

“ELI, ELI, LAMA SABACHTHANI?”: A CRY OF DERELICTION? OR
VICTORY?

L. Paul Trudinger*
Arlington, Virginia 22207

Several recent commentators have insisted that our Lord's words from the cross, "My God, my God, why hast Thou forsaken me?" must be read not as coming from one defeated and frustrated by despair.¹ Rather, we must read them within the context of Psalm 22 as a whole, as the confident prayer of One who did not lose faith even in the midst of his aloneness. My purpose is to make some further observations in support of this view-point, and, in particular to underscore some seldom discussed insights of a profound and thoroughly evangelical scholar, the late Professor Karl Bornhaeuser, of Marburg.²

While it is true that Psalm 22 comes to its conclusion in a mood of confidence, let me suggest that we do not need to go to the later sections of the psalm to find the context of faith and hope. The psalm *from its very beginning* is set within the context of victory and expectation of deliverance. For the psalm begins with its title, which sets the stage for what is to come. The title in Hebrew is notoriously difficult to translate. Luther renders it thus: "A Psalm of David to be chanted by the precentor about the Doe which is hunted in the early dawn." The King James Version translators did not attempt to give meaning to the words which Luther construes as "doe" and "dawn," but just left the Hebrew as it stood. Moffatt made the suggestion that "Doe of the Dawn" was a popular tune of that time to which the psalm was to be sung. Fantastic! If the setting of the psalm had to do with a hunted deer in the early dawn, then the mood would indeed be one of desperation. The psalm would echo the feelings of one driven into sore straits, indeed of one trapped, by his enemies. Have we rightly understood the meaning of the psalm's title, however?

The Hebrew word translated as "precentor" or "choirmaster" is a participle from the verb "to achieve mastery," sometimes translated "to conquer," (*natsach*), and being in the causative mood, may well mean: "to the one who brings about victory." The word's interpretation and use in some places as "choirmaster," stems from the fact that the director of the temple singers in a sense controls or achieves mastery over them. Some of the earliest translations of this psalm, however, attest to the meaning here,

*Teaching Minister, Rock Spring Parish, and Professor of Religion, Northern Virginia Community College.

¹See, for example, Robert Holst, "The Cry of Dereliction; Another Point of View" *The Springfielder*, March 1972, pp. 286-9.

²See Appendix 1 of his book, *The Death and Resurrection of Jesus Christ* (Bangalore: C. L.'s Press, 1958).

“to the bringer of victory.” Aquila’s translation into Greek has “to the victory-maker.” Symmachus has the title “A Song of Victory”; Theodotion, another early Greek translator has the heading, “to the victory,” and Jerome has, in the Latin, *victori*, that is, “to the victor.” Bornhaeuser points to the similarity between this ascription in the psalm title and the words of St. Paul in 1 Cor. XV:57, “Thanks be to God *who giveth us the victory!*” When we look at the Septuagint (Greek O.T.) we again find no reference to a preceptor or to other musical terminology. The opening words of the title are: “To the end (*telos*).” This compares very closely with Theodotion’s “To the victory” and indicates that “the end” here signifies “the end-time,” the beginning of Messiah’s reign. Again, in confirmation of this interpretation of “the end,” Bornhaeuser points to St. Paul’s quotation from Isaiah XXV:8, in the same resurrection chapter we have just quoted: “Death is swallowed up *in victory!*” (1 Cor. XV:55). Symmachus translates Isaiah’s words: “Death is swallowed up *at the end!*” The full psalm title in the Septuagint reads: “To the end, concerning the help at day-break.” The later shift from “help” to “doe” perhaps came about through a change in the pointing of the vowels in the consonantal Hebrew word: *eyaluth* (help) was rendered as *ayyeleth* (a doe), the Hebrew radicals being the same. The title thus indicates that the psalm is one of praise to God, the giver of victory, for the help He gave at the break of day! It is within this context that we must read the words, “My God, my God, why hast Thou forsaken me?”

With the differences between the text of the Septuagint version and the standard translations of the later pointed Hebrew text as great as we have seen them to be in the psalm’s superscription, we ought perhaps to be on our guard against further misunderstandings due to a different understanding of the vowel pointing. We will do well, at least, to check with the Septuagint and with other early translations of the Hebrew text as we proceed with the psalm’s verses. Dr. Bornhaeuser believes that we should see more in “Eli, Eli...,” than just “My God, my God,...” for El is a name for God which already had been invested with deeper meaning by the Hebrew people. He quotes the juridical commentary on Exodus XV:1 (known as the *Mekilta*) as asking, “... and where do I find that El means no other thing than the quality of *compassion*? Because it says in Psalm XXII:2, ‘My El, my El...’” He also suggests that central to the meaning of El is the idea of “strength.” Thus Aquila renders “Eli, Eli...” as “My Strong One, my Strong One....” This translation or understanding is very probably what is reflected in the oft-quoted variant found in the pseudepigraphal Gospel of Peter: “My strength, my strength, why have you left me?”, though the use to which some critics have put this latter variant by way of explaining our Lord’s cry is way off the mark! The next words in the Septuagint version are the prayer “Rescue me!” These words occur again at v. 20, both in the Hebrew and in the Greek text. Our Lord does not pray this prayer for deliverance, and we are reminded of His words recorded in John XII:27: “And what shall I say, ‘Father, save me from this hour?’ No, for this purpose came I to this hour!”

