

Eloi, Eloi Lama Sabachthani:

Christ's Final Plea for Sinners, Encouragement for Disciples

For six hours, Jesus hung on a cross on Calvary. Near the end of his earthly life, Mark 15:33-34 records Christ uttering four Aramaic words: "Eloi, Eloi, lama sabachthani." The apostle then interprets the words to mean: "My God, My God, why have you forsaken me?" There is, however, no other explanation by Mark in his gospel. Moreover, Matthew's gospel, which describes the same scene in chapter 27, verses 45-46, does not provide the meaning of Christ's cry either. In both gospels, the apostles do mention people around the cross who, upon hearing Jesus' cry, questioned whether he was calling out for Elijah. Then, shortly following Christ's four-word cry, Jesus exclaims "It is finished," and surrenders his spirit to God.

The lack of apostolic explanation or analysis in the Scriptures has left the meaning of those four words up to interpretation since they echoed across the hills of Calvary. The range of interpretation has varied widely. Billy Graham was questioned about Christ's Cry of Dereliction in 2016 and responded that Christ's words indicated the Savior had been "banished from the presence of God."¹ At the other end of the spectrum is the view embodied in the article entitled, "A Cry of Dereliction? Reconsidering a Recent Theological Commonplace," by John Yocum. In the article's abstract, Yocum states: "Hans Urs von Balthasar's account of this is explored, and exegetical and theological reasons are offered for preferring a more traditional account in which the unity of the Trinity remains unbroken by human sin."²

The apparent disparity and range of interpretive understandings suggests an analytical examination of Christ's situation on the cross in relation to his life-long mission and the scene that surrounds him at Calvary. To understand the cry of dereliction, several areas should be examined, including the purpose for Christ's incarnation, his unity with the Father, the method of his death, the

¹ Billy Graham, "Did God Abandon Jesus on the Cross," 2016, <https://billygraham.org/story/did-god-abandon-jesus-on-the-cross-billy-graham-answers/>, accessed Dec. 2, 2020.

² John Yocum, "A Cry of Dereliction?" Reconsidering a Recent Theological Commonplace," *International Journal of Systemic Theology*, 7:72-80, 2005, <https://doi-org.ezproxy.liberty.edu/10.1111/j.1468-2400.2005.00152.x>, accessed Dec. 2, 2020.

scene on Calvary and the prophecy of Psalm 22 to gain a fuller understanding of the cry “Eloi, Eloi, lama sabachthani” and the intent behind their utterance.

This paper will demonstrate that Christ’s words on the cross—“*Eloi, Eloi, lama sabachthani*”—were spoken to those surrounding his execution as a final plea for repentance to those who opposed to him and, simultaneously, as words of comfort to his followers. To accomplish this goal, four foundational precepts need to be established—Christ’s purpose of being on earth and His understanding of that purpose; the relationship between Jesus and the Father; an understanding that Christ had the power to choose His path; and the physical toll that Jesus’ scourging and crucifixion had on his human body. With those concepts creating the foundation for understanding the cry of dereliction, an examination of the scene at Calvary, specifically a study of the people, is necessary, followed by a look at the correlation between the crucifixion accounts in Matthew and Mark with the prophetic words of David in Psalm 22.

The Scripture Account

The account of the Cry of Dereliction is found in two gospels—Matthew and Mark. Mark records the moment with these words (NKJV) in Mark 15:33-35:

Now when the sixth hour had come, there was darkness over the whole land until the ninth hour. And at the ninth hour Jesus cried out with a loud voice, saying, “Eloi, Eloi, lama sabachthani?” which is translated, “My God, My God, why have You forsaken Me?” Some of those who stood by, when they heard that, said, “Look, He is calling for Elijah!”

Matthew, using the gospel of Mark, describes the scene this way in Matthew 27:45-47 (NKJV):

Now from the sixth hour until the ninth hour there was darkness over all the land. And about the ninth hour Jesus cried out with a loud voice, saying, “Eli, Eli, lama sabachthani?” that is, “My God, My God, why have You forsaken Me?” Some of those who stood there, when they heard that, said, “This Man is calling for Elijah!”

There are similar and differing words in the two accounts. Both Mark and Matthew reveal that “darkness” fills the area from the sixth to the ninth hours. The word “darkness” is defined by the *Strongest Strong’s Exhaustive Concordance*

of the Bible as, literally, the dark.³ R. Kent Hughes writes: “Most likely the darkness was local, covering the Holy City and its countryside with a black blanket. Whatever the case, the Greek tenses indicate that it came suddenly, and all the Gospels regard it as a supernatural wonder.”⁴

In addition, both accounts also recognize the audience that surrounds Christ on Calvary. With their mistaken recognition of Jesus calling to Elijah, it is apparent that many in the gathering were cognizant of and/or had read the Scriptures. In the *Commentary on the New Testament Use of the Old Testament*, Rikk E. Watts highlights that in Christ’s cry. He states:

