himself the sins of humanity. In this sense, Jesus' cry echoes the suffering of all humanity and serves as a reminder of God's redemptive love and ultimate victory over sin and death. Psalm 22 captures the profound tension between despair and trust, lament and hope. It serves as a powerful expression of human suffering and a reminder of God's faithfulness, culminating in its connection to the crucifixion of Jesus Christ and the hope of redemption for all humanity.

Keywords: My God, forsaken me, Psalm 22

INTRODUCTION

Commonplace in current theological reflection on the topic is the claim that God suffers in, alongside, and in solidarity with all who suffer — i.e., where suffering occurs there God is. When the God-man Jesus Christ, Son of God, therefore, is born from the Holy

Spirit and the virgin Mary, each substance – the humanity and the divinity – remains naturally in its perfection so that what is divine joins itself (communicate) to the humanity, and what are human shares with (participant) the divinity. Here lies the crux of the Augustinian doctrine: The Being thus incarnated is not either God or man but the same God himself who is also man. From the moment he takes on flesh, He is God's madman, always possessing the same fullness and excellence of his divinity. God was made man: Because he bore all of the vicissitudes of human nature and “ran in the same course” as we do even to the extent of taking our mortality, he grew, he hungered, he thirsted, he was tired, was scourged, was crucified, died, and arose from the dead (PL 31, 1225). This does not mean that his divine nature changed. Here Augustine vis-à-vis Leporius’ confession reasserts the inconvertible, unchangeable, and impassible nature of the divinity.¹

Psalm 22 is a psalm of lament, expressing deep anguish and distress. It begins with the words, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?”—a cry of despair that reflects feelings of abandonment and isolation. In the subsequent verses, the psalmist vividly describes the suffering he is experiencing, including physical torment, emotional anguish, and ridicule from his enemies. Despite the intense suffering depicted in the psalm, there is also an expression of trust and hope in God's faithfulness. The psalmist acknowledges God's past acts of deliverance and expresses confidence that God will ultimately rescue him from his current predicament. This tension between despair and trust, between lament and hope, is characteristic of many psalms of lament in the Bible.

God could and did reveal to writers in the Old Testament the establishing of His Kingdom, and even the person of Him who was, someday in the future, to bring about the salvation of the Gentiles. But to credit the writer with this prophetic insight we must have some indication that, at the time he was writing, he was indeed looking forward to that future salvation. There are no such indications in this psalm. There is no suggestion whatever that the psalm was written in the name of another: the whole character of the psalm, and its resemblance to others of the same kind, lead us to think that the psalmist himself is the sufferer, that the psalm reveals the personal sufferings and the prayer of its author.

¹ Tlay Michael. “Can God Really Be in Pain? The Theopaschite Controversy.” *Tanzania Journal Africa Tomorrow*, 21, no. 1-2, (2019): 97-140.

Psalm 22, therefore, is the prayer of the just man who, from a deep knowledge of God's revelation in the second part of Isaiah, strove to resemble, as far as in him lay, the Servant to come, and thereby to assist in the establishing of God's Kingdom. Is it then surprising that the evangelists thought of this psalm when they were writing the story of the Passion? Is it surprising that Our Lord Himself thought of this psalm when he was hanging on the Cross? Even if Our Lord had not quoted the opening verse of the psalm, even if the evangelists had not referred to it, would not we have applied the psalm to Our Lord, since He is the just man, the innocent sufferer by whose sufferings the Kingdom of God is established? He is not merely one of the many who like the psalmist had listened to the teaching of the prophets and modeled themselves on the Servant: He is the Servant in person, and the psalmist, though he did not know it, was a reflection of Jesus Christ. Christ upon the Cross knows that this is His psalm, and He claims it as His own when in the hearing of the bystanders He begins to recite it.

