# An Exegetical Examination of Psalm 22: Understanding its Meaning and Purpose

**Philip E. Goble, Jr.**

Psalm 22 appears to be a song with a complex and important history. A song written by David, the 31 verses of lament, turmoil, and thanksgiving include what appears to be an amazingly detailed description of the crucifixion of Jesus Christ. In fact, the Messiah Himself uttered the opening lines of Psalm 22 from the cross when he quoted in Matthew 27:46: "And about the ninth hour Jesus cried out with a loud voice, saying, '*Eli, Eli, lama sabachthani!*' that is, 'My God, My God, why hast thou forsaken me?'"[1] Mark 15:34 also records this cry.

The connection is so profound that even the esteemed church father, Charles H. Spurgeon, eschews the connection to David for the ties to Christ. Writing in his commentary on Psalms, Spurgeon opines:

> It is the photograph of our Lord's saddest hours, the record of his dying words, the lachrymatory of his last tears, the memorial of his expiring joy. David and his afflictions may be here in a very modified sense, but, as the star is concealed by the light of the sun, he who sees Jesus will probably neither see nor care to see David.[2]

While Spurgeon died in 1892, his view is one that stretches back into church history. In the third and fourth centuries, Eusebius of Caesarea wrote that Psalm 22 was "a prophecy of

[1] All Scripture references will be from the New King James Version unless otherwise noted.

[2] Mark Water, "Charles H. Spurgeon on Psalm 22:1," *Parallel Classic Commentary on the Psalms: Charles H. Spurgeon, John Calvin, Matthew Henry* (Chattanooga, TN: AMG Publishers/John Hunt Publishing Ltd., 2005), 86.

the Passion of the Christ and of the vocation of all Gentiles"[3] while Jerome claimed that "the entire psalm sets forth Christ in all his suffering."[4]

Yet, the question appears pertinent—did David and the audience of his day understand Psalm 22 as a messianic prophecy, or did they just see a sufferer like Job or Jeremiah? Was David thinking of the savior that was going to be the fulfillment of the Davidic Covenant? Or was the lament and thanksgiving just simply that—lament and thanksgiving—as David attempted to connect human life in relation to Yahweh? Should contemporary audiences simply read the crucifixion back into Psalm 22 or does Psalm 22 have wisdom beyond the cross that should be examined in its context of David's life and reign?

Thus, Psalm 22 appears to be a multi-faceted text within Scripture. It lives and breathes in the Psalter yet extends into the New Testament where it is "quoted or alluded to at least eleven times by New Testament authors."[5] That appears to make it imperative to gain an understanding of Psalm 22 in its context and within its place in Scripture as a basis for properly applying it to today's audiences.

Thus, this paper will endeavor to explore Psalm 22's background, genre, structure, and place within the Psalter as a basis for an exegetical examination of the text leading to a greater understanding of its importance within the canon.

**Author, Audience, and Context**

The process of identifying an author for the psalms is complex. Unlike many other books in both the Old Testament and New Testament, many psalms record a different author in their superscriptions—if there are superscriptions. Examining

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[3] Bruce K. Waltke, James M. Houston, Erika Moore, *The Psalms as Christian Worship: A Historical Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2010), 382.

[4] Ibid.

[5] Shon Hopkin, "'My God, My God, Why Hast Thou Forsaken Me?': Psalm 22 and the Mission of Christ," *BYU Studies Quarterly*. 52, no. 4 (2013): 117, accessed Sept. 21, 2023.

timelines for the different named authors points to a compilation of the psalms that could have taken between 500 and 600 years.

Looking at the superscriptions for the 150 psalms, David is listed as author for 73 of them—including Psalm 22—while others are attributed to Moses, Solomon, Heman, the Sons of Korah, Asaph, and Ethan the Ezrahite.[6] While some wonder about the veracity of the titles, "the oldest manuscripts of the Old Testament contain the titles, though they are not part of the composition proper."[7] In arguing for the concept of the accuracy of the superscriptions, it is evident that many of the New Testament authors attributed several psalms to David and "even spoke of the book of Psalms as being David's."[8] In addition, the superscriptions, even if added by a later editor, "are still very ancient and therefore have a claim to authenticity. It is difficult to prove they are inspired, but most conservative interpreters treat them as accurate."[9]

Yet just because the attribution is old, it is not a definitive stamp on the accuracy or reliability of the attestation. Willem E. Vangemeren asserts the two main issues to definitively assigning authorship is the lack of understanding by translators of ancient titles and the different headings between the MT and the LXX.[10] The MT and LXX differ in some places regarding the use or deletion of the phrase "of David."[11]

Robert Alter,[12] in his translation and commentary of the Hebrew Bible, notes that "the one safe conclusion is that the writing of

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[6] Andrew E. Hill, John H. Walton, *A Survey of the Old Testament, 3rd Edition* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2009), 420-421.