... Elijah was widely held to be the agent of Israel’s deliverance (whether eschatological or of individuals in times of distress. It is precisely because they too hear in Jesus’ cry. The expectation of deliverance that the crowd waits to see if Elijah will come. Their basic instinct is correct even though the delayed deliverance is far more amazing than any might have thought and is effected not by Elijah, but God himself.⁵

Also, both accounts use the Aramaic construction instead of translating into the Greek. Yet there is a difference in the use of “Eli” versus “Eloi.” As Donald A. Hagner explains, the difference could have been Matthew’s way of solving the “Elijah” confusion. He writes:

In Matthew’s version of these words, “*Eli*” represents the Hebrew, “*My God*” while the following words are Aramaic for “Why have you forsaken me?” It appears that Jesus, rather than quoting the words in Hebrew, quoted them in their Aramaic equivalent (using the language he normally spoke) and that Matthew altered the word for “God” ... perhaps with an eye on the confusion with the name “Elijah” in v. 47.⁶

³ John R. Kohlenberger III and James A. Swanson, ed., *The Strongest Strong’s Exhaustive Concordance of the Bible* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2001), 1643.

⁴ R. Kent Hughes, *Mark: Jesus, Servant and Savior* (Wheaton, Ill: Crossway, 2015), 391-392.

⁵ Rikk E. Watts, “Mark,” *Commentary on the New Testament Use of the Old Testament*, G.K. Beale, D.A. Carson, ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2007), 237.

⁶ Donald A. Hagner, *Matthew 14-28, Word Biblical Commentary*, Bruce M. Metzger, David A. Hubbard, Glenn Barker, eds., (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1999), 844.

Finally, both mention the crowd surrounding the cross. They are the final pieces in what will be Christ's final plea that nears the end of his mission.

The Purpose of Christ's Incarnation

One of the initial areas to examine in order to develop a foundation for understanding the meaning of Christ's words on the cross is in his Incarnation. Dr. Paige Patterson, in his essay, "The Work of Christ," in *A Theology for the Church*, gives a succinct description of the purpose of Christ's incarnation: "Jesus Christ, the Son of God, was born to die. Unlike any other person who has ever lived, he came into this world for the expressed purpose of dying on the cross as the perfect sacrifice for the sins of the world (1 John 2:2; 4:10)."⁷ Understanding the theological implications regarding the necessity and purpose of the incarnation is not a result of contemporary theologian. For example, Thomas Aquinas, in a rebuttal of St. Augustine's view that the incarnation would have still happened without sin, wrote:

Therefore, since the sin of the first human being is described as the cause of the incarnation throughout Holy Scripture, it is more in accordance with this to say that the work of the Incarnation was ordained as a remedy for sin, so that, if sin had not existed, the Incarnation would never have taken place.⁸

Mankind's atonement was necessary because of the fall of Adam. Isaiah 64:6 (NKJV) states: "But we are all like an unclean thing, and all our righteousnesses are like filthy rags; we all fade as a leaf, and our iniquities, like the wind, have taken us away." Henri A.G. Blocher, in his essay entitled, "Atonement," in *A Theology for the Church*, notes that the theme of restoration is central to Scripture from the Old Testament through the New Testament. He writes in his entry:

Whether served by one keyword (*kapar* in the OT), or by none—that is, many (NT)—the theme of atonement could hardly be more prominent than it is in Scripture: the major topic of one book in the Law, the concern of several psalms, an important interest of

⁷ Paige Patterson, "The Work of Christ," *A Theology for the Church*, Daniel L. Akin, ed., (Nashville, TN: B&H Academic, 2007), 545.

⁸ Thomas Aquinas, "4.22 Thomas Aquinas on the Necessity of the Incarnation," *The Christian Theology Reader, 4th edition*, Alister E. McGrath, ed., (Chichester, West Sussex, UK: Wiley-Blackwell Publishing, 2011), 244.

prophecy. Atonement lies at the heart of the good news. The striking NT feature is its close association to the death of Jesus, not only in Paul's evangel (1 Cor. 2:2-13), but also in all the strands of apostolic witness (an index could be the amount of space devoted to the passion narrative in the Gospels, or the title "Lamb" in Johannine writings.)⁹

Patterson notes that Mankind's atonement is even the central focus of the two recognized church ordinances—The Lord's Supper and baptism. He writes: "Both ordinances focus on the incarnation (body, shedding of blood, burial, resurrection) and on the Lord's work of atonement for the sins of humanity."¹⁰ That reason for the incarnation—redemption of Mankind—was not unknown to Jesus, either. Consider the following Scriptural passages:

Mark 10:45 (NKJV), the apostle quoted Jesus: "For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life a ransom for many."

John 12:27 (NKJV), the apostle whom Jesus loved wrote these words from Christ: "Now My soul is troubled, and what shall I say? 'Father, save me from this hour?' But for this purpose, I came to this hour. Father, glorify your name."