Dr. Bornhaeuser insists that we should read the interrogative adverb as *lemah* (to what?) and not as *lamah* (why?). Several of the most reliable

manuscripts of Matthew and Mark have the Hebrew transliterated into Greek as *lema*. The carefully researched text which was used as the basis for the *New English Bible* reads *lema* both in Matthew and Mark. Furthermore, the translations of the Hebrew (or Aramaic) following the cry are given in the Greek as *hina ti* (Matthew) and *eis ti* (Mark). These reflect the shades of meaning "for what?" and "to what" rather than the simple "why?". This subtle distinction is important in view of the fact that the Aramaic verb *sabachthani* renders the Hebrew verb *azab*, which means "to leave alone" or "to hand over." The cry, "To what have you handed me over?" or "To what have you committed me?" is significantly different from "Why have you *forsaken* me?" Our Lord's cry may thus be seen to reflect His consciousness of the role to which God had committed Him. In the deep words of St. Paul, "He made him to be sin for us, who knew no sin" (2 Cor. V:21). This sense of separation as the world's sin-bearer is understood and borne by our Lord with confidence, and even, says the writer to the Hebrews, with joy: "Who for the joy that was set before Him endured the Cross" (Heb. XII:2). His work on the Cross brings about the final victory over sin and death; hence the final triumphant cry, "It is finished!" Here we see the connection between the opening words of the psalm's title, "For the end-time," (recall Isaiah's words: "Death is swallowed up in the end-time,") and the words of the so-called "cry of dereliction." The words of the psalm and of our Lord are words of triumph from the very beginning—triumph and confidence even in the midst of the experience of aloneness and separation on account of the sin of the world.

There is one last ingenious suggestion of Professor Bornhaeuser that I think merits re-statement here. Following the cry, "My God, my God, to what have you committed me?" come the words "far from my help the words of my roaring!" if we put into English literally the Hebrew text as now pointed. It is not impossible to make some sense out of these words as they stand, but it requires some juggling! Once again, however, the Septuagint has a most interesting divergence from the Hebrew text. It speaks not of "the words of my 'roaring,'" but rather of "the words of my 'sins' "!" The Septuagint translators read the consonantal (unpointed) Hebrew text before them as *shegiah* (cf. Psalm XIX:13) and not as *sheagah* (roaring). *Shegiah* means sins committed unwittingly, which is how Luther renders the word in the Psalm XIX instance. How does the change from "roaring" to "sins" help in understanding the meaning? Dr. Bornhaeuser suggests that what originally stood in the Psalm was not "the words of" (in Hebrew, *dibre*), but "on account of" (in Hebrew, *al-dibre*). The full sentence would then read, "My God, my God, to what have you handed me over for so long without help on account of my sins?" Notice that Dr. Bornhaeuser gives the word "far from" (in Hebrew, *rachocq*) a temporal and not a spatial meaning, that is, "for so long." He also suggests that the words "on account of my sins" may not be part of the questioning cry, but in fact an answer to that cry. For the "my" in "my sins" does not necessarily mean the sins committed by the suppliant, but rather the sins which were reckoned to him, indeed heaped upon him by his enemies and abusers who reproach him (see Psalm 69:5 and Psalm 40:12, for a similar usage).

Thus the cry "To what purpose am I being committed to suffering?" is answered by the words, "on account of my sins." Such an interpretation is most apt when applied by the Church to their understanding of Jesus' sufferings, for as God's servant He "bore the sins of many" (Isaiah 53:12), and the reproaches of his enemies were heaped upon Him (Mark 15:29-32).

These insights of Professor Bornhaeuser help us to see that from its very outset victory and thanksgiving are the dominant notes of this psalm. By paying careful attention to what most probably stood in the original Hebrew text he has produced a very different sense to the question, "*Eli, Eli, lema sabachthani?*", removing the idea of bewilderment on the part of our Lord, and focussing instead upon the purpose of His suffering. Jesus enters into the whole spirit and meaning of this great psalm as, taking its words upon His lips, He fulfils them and achieves His glorious work.