[7] Ibid, 421.

[8] Willem A. Vangemeren, "Psalms," *The Expositor's Bible Commentary, Revised Edition: Psalms*, Tremper Longman III, David E. Garland, general editors (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Academic, 2008), 63.

[9] Hill, Walton, *A Survey of the Old Testament*, 421.

[10] Ibid, 45.

[11] Ibid.

[12] Robert Alter is a biblical scholar and professor at the University of California at Berkeley. He has been awarded a Guggenheim Fellowship, been named an honorary doctor of the Hebrew University of Jerusalem and Yale University and he has won the National Jewish Book Award. His doctorate in comparative literature was earned at Harvard

psalms was a persistent activity over many centuries."[13] Alter argues that even the authorship of David that has been enshrined in both Jewish and Christian tradition "has no credible historical grounding."[14] He grounds much of his discussion in the translation of the Hebrew word *l^e*, which has, for the most part, been translated "of" yet "also can mean 'for,' 'in the manner of,' 'suitable to,' and so forth."[15] Alter seeks to keep "this ambiguity by translating *mizmor l^e dawid* as 'a David psalm'."[16]

Vangemeren agrees, noting that "the ambiguity of the Hebrew participle *l^e* ('for' and 'of') and its use in the superscriptions raises serious questions regarding the place of the headings in interpretation and their dating."[17] It appears there is no clear-cut scholarly consensus on the authorship of the Psalms. For this paper, the authorship of David for Psalm 22 will be affirmed, relying on the witness of the New Testament writers and the history of church tradition.

To whom was David writing Psalm 22? The superscription of the passage reads: "To the Chief Musician. Set to 'The Deer of the Dawn,' A Psalm of David." The psalm shows different styles of form—lament, prayer, and thanksgiving. The language and form suggest that the text is "a liturgy, in which the worshipper moves from lament to prayer, and finally to praise and thanksgiving."[18]

In addition, the opening is directed to the chief musician/player set to, in Hebrew, *ayeleth hasahar*. The phrase *ayeleth hashahar* means "'morning star' (or, literally, 'dawn doe'). One assumes it refers to a musical instrument of some sort, or,

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University. According to his biography on the UC-Berkeley website, Alter currently teaches in the school's graduate school and is a Professor Emeritus of Hebrew and Comparative Literature.

[13] Robert Alter, *The Hebrew Bible: A Translation with Commentary—The Writings* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2019), 5.

[14] Alter, *The Hebrew Bible*, 5.

[15] Ibid.

[16] Ibid.

[17] Vangemeren, "Psalms," 46.

[18] Peter C. Craigie, Marvin E. Tate, *Word Biblical Commentary: Psalms 1-50, 2nd Edition* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2004), 197.

alternately, a melody."[19] That would appear then, to align the psalm as one intended for the Israelite worshipper used in the context of the temple, one of the liturgies of the second and possibly first temple[20] that became a book to help comprehend divine order and relationship.[21]

Unfortunately, Davida H. Charney notes that "canonization had loosened a given psalm from its original historical and ritual context."[22] This led to a system where the psalms were fixed in a canonical sense, which allowed for "different interpretive possibilities."[23] More importantly, it subjugated the rhetoricity of the psalms, which "came to be viewed less as public oral performances tied to specific historical events than as portions of a literary text or as prayers for private meditation."[24]

**Davidic Covenant**

In 2 Samuel 7, King David is resting from battle and desires to build a permanent temple for Yahweh. But Yahweh has other plans. Through Nathan the prophet, Yahweh tells David that one day, the Lord will have a place to reside, but David will not build it—Solomon, David's seed, will be the general contractor. The temple was completed around 957 BCE.