Luke 19:9 (NKJV) Luke records a conversation between Christ and a tax collector, named Zacchaeus. Jesus said: "Today, salvation has come to this house, because he is also a son of Abraham; for the Son of Man has come to seek and save that which was lost."

John 10:15 (NKJV) repeats that affirmation when Christ stated: "As the Father knows me, even so I know the Father; and I lay down my life for my sheep."

It appears clear in Scripture that Christ understood his death was the reason for his incarnation. George R. Beasley-Murray, in his commentary on the Gospel of John for the *Word Biblical Commentary*, notes:

Jesus, in turmoil of spirit, shrinks from the fearful experience before him, and in his address to God seeks avoidance of it; yet he acknowledges that to endure it is the reason for his mission from

⁹ Henri A.G. Blocher, "Atonement," *Dictionary for Theological Interpretation of the Bible*, Kevin J. Vanhoozer, ed., (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2005), 72.

¹⁰ Paige Patterson, "The Work of Christ," 545.

God; in an act therefore of total obedience to the Father's will his spirit rises in unreserved affirmation.¹¹

The Unity of Jesus and the Father

To understand the savior's cry of dereliction, one should examine Christ's unity to the Father. John records a simple statement by Jesus that encapsulates the depth yet simplicity of Christ's unity with God. In John 10:30 (NKJV), John quotes Jesus: "I and My Father are one." The Greek word translated as "one" is "ἓν," which is a nominative neuter singular adjective that conveys the meaning of a singular—of being one.¹² Timothy George affirms that in, "The. Nature of God: Being, Attributes and Acts," when he writes that "Jesus' oneness with the Father is explicitly stated (John 10:30)." Additionally, Jonathan D. Parker, in his article, "My Mother, My God, Why Have You Forsaken Me? An Exegetical Note on Psalm 22 as Christian Scripture," notes that while the possibility exists, yet is not proven, for a relational distance between God and Christ, Jesus "cannot ever be fully separate from Himself, nor can his divine nature leave his human one; God's aseity being what it is."¹³

Parker's thought is further established by Christ. In John 16:31-32 (NKJV), the apostle writes: "Jesus answered them, 'Do you now believe? Indeed, the hour is coming, yes, has now come, that you will be scattered, each to his own, and will leave me alone. And yet I am not alone, because the Father is with me.'" The word translated "alone" is the Greek word μόνος, a nominative masculine singular adjective meaning "only, solitary, desolate."¹⁴ Jesus notes that while the disciples *will* leave him alone/abandoned, he would *not* be abandoned/alone because God would be with him.

Jesus puts no parameters on God's companionship. Christ does not say God will be with him, except at the very end. The Son of Man never states that, at some point, he will be void of his Father's presence. The fifth century Bishop of Rome, Leo, agrees. John Yocum, in his article "A Cry of Dereliction? Reconsidering a Recent Theological Commonplace," quotes Leo:

¹¹ George R. Beasley-Murray, *John, Word Biblical Commentary*, Bruce M. Metzger, David A. Hubbard, Glenn Barker, eds., (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1999), 212.

¹² Bible Hub: Search, Read, Study the Bible in Many Languages, biblehub.com, Interlinear Bible, <https://biblehub.com/interlinear/john/10-30.htm>, accessed Dec. 7, 2020.

¹³ Jonathan D. Parker, "My Mother, My God,' 'Why have you forsaken me?': An Exegetical Note on Psalm 22 as Christian Scripture, *The Expository Times*. 2020;131(5):199-204.

¹⁴ Biblehub.com, <https://biblehub.com/interlinear/john/16-32.htm>, accessed Dec. 7, 2020.

We bid the simple and unthinking hearer not to take the words, *My God, My God, why hast thou forsaken me?* in a sense as if, when Jesus was fixed upon the wood of the cross, the omnipotence of the Father's deity had left him; seeing that God's and man's nature were so fully joined in Him that the union could not be destroyed by punishment or death ... The Son, therefore, was not separated from the Father, nor the Father from the Son, and the unchangeable Godhead and the inseparable Trinity did not admit of any division.¹⁵

G.R. Lewis, in his essay "The Attributes of God" in the *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology, 2nd Edition*, notes: "The unity of the one divine essence and being emphasized in the NT concept of a personal spirit implies simplicity or indivisibility. Neither the Trinitarian personal distinctions nor the multiple attributes divide the essential unity of the divine being."¹⁶

Jesus Chose the Cross

Another point to consider in examining the words "Eloi, Eloi, lama sabbachthani," might be the understanding that Jesus had a choice about his sacrifice. In John 10, Christ is making an analogy about being the good Shepherd and his followers being his flock. He contrasts the love and care of a shepherd with a hireling and each one's commitment to the flock. As he ends the analogy, Jesus states in John 10:17-18 (NJKV): "Therefore my Father loves me, because I lay down My life that I may take it again. No one takes it from Me, but I lay it down of Myself, and I have the power to take it again. This commandment I have received from My Father." The word "commandment" is the Greek word *ἐντολήν*, which means "an ordinance, injunction, command; i.e., an authoritative prescription."¹⁷

The power to lay down his life or take it again was given to Jesus by the Father. In fact, in the garden, he asserted the note that whether to die or not was his option. Matthew 26:52-54 quotes Christ:

But Jesus said to him, "Put your sword in its place, for all who take the sword will perish by the sword. Or do you think that I cannot now pray to My Father, and He will provide Me with more than twelve

¹⁵ Yocum, "A Cry of Dereliction?" Reconsidering a Recent Theological Commonplace," 72.