We need to remember that Jesus died, and the way he died, lest we deny the meaning and purpose of his life and his death, lest we diminish the sacrificial nature of God's love. As Barbara Brown Taylor reminds us in her book, *God in Pain*, "Christianity is the only world religion that confesses a God who suffers." "No, it is not a very popular idea, even among Christians," but you cannot have Christianity without the cross; you cannot have a redeemed world without Christ and he crucified.²

DISCUSSION

According to the New Testament, some of these psalms make reference to Jesus in one form or another. These psalms are frequently seen as first expressing the author's experience and then as containing typological or prophetic allusions to Jesus.³ The view that God feels pain appears to be incompatible with the medieval and patristic view of God as 'impassible. Impassibility (apatheia) is the doctrine that God cannot suffer or change and it is a doctrine that the early church and the medieval church had in common with some Greek philosophers, most notably Aristotle whose Unmover Mover was needed to

² Barbara Brown Taylor, *God in Pain*, (Abingdon Press, 1998), 119.

³ John E. McKinley, "Psalms 16, 22, and 110. Historically Interpreted as Referring to Jesus," *Perichoresis* 10, no. 2 (June 2012): 207–21, <https://doi.org/10.2478/v10297-012-0010-8>.

explain the changing universe while remaining unchanged in any way himself. Aristotle thought that a perfect being cannot be dependent on anything else for its perfection nor can it have any potential to change from one imperfect state to a better one or a better one to a worse one, such as the state of fluctuating emotions. This is also connected with other attributes of a perfect being such as being incorporeal (without a body), timeless, and spaceless.⁴ In his book *Metaphysics*, he writes:

“it is clear then from what has been said that there is a substance which is eternal and unmovable and separate from sensible things. It has been shown that this substance cannot have any magnitude, but is without parts and indivisible...But it has also been shown that it is impassible and unalterable; for all the other changes are posterior to change of place.⁵

In this context, the Biblical language of God showing emotion or change could be accommodated to Greek thinking in terms of anthropomorphism. According to an old Talmudic saying, ‘The Torah speaks according to the language of men.’ Moses Maimonides in his *Guide for the Perplexed* explains that this means that ‘expressions, which can easily be comprehended and understood by all, are applied to the Creator.’ As a result, there has been a tradition within Judaism not to take those passages literally which are thought to be ‘unfitting’ for the divine e.g. in the Psalms where God is said to get drunk and have a hangover or to literally walk about in the garden of Eden. Similarly, it was argued, that God does not get angry nor change his mind, since ‘he is not man that he should change his mind’ (Numbers 23:19). By extension it was reasoned that God does not feel pain, nor suffer since this too would entail change and ‘I am the Lord I change not’ (Malachi 3:6).⁶

Lutheran theologian Kitamori reflects, ‘We are living in an age of God and pain. The world today seems to be stretched out under pain.’ ‘Only a suffering God can help us,’⁷ wrote Dietrich Bonhoeffer from a Nazi prison where he was later hanged. This theme of a ‘suffering God’ has been notably developed by another Lutheran theologian Jurgen Moltmann in a series of books beginning with *The Crucified God*, in 1971. Turning his fire on Aristotle’s Unmoved Mover, Moltmann writes: ‘A God who is eternally only in love with

⁴ Alan Darley. Does God feel pain. https://www.academia.edu/36860877/Does_God_feel_pain

⁵ Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, Bk. 12, c. 8 (1073a), trans. W. D. Ross in *The Works of Aristotle*, Vol. 1 (Chicago:William Benton, Encyclopedia Britannica, 1984), 603-604.

⁶ Darley.

⁷ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison* (London: SCM Press, 1959), 361.

himself, and therefore without concern for others, is a monster, an idol...God himself has gone through the experiences of Christ's cross.⁸

The last words uttered by Jesus in Matthew's gospel are a prayer. He could have used any form of expression. He could have expressed rage, given the cruel nature of the means of execution, but instead, he prays. Actually what he does is scream a prayer. And what a prayer it is! He abandons his usual means of address, which is the intimate "Abba," "Father". Now, he no longer presumes intimacy. He uses "a form of address that is common to all people: "My God!" (7) He is identified with human beings. Then, he continues by quoting the opening lines of Psalm 22: For what reason have you abandoned me? Why have you abandoned me? Notice that Jesus does not question the existence of God; neither does he question the power of God. He is questioning the silence of God.⁹