Yet that is only the beginning of the Davidic Covenant. From David, a line of kings will rule through the ages. In fact, Yahweh's promise in 2 Samuel 7:16 states: "And your house and your kingdom shall be established forever before you. Your throne shall be established forever." The Hebrew phrase translated "forever" at the end of the verse is עַד־ עוֹלָֽם׃ (*'ad-*

[19] Alter, *The Hebrew Bible*, 66.

[20] J. Clinton McCann Jr., "Psalms, Book of," *Dictionary for Theological Interpretation of the Bible, 3rd edition*, Kevin J. Vanhoozer, general editor (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2009), 645.

[21] Ibid.

[22] Davida H. Charney, "Performativity and Persuasion in the Hebrew Book of Psalms: A Rhetorical Analysis of Psalms 116 and 22," *Rhetoric Society Quarterly* 40, no. 3 (2010), 249, http://www.jstor.org/stable/27862445, accessed Sept. 21, 2023.

[23] Ibid.

[24] Ibid.

*ʻōwlām*) gives the idea of perpetuity, everlasting, always, continuous, and unending future.[25]

Daniel D. Martin points out in his essay, "The Davidic Messiah in the Old Testament: Tracing a Theological Trajectory," that this text in 2 Samuel 7 is: "One of the first statements where the promise of a future ruler is connected to the historical dynasty of David."[26] This promise gives "the expectation of a future ruler from the house of David and the promise of continuity of David's seed"[27] yet it also speaks to "the concept of sonship or the promise of a unique father-son relationship"[28] that is anchored in 2 Samuel 7 and Psalm 89. Martin observes that this relationship is "also associated with the promise of Yahweh's perpetual loyalty and mercy, despite his chastisement for the sins of David's descendants."[29]

Finally, the passage in 2 Samuel 7 establishes the concept of an eternal throne for David and of Israel's peace and security, which "implies a kingdom and the abolition of foreign domination."[30] In fact, the "concept of an ideal king who will rule Israel in the eschaton is rooted in the Davidic covenant, which promised David an eternal house, kingdom, and throne."[31] This will be accomplished with the combination of God's Spirit and anointing when "the king becomes a superhuman divine being, a 'son of God,' filled with superhuman power and wisdom."[32]

All these promises are brought to fruition through the Messiah, who came through the line of Abraham and David (Matthew 1:1-7) and was announced as the fulfillment of the Davidic

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[25] https://biblehub.com/interlinear/2_samuel/7-16.htm, accessed Oct. 6, 2023.

[26] Daniel D. Martin, "The Davidic Messiah in the Old Testament Tracing a Theological Trajectory," *Perichoresis 20*, no.5 (2022): 87-96. https://doi.org/10.2478/perc-2022-0033.

[27] Ibid.

[28] Ibid.

[29] Ibid.

[30] Ibid.

[31] Waltke, Houston, Moore, *The Psalms as Christian Worship*, 105.

[32] Ibid.

Covenant by angels to Mary (Luke 1:28-33) prior to Christ's incarnation.

Thus, the cry of Christ on the cross echoing the opening line of Psalm 22 may be the Savior's way of repeating the liturgy of the laments—and, in an unspoken way, the thanksgiving—of the psalm written by David that described the feeling of abandonment of humanity separated by sin from its creator before the reconciliation. And in that cry, Christ is acting as a "town crier" to announce the covenant has been fulfilled.

**Literary Forms in Psalm 22**

What literary forms are present in Psalm 22? Looking at the canon as we have it today, modern scholarship would likely classify it as prophecy, an easy link due to the cry of Christ and the links between the cross and David.

Typically, the prophetic writings have consisted of the Minor prophets as well as Lamentations, Daniel, Isaiah, Ezekiel, and Jeremiah.[33] Standard form for the prophetic writings would have been "judgement preached, judgement comes, salvation proclaimed."[34] Yet that form does not precisely fit Psalm 22, which opens with lament and ends with thanksgiving.

In analyzing Psalm 22, it would appear important to remember that it was written in a liturgical style. Psalm 22 should "be interpreted as an *individual* psalm, though the liturgy sets the problem of the individual in the context of the community as a whole; thus, the liturgy was clearly a communal affair."[35]

That is the essence of liturgy. Bryan D. Spinks defines the term as "communal worship offered to God rather than private prayer, though these are closely connected."[36] Within that liturgical setting, most of the psalms can be divided into three

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[33] J.G. McConville, "Prophetic Writings," *Dictionary for Theological Interpretation of the Bible*, Kevin J. Vanhoozer, general editor (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2005), 628.