¹⁶ G.R. Lewis, "Attributes of God," *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, Walter A. Elwell, ed., (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2001), 492.

¹⁷ Biblehub.com, <https://biblehub.com/interlinear/john/10-18.htm>, accessed Dec. 7, 2020.

legions of angels? How then could the Scriptures be fulfilled, that it must happen thus?"

A legion is a unit of the Roman army consisting of between 3,000 and 6,000 soldiers.¹⁸ Jesus said God would send him 12 legions of angels – between 36,000 and 72,000 heavenly warriors – with a single prayer. To understand the power in that statement one must consider that in 2 Samuel 24:15-16, a single angel killed 70,000 men with a plague and, in 2 Kings 19:35, a single angel slaughtered 185,000 Assyrians. Jesus was asserting to his disciples and those around his arrest that he did not need anyone to defend him. He had the power to decide what he wanted to do and the resources of heaven at his disposal.

Yet, in the end, Jesus chose to follow the will of God. In Matthew 26:36-46 (NKJV), the apostle pens his account of Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane. In both his second and third prayers, Jesus told the Father: "O My Father, if this cup cannot pass away from me unless I drink it. Your will be done." Hagner, in his commentary on Matthew 14-28 in the *Word Biblical Commentary* series, states: "The acceptance of God's will shows Jesus as one who is strong in his obedience, and thus Jesus is portrayed only positively in this pericope (see Dibelius)."¹⁹ John R.W. Stott, in his book, *The Cross of Christ*, agrees:

So then, although he knew he must die, it was not because he was the helpless victim either of evil forces arrayed against him or of any inflexible fate decreed for him, but because he freely embraced this purpose of his Father for the salvation of sinners, as it had been revealed in Scripture.²⁰

Jesus had the power to choose whether he died or not, but in obedience he followed the Father's will to complete the task of his incarnation.

The Method of Christ's Execution

Finally, in considering the meaning of Christ's Cry of Dereliction, one should take into account the method of Christ's execution and the toll that it had on his physical body. According to the *Dictionary of Biblical Imagery*, crucifixion as a means of execution most likely began with the Persians, but "was later

¹⁸ Merrill F. Unger, "Legion," *The New Unger's Bible Dictionary*, R.K. Harrison, ed., (Chicago: The Moody Bible Institute of Chicago, 1998), 768.

¹⁹ Hagner, *Matthew 14-28, Word Biblical Commentary*, 784.

²⁰ John R.W. Stott, *The Cross of Christ* (Downers Grove, Ill: Intervarsity Press, 2006), 37.

appropriated by Alexander the Great, adopted by the Romans and finally abolished by Constantine.”²¹ In Deuteronomy 21:22-23 (NKJV), execution by crucifixion is called a curse on the condemned. Paul reiterates this in Galatians 3:13-14 when he writes:

Christ has redeemed us from the curse of the law, having become a curse for us (for it is written, “Cursed is everyone who hangs on a tree”),¹⁴ that the blessing of Abraham might come upon the Gentiles in Christ Jesus, that we might receive the promise of the Spirit through faith.

Crucifixion was a process that began at conviction and ended at death. M. Hengel describes it this way in his entry entitled, “Cross,” in the *Dictionary of Biblical Imagery*:

In the first century A.D. crucifixion was one of the strongest forms of deterrence against insurrection or political agitation in Roman provinces. Crucifixion was preceded by scourging. When the victim was affixed to the cross, he was stripped and mocked. The pain was extreme. After the victim died, the body was often left on the cross to decay and become food for scavengers.²²

In the *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology, 2nd Edition*, Hengel writes in his entry “Cross, Crucifixion” that the condemned were forced to carry the cross beam to the execution site led by a four-man execution team.²³ Hengel then explains how the process included securing the arms to the cross beam by either ropes or nails and then “the feet were then secured in a manner forcing the knees into a bent position.”²⁴ Death, Hengel notes, “came slowly; it was not unusual for persons to survive days on the cross. Exposure, disease, hunger, shock and exhaustion were usually the cause of death.”²⁵

In March 1986, Dr. William D. Edwards of the Mayo Foundation for Medical Education and Research co-authored a paper with Rev. Wesley J. Gabel and Floyd E. Hosmer of the Mayo Foundation’s Medical Graphics Department

²¹ M. Hengel, “Cross,” *Dictionary of Biblical Imagery*, Leland Ryken, James C. Wilhoit, Tremper Longman III, eds. (Downers Grove, Ill: InterVarsity Press, 1998), 184.