The Roman centurion, who had no idea what was going on and had never read Psalm 22, got it the day Jesus was crucified: Truly, this man was God's son. He died so that we might no longer live for ourselves but live for him and through him, be whole. For one terrible, dark afternoon, God and Jesus, out of their choosing, were separated. Jesus descended into the hell of an absence of God. He did it for us; he and the Father did it for everyone who has been laid low by life. I may not know whether or not God answers your prayers in a specific sense, but I do know, in the larger sense, the big answer has already been given. In the silence of a Friday afternoon, 2000 years ago, after the ridicule, after jeering, came a helpless cry of utter abandonment. After the cry, came the death. After the death, came God's big answer, not in words, but in the form of a life laid down, a body raised, a stone rolled away, and a world that will never be the same again.¹⁰

DISCUSSION

Psalm 22

Psalm 22 never originally described the psalmist's situation; instead, the psalm represents the Messiah's words on the cross. The first-person pronouns (I, me, my, and our)

⁸ Jurgan Moltmann, *Experiences of God*, 1980.

⁹ Raymond E. Brown, *The Death of the Messiah*, Volume II, (Doubleday, 1994)1046

¹⁰ Joanna M. Adams. "Why Hast Thou Forsaken Me?" 2008.

https://s3.amazonaws.com/dfc_attachments/public/documents/458/3-9-08_Why_Hast_Thou_Forsaken_Me.pdf

refer exclusively to Jesus Christ. The psalmist and prophet David wrote Jesus's words centuries in advance. This view presupposes a core tenet of Judaism, Christianity, and even Islam—namely, that the Bible contains predictions. Psalm 22 includes statements that do not easily fit the life of David. For example, we have no historical evidence that David's adversaries cast lots for his garments and pierced, pinned, or tore his hands and feet (vv. 16, 18). The book of Esther tells the Purim story without mentioning God, whereas Psalm 22 appeals to God excessively. Moreover, the sufferer of Psalm 22 comes across as a pious saint, but Esther appears ungodly and immoral. For reasons such as these, Bible readers often bypass the Esther option.¹¹

The Gospels use Psalm 22 to describe Jesus's suffering on the cross. Jesus spoke the opening words of the psalm on the tree: "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" (Ps 22:1; Matt 27:46; Mark 15:34). Quoting Psalm 22:18, John explains that the Roman soldiers divided Jesus's garments by casting lots "to fulfill the Scripture." Sinners blasphemed Jesus (βλασφημέω), wagged their heads, and chided him to trust God and be delivered. In Matthew 27:43, Jesus's detractors knew that he claimed to be the Messiah so they mockingly quoted Psalm 22:8 at him because in early Jewish tradition, the psalm described the suffering Messiah. The famous line "they pierced my hands and my feet" invokes crucifixion (Ps 22:16; cf. Mark 15:25; John 20:25). The last word of Psalm 22 (כִּי נִפְּשָׁה, "it is finished," v. 31) corresponds with one of Jesus's last words before his death (τετέλεσται, "it is finished," John 19:30).¹²

Psalm 22 records the Messiah's own words—words spoken on the cross at approximately three o'clock, moments before he took his final breath and departed for paradise. The psalm constituted a loud prayer offered to the Father and other words spoken to witnesses. The sufferer of Psalm 22 was Jesus Christ and no other. King David the prophet wrote Jesus's words centuries in advance, and these words enrich the biography of

¹¹ Mark Hassler. "My God, My God, Why Have You Forsaken Me?" Psalm 22 as Direct Predictive Prophecy Concerning Jesus Christ on the Cross." *Detroit Baptist Seminary Journal*, 2022.

¹² Abraham Jacob Berkovitz, "Jewish and Christian Exegetical Controversy in Late Antiquity: The Case of Psalm 22 and the Esther Narrative," in *Ancient Readers and Their Scriptures: Engaging the Hebrew Bible in Early Judaism and Christianity*, ed. Garrick V. Allen and John Anthony Dunne, *Ancient Judaism and Early Christianity* 107 (Leiden: Brill, 2019), 223, 239.