[34] McConville, "Prophetic Writings," 629.

[35] Craigie, Tate, *Psalms 1-50*, 198.

[36] Bryan D. Spinks, "Liturgy," *Dictionary for Theological Interpretation of the Bible*, Kevin J. Vanhoozer, general editor (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2005), 460.

primary sections—wisdom, lament, and praise.[37] Psalm 22 is unique in that it incorporates two of those categories—lament and praise.[38]

**Metaphors in Psalm 22**

There are several metaphors in Psalm 22 that impact the understanding of the text, especially in the first 18 verses. If one is to truly understand how David's audience grasped the liturgy of Psalm 22, comprehending the metaphors would appear necessary.

One of the most glaring metaphorical categories appears to be the use of "the metaphorical cluster of HUMANS ARE ANIMALS."[39] Within this category would be verse 6 ("I am a worm"), verses 12-13 (bulls of Bashan, lions to describe attackers), and verse 16 ("dogs surrounded me").

How do those metaphors affect understanding? An answer can be found by examining two verses—verses 12 and 13. By seeing how these metaphors affect understanding, one can begin to see the impact on Psalm 22's comprehension by its receptor audience, a subject that is more detailed than can be fully examined in this paper.

In verse 12, David writes about the bulls of Bashan. In that time, bulls were feared as some of the strongest and dangerous of all land creatures.[40] Bashan was "the high plateau region east of the Sea of Galilee, which was well known as a fertile grassland and therefore conducive to the growth of cattle."[41] This would signal to the audience that the trouble facing the psalmist was intense and stout, showing that "the individual

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[37] Hill, Walton, *A Survey of the Old Testament*, 423.

[38] Ibid.

[39] Ellen van Wolde, "A Network of Conventional and Deliberate Metaphors in Psalm 22." *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament*, 44(4), 2023, 648. https://doi.org/10.1177/0309089219862816, accessed Sept. 21, 2023.

[40] John W. Hilber, "Psalms," *Zondervan Illustrated Bible Backgrounds Commentary: The Minor Prophets, Job, Psalms, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs*, John H. Walton, general editor (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2009), 338.

[41] Ibid.

despair is connected with other people's attack and mistrust in God"[42]

In verse 13, David continues the metaphor, noting that his adversaries, the aforementioned bulls of Bashan, "gape at me with their mouths, like a raging and roaring lion." The lion was known as a fierce predator, strong and swift who "used stealth to hunt their victims and were feared for both their teeth and claws."[43] In ancient Near Eastern artwork and lore, the lion "symbolized both human enemies and the forces of chaos that the king routinely subdues."[44]

Verse 13 would appear to then symbolize that "the misery and desperation of the speaker is sketched in full detail against the background of opponents who are described as attacking the speaker like wild animals."[45]

It seems imperative to have an understanding of the use of metaphors in Psalm 22 to have a full and complete understanding of its intended meaning.

**Structure of Psalm 22**

There are several arguments for the proper structure of Psalm 22. The spectrum ranges from simplistic to detailed.

Vangemeren notes there is a "natural division of this psalm into two distinct parts, lament and thanksgiving (vv. 1-21, 22-31)."[46] He observes that the simplicity of the structure of lament and thanksgiving passages could be indicative of two separate psalms that were blended at some point after composition.[47] However, since the same pattern is seen in other psalms, Vangemeren states that "contemporary scholars are in greater agreement over the literary unity of Psalm 22."[48]

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[42] van Wolde, "A Network of Conventional and Deliberate Metaphors," 647.

[43] Ibid.

[44] Ibid.

[45] Ibid.

[46] Vangemeren, "Psalms," 235.

[47] Ibid.

[48] Vangemeren, "Psalms," 235.

Craigie and Tate argue that there should be an even more detailed outline of Psalm 22. They note that "the liturgical dimension of the psalm emerges most clearly from an analysis of its structure."[49] They propose the following outline:

*I. Lament* (v. 2-22b): the sick declares his sorrow.
   1. Forsaken by God and mankind (v. 2-11).
   2. Prayer for help (v. 12).
   3. Surrounded by trouble (vv. 13-19).
   4. Prayer for deliverance (vv. 20-22b).

*II. Response* (v. 22c): presupposing an oracle.

*III. Thanksgiving* (vv. 22-27): declared by the sufferer.