²² Ibid.

²³ M. Hengel, “Cross, Crucifixion,” *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, Walter A. Elwell, ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2001), 310.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Ibid.

entitled “On the Physical Death of Jesus Christ.” They describe in detail the physiological toll surrounding Christ’s crucifixion, from severe blood loss from the pre-death scourging to the intense pain, respiratory issues, dehydration, and other, more intense issues.²⁶ The most vital part of their diagnosis to comprehend for this discussion is the effect of breathing, which, in turn, affects the ability to speak. The three write:

The major pathophysiologic effect of crucifixion, beyond the excruciating pain, was a marked interference with normal respiration, particularly exhalation. The weight of the body, pulling down on the outstretched arms and shoulders, would tend to fix the intercostal muscles in an inhalation state and thereby hinder passive exhalation. Accordingly, exhalation was primarily diaphragmatic, and breathing was shallow. It is likely that this form of respiration would not suffice, and that hypercarbia would soon result. The onset of muscle cramps or tetanic contractions, due to fatigue and hypercarbia, would hinder respiration even further. Adequate exhalation required lifting the body by pushing up on the feet and by flexing the elbows and adducting the shoulders. However, this maneuver would place the entire weight of the body on the tarsals and would produce searing pain. Furthermore, flexion of the elbows would cause rotation of the wrists about the iron nails and cause fiery pain along the damaged median nerves. Lifting of the body would also painfully scrape the scourged back against the rough wooden stipes. Muscle cramps and paresthesias of the outstretched and uplifted arms would add to the discomfort. As a result, each respiratory effort would become agonizing and tiring and lead eventually to asphyxia.²⁷

In short, crucifixion was an agonizing death that would have severely impaired the ability of Christ to speak more than a few words towards the end of his tortuous journey from court to scourging to the cross. This verbalization challenge can be seen in Scripture as his final words to John about Mary, to the soldiers requesting a drink, the cry of dereliction and Christ’s final declaration

²⁶ William Edwards, Wesley J. Gabel, Floyd E. Hosmer, (1986). On the Physical Death of Jesus Christ. *The Journal of the American Medical Association*. 255. 1455-63.
10.1001/jama.1986.03370110077025.

²⁷ *Ibid.*

in John 19:30 (NKJV) were all short bursts of words. The gospel writers recorded no long and detailed oration from Jesus' final few hours.

Yet not only was crucifixion a prolonged and agonizing death. In addition, as Hengel states, it was a punishment that carried with it ridicule and scorn. According to Hengel:

The social stigma and disgrace associated with crucifixion in the ancient world can hardly be overstated. It was usually reserved for slaves, criminals of the worst sort from the lowest levels of society, military deserters, and especially traitors. In only rare cases were Roman citizens, no matter what their crime, crucified.²⁸

At that time, a person's death by crucifixion robbed the condemned of his dignity while also providing an execution that drained their physical strength and led to a prolonged, excruciating death. Hengel writes that, in connection to Deuteronomy, crucifixion "was understood to mean that the very method of death brought a divine curse upon the crucified."²⁹

The Crowd at the Crucifixion

Before delving into the understanding of Christ's cry, a final short analysis should be undertaken to grasp the diversity of the group surrounding the Savior's execution. A.G. Sertillanges, in his book, *What Jesus Saw from the Cross*, describes the crowd:

There are friends, secret or avowed; there are sympathizers, perhaps many, but more reserved and silent than the others. In addition, there are the indifferent, the inquisitive, the scoffers. And finally there are the enemies, official or otherwise, in the midst of the turbulent mob.³⁰

In Matthew's account of the crucifixion, Jesus is surrounded by the soldiers who crucified him and cast lots for his clothes (Matthew 27:35); two thieves who were crucified with Christ (Matthew 27:38); scoffers who passed by the scene (Matthew 27:39); the chief priests, scribes and elders (Matthew 27:41-43); and, at a distance, women who followed him, including Mary

²⁸ M. Hengel, "Cross, Crucifixion," 310.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ A.G. Sertillanges, *What Jesus Saw from the Cross* (Manchester, NH: Sophia Institute Press, 1996), 107.