Jesus.¹³ VanGemeren makes the observation that the psalmist views God in contrastive terms this situation:

- his God has 'forsaken' him (v. 1a)
- Israel is God is 'enthroned' (v.3a)
- his God is 'far...from saving' (v.1b)
- Israel's God is 'holy' or the 'Holy One' (v. 3b)
- his God is unresponsive to his 'groaning' (v.1c)
- Israel's God receives the 'praise of Israel' (v.3c)¹⁴

He concludes that this understanding allows the reader to find deep appreciation for Jesus' cry on the cross, Eloi, Eloi, lama sabachthani?'It shows the forsakenness and alienation from God the Father and the cutting off from any act of deliverance at the hand of God.¹⁵ It is clear from these examples that there is an abundance of similarities between the poetic writing of Psalm 22 and the verses found in the New Testament that depict Christ.¹⁶

Psalm 22 (vv. 2-11) introduces the tragic theme of divine abandonment or the farness of God—this is the central problem of the psalm. But, what exactly is divine abandonment here? Notice how the author describes God's far-ness and nearness not in terms of companionship but in terms of action: far-ness ק ה ר and abandonment ע ז ב are paired contrastively with action words like salvation י ש ע (v. 2), deliverance פ ל ט , and escape מ ל ט (vv. 5-6); the psalmist is saying "you're not acting in the way you have in the past" more than "we're not as relationally close as we once were." The state of abandonment is also perceived by onlookers, who see that the psalmist requires rescue צ נ and deliverance פ ל ט (v. 9), also suggests that this is about God's action. In other words, divine distance, in this case, is not about a lack of affection or relational distance so much as it refers to inactivity; the psalmist feels far from God because, for whatever reason, God has not continued the saving, delivering actions the psalmist knows him for. Therefore, this is the answer ה נ ע the psalmist seeks (v. 3)—rescue from his deathly peril.¹⁷

¹³ Alfred Edersheim, *The Life and Times of Jesus the Messiah* (New York: Longmans, Green, 1896), 609.

¹⁴ Mark H. Heinemann, 'An Exposition of Psalm 22,' in *Bibliotheca Sacra Volume 147,587* (Dallas, TX:Dallas Theological Seminary, 1990), 285

¹⁵ Willem VanGemeren, *The Progress of Redemption: The Story of Salvation from Creation to the New Jerusalem*. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1988) 201

¹⁶ Elke Speliopoulo, *Messiah in the Psalms*.2010.

https://www.academia.edu/753368/Messiah_in_the_Psalms

¹⁷ Carissa M. Quinn, "Understanding the Forsaken King: The Design and Context of Psalm 22." Hebrew Bible Conference, 2023.

Limburg says that this Psalm is a pattern of Jesus' life: "He felt forsaken, lying in the dust of death, but was then rescued."¹⁸ From an Evangelical point of view, this would mean that He felt forsaken as a human emotion He was suffering in His incarnate form. This lends yet more credence to the idea that this Psalm is not just a petition, not just a liturgy, but also a Messianic prophecy. Jesus shows us the reality of the cross, identifies with the afflicted (vv 3-5), reflects the hostility of people towards Himself (vv 6-8), remembers his mother (vv 9-10), laments the rejection by humanity (vv 11-18), prays to God (vv 19-22), and praises God for His eventual response (23-31).¹⁹

According to the history of Psalm 22 interpretation, there was a significant difference between the Hebrew and Greek interpretations. This Psalm's Hebrew and Greek versions both open with an impassioned prayer to God bemoaning the author's desolation, but only the Greek version pinpoints the reason for that desolation: "the accounts of my transgressions are far from my salvation" (LXX Ps 21.2).²⁰ The Septuagint implies that the psalmist's suffering was justified, as Stephen Ahearne-Kroll has shown. The way that Psalms 22 and LXX Ps 21 were interpreted also demonstrates this difference between the Hebrew and Greek: the Greek Psalm is interpreted as the contrite prayer of a sinner, while the Hebrew Psalm is appropriated as the lament of a virtuous sufferer. For example, Esther is shown praying the lines of Psalm 22.1, "My God, My God, why have you abandoned me," in a midrash on her when she approaches the king (Esther 5.2).²¹

Within the context of the entire psalm, the cry, "My God, my God, why have you abandoned me?" is the anguished introduction to an increasingly intense plot curve that culminates in YHWH's deliverance of the afflicted king from death in a way that affects and invites the participation of all humanity. Jesus's situation of suffering does find resonance with that of Psalm 22, so his cry of dereliction evokes a depth of distress related to imminent death. But Jesus and the gospel authors also know how the psalm ends—with

https://www.academia.edu/97372198/Understanding_the_Forsaken_King_The_Design_and_Context_of_Psal_m_22

¹⁸ James Limburg, *Psalms* (Westminster: John Knox Press), 71

¹⁹ Hans-Joachim Kraus, *Psalms 1-59: A Commentary* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1988), 301-2

²⁰ Jason Robert Combs, "An Extended Inverted Allusion to Psalm 22 in Mark 15: Reading Reversal in the Markan Passion," *New Testament Studies* 70, no. 1 (January 1, 2024): 23–37, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0028688523000346>.