*IV. Thanksgiving* (vv. 28-32): declared by the congregation.[50]

Ellen Van Wolder, in her essay, "A Network of Conventional and Deliberate Metaphors in Psalm 22," agrees with the division of John Kselman and David Chaney: "the Address (vv. 2-12), Complaint and Petition (vv. 13-22), and Proposed Action (vv.23-32)."[51]

In examining each of the arguments, a shorter, simpler, and more pointed division seems to be possible—first, laments in verses 1-18; second, prayer in verses 19-21; and third, thanksgiving in verses 22-31.

**Psalm 22 as Part of the Davidic-Messianic Psalms & Christological Hymn**

Psalm 22 is considered one of the Davidic-Messianic passages within the Psalter. These are passages highlighted as having some connection from the Davidic Covenant promises through its fulfillment in the life of Christ.

The earliest Davidic-Messianic text in the psalter is Psalm 2, which prophecies the Messiah's triumph and kingdom. There are also psalms that deal with, among other issues, Christ's incarnation (Psalm 40), His resurrection (Psalm 16), His

[49] Craigie, Tate, *Psalms, 1-50*, 198.

[50] Ibid.

[51] van Wolde, "A Network of Conventional and Deliberate Metaphors," 646.

betrayal (Psalm 41), Jesus as the chief cornerstone (Psalm 118), and even His temptation (Psalm 91).

But there is also an argument that Psalm 22, specifically, can also be considered a Christological hymn, which may add to the understanding of its place in the Psalter and in Scripture as a whole. John E. McKinley sees that particularly in Psalms 16, 22, and 110. To bolster his case, McKinley points to "Peter's denial that David is the referent for the things David wrote as first-person accounts."[52] His second observation is that the three psalms speak of things that appear "implausible to fit any experience in David's life."[53] McKinley points to Psalm 22 and claims it "has non-metaphorical accounts that are counted by the gospel writers as exact fulfillments of Jesus' crucifixion, including at least one of his actual cries from the cross."[54]

**Exegesis of Psalm 22**

To achieve a true understanding of Psalm 22, it would appear necessary to embark on a verse-by-verse exegesis of the text. Psalm 22 will be examined through the lens of the truncated outline listed in the above "Structure of Psalm 22" section—laments in verses 1-18; prayer in verses 19-21; and thanksgiving in verses 22-31.

Groupings of verses will be listed with a short commentary attempting to gain an understanding of them as their intended audience and author designed them. The psalms' first 18 verses are its opening lament.

**VERSE 1-2—***My God, My God, why have You forsaken Me? Why are You so far from helping Me, And from the words of My groaning? O My God, I cry in the daytime, but You do not hear; And in the night season and am not silent.* The opening lament highlights "the sufferer's personal relationship with God is in doubt because of God's inaction."[55] The idea that God has

[52] John E. McKinley, "Psalms 16, 22, and 110: Historically Interpreted as Referring to Jesus," *Perichoresis 10*, no.2 (2012): 210, https://doi.org/10.2478/v10297-012-0010-8, accessed Sept. 21, 2023.

[53] Ibid.

[54] Ibid.

[55] Allen P. Ross, "The 'Thou' Laments: The Bold and Earnest Prayers of the Psalmists," *The Psalms: Language for All Seasons of the Soul*, Andrew J.

abandoned his servant appears totally foreign to Scripture, which boasts of Yahweh's constant presence.[56] It is more the sufferer's *feelings* than reality that God has abandoned him. "It is a cry of disorientation, for the protective presence of God seems to have been withdrawn."[57]

**VERSE 3-5—***But You are holy, Enthroned in the praises of Israel. Our fathers trusted in You; They trusted, and You delivered them. They cried to You, and were delivered; They trusted in You, and were not ashamed.* Despite the feeling of being alone, the sufferer's feelings are "balanced by expressions of confidence (such as 'But You are holy in v. 3), trust (such as 'Our fathers trusted you … and you delivered them' in vv. 4 and 5), and security ('from my mother's womb, you are my God' in v. 9)."[58] His "memory of God's past saving acts serves as a handmaid to faith."[59]