Magdalene, Mary the mother of James and Joses, and the mother of Zebedee's sons (Matthew 27:55-56). To that list, Mark adds Salome (Mark 15:40) while Luke observes Christ's "acquaintances" (Luke 23:49) and John records the presence of Christ's mother and disciples (John 19:25-27). Matthew, Mark and Luke also note Christ being helped by Simon, the Cyrenian, yet none of those gospels mention whether Simon remained on Calvary after delivering the cross. Interestingly, though, only two of the disciples seem to make it past the Garden of Gethsemane—John and Peter. Sertillanges writes: "The disciples are not there. Two among them, Peter and probably John also—although his name is not given—took courage again after the general flight. They followed at a distance after the band as it made its way up to Zion, and entered the house of Caiaphas."³¹

The crowd that finally makes its way to Calvary is a cross-section of the people Jesus sought to serve in his earthly ministry—Jews and Gentiles. Yet, in this moment, a gathering that would normally have differing views converge. Douglas Sean O'Donnell, in his commentary *Matthew: All Authority in Heaven and on Earth* in the *Preaching the Word* series, recognizes the melding of views from the assembled mass of humanity in Matthew's account:

Here in 27:33-44, as Jesus hangs on the cross, those two voices join together in their summary mockeries of the Messiah. To the Gentiles—the Roman soldiers—this king on a cross is a joke. This is the height of foolishness. To the Jews—the common folk, the religious leaders, and the criminals—this Son of God on a cross is inconceivable. It's the height of weakness, not power.³²

It is in front of this conglomeration that Jesus speaks the words: "Eloi, Eloi, lama sabachthani."

The Message of Jesus

With the scene set, the crucial question may be asked: What did Jesus mean when he said "Eloi, Eloi, lama sabachthani?" First, it should be re-stated what has been settled thus far.

³¹ Ibid, 123.

³² Douglas Sean O'Donnell, *Matthew: All Authority in Heaven and on Earth, Preaching the Word*, R. Kent Hughes, ed. (Wheaton, Ill: Crossway, 2013), 862.

First, it has been demonstrated that the reason for Christ's incarnation was, ultimately, his death on the cross and that Christ knew the substance of his mission on earth—to seek and save that which was lost.

Second, it has been demonstrated that Jesus and the Father were one, a precept confirmed by Scripture and a historical understanding of a trinitarian theology.

Third, it has been shown that Christ had the free will to choose whether to complete the sacrifice or not—and that he chose the cross.

Fourth, the method of crucifixion was explored to understand the physical toll placed on Christ's body, a toll that would have left him with little to no strength and stamina. It would have impaired Jesus' ability to make a long-drawn out speech.

Fifth, and most importantly, the people who were around the cross, specifically, the Jews—both Christ's followers and his attackers. It is in front of these individuals that Jesus utters the words: "Eloi, Eloi, lama sabachthani."

Therefore, with those five points being established, the question can be posed: If, at the moment the words "Eloi, Eloi, lama sabachthani" were spoken, Jesus had very little energy left, then what did his cry mean?

It would seem logical that the words "Eloi, Eloi, lama sabachthani" were spoken to draw the attention of those on Calvary to Psalm 22. Matt Paulson, in his article "Did Jesus Separate from God the Father on the Cross" on the Christian Apologetics and Research Ministry website (carm.org) notes the Jews around the cross would have been taught the Scriptures beginning at age 6, and since they would not have had the modern-day chapter and verse numbering system, they would have recognized the phrase "Eloi, Eloi, lama sabachthani" as the beginning of what is known today as Psalm 22.³³ Paulson notes that:

... there is no doubt that Jesus was drawing the attention of the Jews to the words of King David, the first sentence of Psalm 22. Can you imagine the expression of the surprised Jews as they

³³ Matt Paulson, "Did Jesus Separate from God the Father on the Cross?" <https://carm.org/jesus-cross-father>, accessed Dec. 7, 2020.

remembered the whole of the messianic prophecy as Psalm 22 unfolded in front of their eyes?³⁴

Wave Nunnally, in an article entitled “Did God Abandon Jesus on the Cross?” published by the Center for Holy Lands Studies, agrees. Nunnally asserts that Christ was actually trying to move the religious leaders to put the verses of Psalms 22 that they were misinterpreting into proper context.³⁵ Nunnally points out that in Christ’s day, context was everything and that it had to be considered as Scriptures were analyzed and quoted in certain situations.³⁶ Had the Jewish leaders recognized Christ’s words in correlation to Psalm 22, instead of misinterpreting them as a cry from Jesus to Elijah for intervention, they may have recognized the events on Calvary and thus recognized Christ as the foretold Messiah. Charles H. Spurgeon said of Psalm 22: “This is beyond all others THE PSALM OF THE CROSS” (emphasis by Spurgeon).³⁷

Likewise, Jesus’ Jewish followers should have made the same connection, and, in that moment of grief, understood the prophecy of Psalm 22 being played out before their eyes and thus connected Christ to the promised Messiah.

In writing about Mark’s recording of Christ’s cry from Psalms 22, Rikk E. Watts, in the *Commentary on the New Testament Use of the Old Testament*, notes that “Mark’s deliberate application of Psalms 22 to Jesus, the messianic Son of Man, is unparalleled in any of the traditions to which we have access.”³⁸ Watts argues that “in view of the repeated passion predictions, there is every reason why Ps. 22 can describe not just Israel or Zion, but David’s greater eschatological son.”³⁹

Psalms 22 is a special narrative. As Rikk E. Watts explains: “Mark’s deliberate application of Ps. 22 to Jesus, the messianic Son of Man, is unparalleled in any of the traditions to which we have access.”⁴⁰ Andrew E. Hill and John H. Walton, in *A Survey of the Old Testament*, note that the psalms can

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Wave Nunnally, “Did God Abandon Jesus on the Cross?” <https://www.holylandsstudies.org/post/did-god-abandon-jesus-on-the-cross>, accessed Dec. 7, 2020.

