

Theology on the Web.org.uk

Making Biblical Scholarship Accessible

This document was supplied for free educational purposes. Unless it is in the public domain, it may not be sold for profit or hosted on a webserver without the permission of the copyright holder.

If you find it of help to you and would like to support the ministry of Theology on the Web, please consider using the links below:



Buy me a coffee

<https://www.buymeacoffee.com/theology>



PATREON

<https://patreon.com/theologyontheweb>

PayPal

<https://paypal.me/robbradshaw>

A table of contents for *Canadian Journal of Theology* can be found here:

https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_canadian-journal.php

Psalm 22: An Exposition

STANLEY B. FROST

A VERY SICK MAN. Even in these days of medical knowledge and surgical techniques, those four words can still spell tragedy. In the days before medical science had been developed, when men were dependent on herbal remedies and magical spells, those four words held a grisly horror that we find difficult to recapture. Of all the diseases only cancer still has the power to invest itself with grue, but in the ignorant world of the past every illness was ominous, every sickness was a thing of witchcraft, all disease was shrouded in the miasma of taboo.

"A very sick man." It goes without saying that healthy men are not ill. To be ill means of itself that you are not healthy; and where illness is thought of in magico-religious terms, to be ill means to be infected with evil. Conversely, to be healthy is to be righteous, that is, in good standing with God. Equally, to be in good standing with God is to rejoice in good health, and to be ill is to be unrighteous, to be in bad odour with God.

"A very sick man." A physical illness is always a profound emotional experience, but particularly so when the thought of death has presented itself menacingly before the disturbed and unhappy mind. In an age and in a land where life-expectancy was very meagre, the presentiment of death was never far from the man who was seriously ill.

I

The psalm that is numbered twenty-two in the English Bible is the psalm of a man who has been very ill, who has looked upon the face of death, and has recovered. After a long absence he has returned to his acquaintance, bringing with him the spiritual fruit of his experience, a lament in which during his illness his thoughts and fears and desperate appeals for help found permanent form. Incorporated in these appeals was a vow, if he were delivered, to give open and public testimony to the saving power and merciful goodness of God. Now, still gaunt and frail in convalescence, he has returned to the *ṣodh*, the evening circle of his friends and neighbours, and in the ebb and flow of the conversation he awaits the appropriate moment to intervene and so fulfil his vow, at least in part.

We may try to reconstruct this "setting in life" of the psalm. The evening meal is over, and the hour or two before sleep is the daily time for gossip and the exchange of news in the *ṣodh*. While the men are gathering the talk is desultory—the incident of a sheep that strayed, of the ass that brayed suddenly during the siesta, of a quarrel between two women at the well. As the

knot of men thickens, perhaps a riddle or two is passed back and forth, referring in enigmatic terms to some incident during the day. The skill lies in penetrating the disguise and laying bare the event in its everyday dress—as when Samson propounded:

Out of the eater came forth meat,
Out of the strong came forth sweetness;

and was answered:

What is sweeter than honey?
What is stronger than a lion?

He replied on that occasion:

If you had not plowed with my heifer,
You had not found out my riddle (Judges 14:14, 18).

From such rejoinders, it is but a short step to the exchange of proverbs, a form of contest in which the mind needs to be well stocked with maxims, and the wit quick to produce the appropriate one. Did not Solomon know three thousand proverbs? Such gnomic sayings are rich in sententious thoughts, and before long, someone quotes the one that gives the convalescent his cue:

The righteous shall never be removed,
But the wicked shall not dwell in the land (Prov. 10:30).

This incontestable statement of the pietistic orthodoxy of the day provides the psalmist not merely with his point of entry but also with the dogmatic backcloth against which (as we have seen) his lament must necessarily be viewed: “if you are righteous, you prosper—if you do not prosper, clearly you are not righteous.” Without further introduction he breaks into the conversation, and the rest fall silent to hear what indeed they have been expecting, all the evening, the account of this man’s plight and deliverance:

My God, my God, why hast thou deserted me?

It is a question a man may indeed ask, but who at the Old Testament level of knowledge can answer him? Science unknown, philosophy as yet unborn, theology in its infancy, and religion itself still but one remove from magic, who can tell why God should suddenly desert a man? God is mysteriously arbitrary about the matter, and a man can unwittingly fall out of favour, and discover it only when disaster strikes. Why does God suddenly desert a man? If he knew the answer to that question, he would also know the answer to a great many other questions: scientific questions of medicine and physics, philosophical questions concerning the one and the many, ethical question of right and wrong and of the eternal validity of value. But Old Testament man caught in the experience of being left prey to the evil

things of this world must nevertheless ask the question, even if as far as he knows there is no possibility of answer:

My God, my God, why hast thou deserted me?
 Remote from my Help are the words of my complaint!¹
 My God, I cry in the daytime, and thou dost not answer,
 And at night, but I get no satisfaction.