**VERSE 6-8—***But I am a worm, and no man; A reproach of men, and despised by the people. All those who see Me ridicule Me; They shoot out the lip, they shake the head, saying, "He trusted in the Lord, let Him rescue Him; Let Him deliver Him, since He delights in Him!"* Despite his affirmation of God's power and silent presence, the sufferer/psalmist returns to his complaint. He begins by contrasting his "shame with his father's honor,"[60] describing himself as a worm, "a creature so despicable and threatening to social well-being that he should be destroyed."[61] He ends the cry by quoting those who derided him, using the Hebrew *gōl 'el yhwh*. Ross points out the *gōl 'el* is "onomatopoetic: one hears the rolling sound of a stone."[62]

**VERSE 9-10—***But You are He who took Me out of the womb; You made Me trust while on My mother's breasts. I was cast upon You from birth. From My mother's womb You have been My God.*

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Schmutzer, David M. Howard Jr., general editors (Chicago: Moody Publishers, 2013), 140.

[56] Ibid.

[57] Ibid.

[58] Ross, "The 'Thou' Sections," 140.

[59] Waltke, Houston, Moore, *The Psalms as Christian Worship*, 400.

[60] Waltke, Houston, Moore, *The Psalms as Christian Worship*, 401.

[61] Ibid, 402.

[62] Ibid.

This assertion reaffirms for the sufferer/psalmist that "God has been with him since birth. This God would continue to care for him even now."[63]

**VERSE 11-13—***Be not far from Me, for trouble is near; For there is none to help. Many bulls have surrounded Me; Strong bulls of Bashan have encircled Me. They gape at Me with their mouths, Like a raging and roaring lion.* The bulls were considered strong animals. In fact, many ANE documents show that "goring oxen were a danger and that they could even occasionally be found wandering the streets."[64] As for the lions, in this context, Assyrian literature from the seventh century shows that "the lions' pit occurs as a metaphor for vicious and antagonistic courtiers of the king."[65]

**VERSE 14—***I am poured out like water, and all My bones are out of joint; My heart is like wax; It has melted within Me.* In utilizing the phrases "poured out like water" and "heart is like wax, it has melted within me," the psalmist is pointing towards a life without form which shows "the inner feeling of the anguished. He can no longer function as a human being."[66] His bones being "out of joint" can also be rendered "scattered about" in the Hebrew, "as when a predatory pack has devoured a victim, and each member of the pack carries off its share."[67]

**VERSE 15—***My strength is dried up like a potsherd, And My tongue clings to My jaws; You have brought Me to the dust of death.* This verse opens by likening the sufferer's strength, i.e., "power to produce,"[68] being compared to a piece of pottery "whose existence depends on a lack of moisture."[69] The comparison is showing that the psalmist's "strength withers like

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[63] James A. Johnston, *Preaching the Word: The Psalms: Vol. 1-Psalms 1-41—Rejoice, the Lord is King* (Wheaton, ILL: Crossway, 2015), 236.

[64] John H. Walton, Victor H. Matthews, Mark W. Chavalas, *The IVP Bible Background Commentary: Old Testament* (Downers Grove, Ill: IVP Academic, 2000), 523.

[65] Walton, Matthews, Chavalas, *The IVP Bible Background Commentary*, 523.

[66] Vangemeren, "Psalms," 243.

[67] Walton, Matthews, Chavalas, *The IVP Bible Background Commentary,* 523.

[68] Waltke, Houston, Moore, *The Psalms as Christian Worship*, 405.

[69] Ibid.

vegetation without water."[70] Similarly, the rancor is so intense, that his tongue clings to his jaw, a heat so fierce that he could only speak but for a short time.[71] The "dust of death" is a description of Sheol, the Israelite underworld. The word Sheol is "unique to Hebrew and of uncertain etymology."[72] Christopher B. Hays notes that Sheol is variously described as a deep underwater pit, dark, and dusty.[73]

**VERSE 16-18—***For dogs have surrounded Me; The congregation of the wicked has enclosed Me. They pierced My hands and My feet; I can count all My bones. They look and stare at Me. They divide My garments among them, And for My clothing they cast lots.* The climax to the lament portion, these verses appear to have direct ties to the crucifixion, especially in piercing the sufferer's hands and feet and the dividing of his garments. There is, however, a translation question in this section. While modern interpreters read "They pierced my hands and my feet," Kristin M. Swenson argues that an ancient LXX translation in Greek renders the phrase: "they have dug my hands and feet."[74] Swenson notes that the verb translated "pierce" does not contain that meaning in any other uses in the OT.[75] She sees a better translation being: "Dogs surround me, a pack of wicked ones. Like a lion, they circumscribe my hands and feet."[76] There is not enough space in this essay to devote to a detailed analysis of Swenson's position, but it needs to be considered in a proper exegesis.