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ Charles H. Spurgeon, *Psalms 22, Parallel Classic Commentary on the Psalms*, Mark Water, ed., (Chattanooga, TN: AMG Publishers, 2005), 86.

³⁸ Watts, “Mark,” *Commentary on the New Testament Use of the Old Testament*, 236.

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

be categorized three ways—praise, lament and wisdom.⁴¹ However, they write about Psalms 22: “For the most part, each psalm falls into only one of the classifications—one exception being Psalm 22, in which verses 1-21 are a lament psalm and verses 22-31 are praise psalms.”⁴²

If Christ’s desire was to point those on Calvary to a passage that would have affirmed his deity and place as Messiah, then Psalms 22 fits the need well. Had they examined Psalm 22 in light of the moment they were in, both those against Christ and his followers would have found some startling similarities.

For example, consider several passages from the NKJV:

Psalms 22:1—My God, My God, why have You forsaken Me? Why are You so far from helping Me, And from the words of My groaning?

Mark 15:34—And at the ninth hour Jesus cried out with a loud voice, saying, “Eloi, Eloi, lama sabachthani?” which is translated, “My God, My God, why have you forsaken me?”

Psalms 22:6-8—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!”

Mark 15:29-30—And those who passed by blasphemed Him, wagging their heads and saying, “Aha! You who destroy the temple and build it in three days,³⁰ save Yourself, and come down from the cross!”

Psalms 22:15—My strength is dried up like a potsherd, And My tongue clings to My jaws; You have brought Me to the dust of death.

John 19:28-29—After this, Jesus, knowing that all things were now accomplished, that the Scripture might be fulfilled, said, “I thirst!” Now a vessel full of sour wine was sitting there; and they filled a sponge with sour wine, put it on hyssop, and put it to His mouth.

⁴¹ Andrew E. Hill and John H. Walton, *A Survey of the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2009), 423.

⁴² *Ibid.*

Psalms 22:16-17—For dogs have surrounded Me; The congregation of the wicked has enclosed Me. They pierced My hands and My feet.

John 20:24-25—Now Thomas, called the Twin, one of the twelve, was not with them when Jesus came. The other disciples therefore said to him, “We have seen the Lord.” So, he said to them, “Unless I see in His hands the print of the nails and put my finger into the print of the nails, and put my hand into His side, I will not believe.”

Psalms 22:18—They divide My garments among them, And for My clothing they cast lots.

Matthew 27:33-35—And when they had come to a place called Golgotha, that is to say, Place of a Skull, they gave Him sour wine mingled with gall to drink. But when He had tasted it, He would not drink. Then they crucified Him, and divided His garments, casting lots, that it might be fulfilled which was spoken by the prophet: “They divided My garments among them, And for My clothing they cast lots.”

One major change to Psalms 22 that Christ makes appears to be the closing. David writes in Psalms 22:31 (NKJV) that: “They will come and declare His righteousness to a people who will be born, that He has done this.” In John 19:30, the apostle notes Christ’s final words (NKJV): “So when Jesus had received the sour wine, He said, “It is finished!” And bowing His head, He gave up His spirit.” Psalms looks forward in anticipation while Jesus closes with finality. James Johnston, in his commentary on Psalms 1-41 in the *Preaching the Word* series, opines: “If that is the case, then Jesus was saying that everything God promised in the second half of this psalm was as good as done. His suffering would save the world, and the nations would turn to God.”⁴³

The Recognition of His Deity

To understand the impact of Christ’s cry on Calvary, it is necessary to look no further than the crowd surrounding the cross. From many sources on Calvary, declarations—both verbal and non-verbal—can be seen in the gospels.

Mark 15:38 notes that, upon Christ’s surrender to death, the veil of the temple being torn from top to bottom. R. Kent Hughes in his book, *Mark: Jesus*,

⁴³ James Johnston, *The Psalms: Volume 1—Psalms 1 to 41: Rejoice, the Lord is King, Preaching the Word*, R. Kent Hughes, ed. (Wheaton, Ill: Crossway, 2015), 233.