²¹ Combs.

victory and celebration for all the nations because of the rescue of the Davidic king. It seems reasonable that listeners familiar with the psalm would not be expected to disregard its entire second half. If we keep that context in mind, Jesus's words on the cross express not only deep anguish, but also relenting trust in YHWH's faithfulness, and, for those familiar with the scriptures, a proclamation that Jesus is the afflicted king of whom YHWH's rescue will bring about thriving for all. It is a cry of anguish mingled with confidence.²²

In this psalm we have the example of the just man who long before the coming of the Messiah was, under God's guidance, sanctifying himself by the imitation of Christ. The divinely inspired hopes of the psalmist can only be adequately satisfied in the person of Christ the Redeemer. We have nothing to lose by refusing to force details of Christ's ~ortrait into the Old Testament. To anticipate the progress of God's revelation is not only an unwarrantable interference in God's plans: it destroys any apologetic argument, it is nothing more than a *petitio principii*. Christ is the fulfillment of prophecy; prophecy points the way, but of its very nature it does not reveal Christ in all His perfection; we can hardly expect it to defeat its purpose, which is the gradual preparation for the coming of Christ. If we but consider the development of revelation according to the broad outlines that the Old Testament gives us, we shall not need to insert details *ex event*, for we shall realize quite clearly that Christ and His Kingdom are the only adequate and definitive fulfillment of all the hopes and longings of Israel.²³

This song is the source of Christ's cry, and Aquinas's commentary on song 22:27 expands on the Augustinian reading of the passage to highlight Christ's humanity. This focus aids in providing a classical explanation of what it could entail for Christ to be abandoned. Therefore, by offering a straightforward literal interpretation of this contentious biblical passage without attributing Christ's experience of damnation or rejecting traditional views on divine impassibility, Christ's beatific knowledge, and the nature of Trinitarian relations, Aquinas's exegesis supports the orthodox response to modern revisionist theologians. It is impossible to see Christ's last cries on the cross as a cry of spiritual separation from God or of despair. Theologically speaking, however, it must

²² Quinn. *Understanding the Forsaken King*.

²³ T. Worden. *My god, my god, why has t tho u forsaken me*, Upholland College.
https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/pdf/scripture/06-1_009.pdf

be interpreted as a prayer of longing concerning Christ's desertion of the Father and his aspiration to bring humanity into the eschatological gift of redemption.²⁴

CONCLUSION

Jesus's famous cry of dereliction or abandonment is less an expression of loss of the divine relationship and more a mixture of excruciating pain with cosmic-level hope and trust in the rescuing activity of YHWH. In the gospel narratives of Matthew and Mark, Jesus utters words that sound only like despair or lament if we hear them as isolated, but in the context of Psalm 22, they are an expression of both agony and confidence, mysteriously mixed. Psalm 22, especially in comparison with its parallel Psalm 17, communicates unfathomable distress and impending death. And yet we know from these psalms that this suffering and death is not the end of the story—God will deliver his king—and this will result in worldwide praise and feasting and the expansion of Yhwh's kingdom among the nations—perhaps the centurion's expression of faith after Jesus breathes his last that he is surely the son of God is a nod to this storyline (Matt 27: 54; Mark 15:39). Jesus proclaims not only his anguish, but his kingship, impending deliverance, and initiation of YHWH's kingdom on earth. Jesus's cry, heard in context, does not downplay the severity of his lament. He was brutally tortured, murdered, and alone. His expectations feel shattered, as do his followers. He also declares with confidence that he is the king that the Scriptures point forward to.

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²⁴ Philip Nolan, "Christ's Human Nature and the Cry from the Cross: St. Thomas Aquinas on Psalm 22:2," *Nova et Vetera* 21, no. 4 (September 2023): 1219–43, <https://doi.org/10.1353/nov.2023.a919248>.

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