Following verse 18, the lament portion of Psalm 22 changes. The sufferer/psalmist has laid out his case for feeling abandoned by God, a life that many in that time could relate to as a nation scorned by others. But now, the sufferer/psalmist

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[70] Ibid.

[71] Ibid.

[72] Christopher B. Hays, "Death and Burial in the Iron Age Levant," *Behind the Scenes of the Old Testament: Cultural, Social, and Historical Context*, Jonathan S. Greer, John W. Hilber, John H. Walton, editors (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2018), 386.

[73] Ibid.

[74] Kristin M. Swenson, "Psalm 22:17: Circling around the Problem Again." *Journal of Biblical Literature* 123, no. 4 (2004): 638, https://doi.org/10.2307/3268463, accessed Sept. 21, 2023.

[75] Swenson, "Psalm 22:17," 638.

[76] Ibid, 642.

returns to his knees and surrenders to God, acknowledging Yahweh's presence even though it seems missing.

**VERSE 19-21—***But You, O Lord, do not be far from Me; O My Strength, hasten to help Me! Deliver Me from the sword, My precious life from the power of the dog. Save Me from the lion's mouth and from the horns of the wild oxen! You have answered Me.* Here, the psalmist uses God's name—*yhwh*—for the first time.[77] There is in this moment, a tremendous revelation—"he knows that God has heard him. In Hebrew, verse 21 ends with a one-word shout, 'You have heard me!'"[78] It is here that the saga of Psalm 22 swings from lament and angst to joy and celebration. God is the sufferer's strength and deliverer. It is interesting that in this moment, the psalmist/sufferer switches from the animal analogy to an image of real destruction—the sword.[79] The sword is the power of the "dog," i.e., the one who is bringing terror to the psalmist.[80]

**VERSE 22-24—***I will declare Your name to My brethren; In the midst of the assembly, I will praise You. You who fear the Lord, praise Him! All you descendants of Jacob, glorify Him, and fear Him, all you offspring of Israel! For He has not despised nor abhorred the affliction of the afflicted; Nor has He hidden His face from Him; But when He cried to Him, He heard.* Craigie and Tate note: "The opening words of praise and thanksgiving are addressed to God; the remaining major portion of the declaration is addressed to the congregation as a whole."[81] In these words, the sufferer/psalmist affirms that Yahweh has not abandoned nor ignored his people. He implores the offspring of Yahweh to praise Him, highlighting "the aspect of fear, awe, and reverence of him who holds their life and death in his hands."[82]

**VERSE 25-27—***My praise shall be of You in the great assembly; I will pay My vows before those who fear Him. The poor shall eat and be satisfied; Those who seek Him will praise the Lord. Let your heart live forever! All the ends of the world Shall remember*

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[77] Waltke, Houston, Moore, *The Psalms as Christian Worship*, 407.

[78] Johnston, *The Psalms*, 238.

[79] Ibid.

[80] Ibid.

[81] Craigie, Tate, *Word Biblical Commentary*, 200.

[82] Waltke, Houston, Moore, *The Psalms as Christian Worship*, 410.

*and turn to the Lord, and all the families of the nations Shall worship before You.* The joy continues as the psalmist talks about a public cry of thanksgiving. He will "pay my vows," a term that points to a votive offering made in the Temple for his prayers being answered.[83] His joy will encourage his heart—the center of his being—forever. This celebration will by all: "In David's world the king was over the nation, the patriarch over then clan, and the father over the tribe."[84] All of these people will remember God's acts, meaning "that by faith they will bring to mind, accept, and participate in God's saving act of delivering his anointed king from death."[85]

**VERSE 28-31—***For the kingdom is the Lord's, And He rules over the nations. All the prosperous of the earth Shall eat and worship; All those who go down to the dust Shall bow before Him, even he who cannot keep himself alive. A posterity shall serve Him. It will be recounted of the Lord to the next generation, they will come and declare His righteousness to a people who will be born, That He has done this.* At the end of Psalm 22, the writer expands his view of God's sovereignty to the ends of the earth. In these verses, "the theme of God's lordship over all people is emphasized."[86] As he has been in the "dust of death," so shall all people—the rich, the poor, the healthy, and the frail.[87] The praise of God will include acknowledgement of His place and power, of one's relationship to Him.[88] And what will those generations do? They will declare God's righteousness. As Waltke, Houston, and Moore note: "The subject is the coming generations who come to other nations, even to the ends of the earth, with their gospel story."[89]

## Conclusion

Psalm 22 may not be as complicated as previously thought. Looking back from the New Testament to the Old Testament, it

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[83] Alter, *The Hebrew Bible*, 69.