Servant and Savior, writes that the “veil into the Holy of Holies was supernaturally slashed in two as if a great sword had fallen. The high priest could only go into the Holy of Holies once a year, but now the way is wide-open for all who are in Christ.”⁴⁴

Mark 15:39 adds the climactic line, given not by a follower, a rabbi, a Pharisee or other religious leader, but by a Roman Centurion. One who had, most likely, participated in the scourging and subsequent crucifixion of Christ surveys the scene around Calvary and utters the words (NKJV): “Truly this man was the Son of God.” Matthew 27:54 records it this way (NKJV): “So, when the centurion and those with him, who were guarding Jesus, saw the earthquake and the things that had happened, they feared greatly, saying, ‘Truly this was the Son of God!’” Hughes observes:

The centurion who was charged with the execution had seen everything: the terrible scourging, Jesus’ features beaten into anonymity, the *Via Dolorosa*. He had supervised Jesus’ nailing to the *patibulum* and elevation on the *crux simplex*. He had seen Jesus’ ministry to the co-crucified and his care for his mother. He had seen the midday darkness come. This centurion stood close lest some foul play take place under its cover. Finally, he saw Jesus’ explosive, triumphant death! That is why Mark records, ‘And when the centurion, who stood facing him, saw that in this way he breathed his last, he said, ‘Truly this man was the Son of God (v. 39).’ We must not suppose that this declared the man’s faith, but it was a responsive, momentary heralding of the deity of Christ.⁴⁵

The words of the centurion are powerful. *The Cradle, The Cross and The Crown: An Introduction to the New Testament*, proclaims the centurion’s recognition as the “climax of Mark’s Gospel.”⁴⁶ Authors Andreas J. Köstenberger, L. Scott Kellum and Charles L. Quarles posit the centurion’s observation shows “that now the messianic secret has been lifted even for the (Roman) Gentiles, so that the missionary power of Jesus’ suffering and death had been extended also

⁴⁴ Hughes, *Mark: Jesus, Servant and Savior*, 395.

⁴⁵ *Ibid*, 396.

⁴⁶ Andreas J. Köstenberger, L. Scott Kellum, Charles L. Quarles, *The Cradle, The Cross and The Crown: An Introduction to the New Testament* (Nashville, TN: B&H Academic, 2009), 248.

to non-Jews.”⁴⁷ It appears as though, in that centurion’s words, the prophecy of Genesis 22:15-20 is fulfilled (NKJV):

Then the Angel of the Lord called to Abraham a second time out of heaven, and said: “By Myself I have sworn, says the Lord, because you have done this thing, and have not withheld your son, your only son—blessing I will bless you, and multiplying I will multiply your descendants as the stars of the heaven and as the sand which is on the seashore; and your descendants shall possess the gate of their enemies. In your seed all the nations of the earth shall be blessed, because you have obeyed My voice.”

Yet the centurion was not the only one to recognize the reality of the scene. Luke 23:48 notes (NKJV): “And the whole crowd who came together to that sight, seeing what had been done, beat their breasts and returned.” The phrase “whole crowd” is the Greek phrase ὄχλος, which, according to The Strongest Strong’s Exhaustive Concordance of the Bible, means “crowd, people, multitude, a gathering of any size.”⁴⁸

The reaction came from all those gathered around the cross.

Conclusion: Putting the Pieces Together

Was Christ’s cry of “Eloi, Eloi, lama sabachthani,” a call of distress to a Father who had abandoned his son in the midst of a death that was beyond comparison in its violence and human destruction? Was it, as the religious leaders at Calvary believed, Jesus appealing to Elijah?

The answer is no. Therefore, if neither of those is the true meaning of Jesus’ words, then what is it? What understanding of that scene and those words make the most logical sense in context of the metanarrative of Creation, Fall, Redemption and Restoration?

The words “Eloi, Eloi, lama sabachthani” were spoken near the end of his crucifixion. Tired, battered, bruised, weak, dehydrated and beaten, Christ managed to cry out in loud enough for those around him—including a few of his followers, the religious elite with whom he had the most trouble but also objects

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ Kohlenberger III and Swanson, ed., *The Strongest Strong’s Exhaustive Concordance of the Bible*, 1632.

of his love in death, and countless others representing Jew and Gentile alike—to hear his words.

In a desire to complete his mission, to seek and save that which was lost—the directive spoken to Zacchaeus in Luke 19:10 (NKJV)—Christ mustered enough energy to speak four words: “Eloi, Eloi, lama sabachthani!” Those words should have driven the lost Jewish leaders and his followers to Psalm 22, which they should have known well. In that Psalm, they would have recognized the Passion narrative being played out in front of their eyes at that very moment. It was a meaning that escaped their view even when it resonated with a Roman Centurion. Watts writes:

Finally, as a correlate of Peter’s confession, the centurion’s affirmation of Jesus as huioi theou, for the first time in the Gospel, from a Gentile, and that unbidden (cf. Ps. 22:27), suggest the beginning of the ingathering of the nations to which various OT throughout Mark have pointed.⁴⁹

Jesus came to the earth to willingly give his life for Mankind—a mission that was carried out from the start of his ministry through his death on Calvary. “Eloi, Eloi, lama sabachthani” can therefore be viewed not as cry of abandonment from the Father, but as words spoken in front of those surrounding his execution as a final plea for repentance to those who opposed him and, simultaneously, as words of comfort to his followers.

⁴⁹ Watts, “Mark,” 236.

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