[84] Waltke, Houston, Moore, *The Psalms as Christian Worship*, 412.

[85] Waltke, Houston, Moore, *The Psalms as Christian Worship*, 412.

[86] Vangemeren, "Psalms," 248-249.

[87] Vangemeren, "Psalms," 149.

[88] Waltke, Houston, Moore, *The Psalms as Christian Worship*, 414.

[89] Ibid.

appears to be an amazing prophecy that eerily foretells the fate and situation faced by Christ at Calvary.

Yet the question is not about the psalm looking *backward*, but the psalm in its context. There seems to be strong evidence that Psalm 22 would have been sung as a liturgy by the Israelites, just as the other psalms would have been. The psalm is an individual piece set in the context of community.

David, the psalmist, is in a desperate state and feels like he is walking through life alone, yet he knows that Yahweh is always there. In verses 1-18, David lays out the attacks he is facing and his state of both physical and mental exhaustion. His prayer in verses 19-21 recognizes that Yahweh is not far from him despite David's feelings, and climaxes in the declarative statement of verse 21: "You have answered me."

From that moment, verses 22-31 take on a sense of joy and euphoria—true thanksgiving. The celebration stanzas culminate with David stating that what God has done will to the next generation who "will come and declare His righteousness to a people who will be born, that He has done this."

What has Yahweh done? He has shown up amid despair and torment and revived His servant. Like a savior in a storm, Yahweh, who has always been there, asserts His power and sovereignty to protect and deliver the psalmist.

That is how the audience of David's day would have understood Psalm 22—as a powerful reminder that Yahweh truly is the "I am" who is with them and will watch over them whether they see Him or not.

If one takes that view and applies it to the cross, an entirely different understanding of the Cry of Dereliction appears. First, it must be remembered that when Christ uttered the opening of Psalm 22, he had been arrested, dragged before Pilate, beaten and scourged, nailed to the cross and hung up for about nine hours prior to his declaration. There was very little strength or life left in him.

In uttering "My God, My God why have You forsaken me?," Jesus would have been voicing what should have been a

familiar liturgical refrain to the Pharisees, Sadducees and other religious elite and Jews around the cross. Had they understood the reference instead of misinterpreting it as a cry to Elijah, it should have reminded them of the lament of Psalm 22, as well as the deliverance and thanksgiving of Psalm 22. The opening 18 verses should have been viewed as a mirror of Calvary, but the prayer and thanksgiving would have shown them what was to come. Truly, Jesus "observed that his own experience was prefigured in the psalms of vindication and suffering. These psalms were used both by individual Israelites and by corporate Israel."[90] The question seems to be if the crowd would have understood the cry and its relationship to Psalm 22 if Christ had enough strength to recite the entire passage. He related to how the audience in David's time would have seen the psalm—an apparent loneliness that was overcome by the magnitude of God's presence and salvation that would be passed down to succeeding generations.

Modern interpreters should heed that understanding. Too many times, it seems that the focus is on Yahweh's "abandonment" of His Son when, in actuality, Jesus is crying about His condition while acknowledging God's presence and anticipating the celebration of the promised deliverance.

A renewed understanding of Psalm 22, then, would allow interpreters to have a different view of Christ's words. Seeing the psalm as David and his audience did allows the interpreter to begin applying a better hermeneutic to the text. It's meaning is two-fold: first, today's audience can rest in the fact that even though God may appear distant, He is not—and He will answer the prayers of His children and rescue them from all evil; and second, it gives today's audience the hope that the salvation espoused in Psalm 22 that was fulfilled in the life, death, and resurrection of Christ is still available. As Johnston stated: "As long as children are still being born, Psalm 22 should send us out to the world with this good news."[91]

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[90] David S. Dockery, David P. Nelson, "Special Revelation," *A Theology for the Church*, Daniel L. Akin, editor (Nashville, TN: B&H Academic,2007), 125.

[91] Johnston, *The Psalms*, 242.

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