But though the withdrawal of divine favour is arbitrary and unsearchable, there are the known facts of history. In the past, men have trusted God and have not been let down. Why should it not be so now?

O thou that art holy,
 Enthroned on the praises of Israel,²
 Our fathers trusted in thee,
 They trusted, and thou didst deliver them,
 They trusted in thee and were not disappointed.

But the author of this lament cannot count on the same dependable goodness of God towards him because he recognizes that he has now no merit in anyone's eyes, least of all his own. His loss of God's favour has made him feel inferior, and this has engendered a resentment that has found expression in distrust of relatives and friends. He thinks, probably not altogether without reason, that there are those who will not be averse to hearing of his misfortune. The censorious puritan always arouses antagonism, and now, when the favour of God has been so signally and patently withdrawn, there are those who will gloat over his downfall. He can just imagine the scorn and the clever remarks, mocking the pious phrases of himself and his circle: "he was always 'committing himself into God's hands'—well, let's see him do it now! God 'delighted in him,' so he said—let's see if he does now!" To whom, then, can the psalmist, friendless and persecuted, turn but to the God on whom he has always depended? He reminds himself that his religious experience is no new thing. It goes back to his youngest memories. From earliest childhood he has been conscious of his dependence on God. Even if God does now seem far away and removed, it is still to him that the psalmist must make his appeal:

But I am a worm, not a man!
 Everybody scorns me, despises me!
 All who see me mock me,
 Pursing their lips, wagging their heads;
 "He 'committed'³ to Yahweh"—let him deliver him!
 Let him save him! He 'delighted in him!'"

1. Cf. LXX and RV (ASV) margin.

2. For this phrase, cf. 2 Kings 19:15, and for the construction (vocative followed by adjective, with or without further limiting clauses preceding the main clause), cf. Hab. 1:13; Ps. 137:8.

3. Reading (with LXX, RSV, most moderns) perfect for the MT imperative. For the first phrase, cf. Ps. 37:5; for the second, cf. Ps. 18:19; Isa. 42:1.

But thou has been my Refuge from birth,
 Thou didst bring me security even in my mother's arms.
 I depended on thee from earliest days,
 Thou has been my God from the womb!
 Do not be distant from me! Distress is near enough!
 And I have no help!

As he experiences the utter helplessness of the gravely ill, he feels like a man trapped by the wild cattle of Bashan, caught in a circle of menacing horns, a circle without a break, a circle closing steadily upon him. Lying on his bed, he knows that his last strength has gone; his limbs no longer seem to belong to him, and already he feels the earth of his grave heavy upon him. As for his so-called friends and relatives, he is well aware that they are only waiting for him to die, so that they can grab his few possessions—they have already drawn lots for what each is to have. He feels that in their haste they have already as good as bound him in the grave-clothes, wanting to hustle him off before his time. God is indeed his last resource. Only he can save him in this count-down of death.

I am encircled by wild bulls,
 Surrounded by Bashan steers;
 They are opening their mouths at me,
 Like some lion, roaring at its kill.
 I am poured out like water,
 My limbs are dislocated,
 My heart has turned to wax,
 Melting away into my belly;
 My mouth⁴ is as dry as a potsherd,
 My parched tongue is choking me;
 I am already being smothered by the dust of the grave!⁵
 For I am surrounded by jackals,
 Unscrupulous plotters have entangled me,
 They have bound⁶ me hand and foot in my shroud.
 I can count every bone in my body,
 But they just stand and stare at me,
 While they divide up my things,
 And draw lots for my clothes.
 But thou, Yahweh, be not a long way off!
 O my Helper, come quickly to my rescue!
 Save my life from the sword,
 Save me from the power of these jackals!
 Deliver me from the lion's mouth,
 My poor soul⁷ from the horns of the bison!

4. The usual emendation, reading *hikki* for *kohi*.

5. Reading either (MT) 2nd pers. sing. imperf. or (a popular emendation) 3rd pers. plur. perf. The emphasis (as word order shows) is not on the actor but on the recipient of the action. Hence translation by a passive is indicated.

6. An early corruption in MT to "like a lion my hands and my feet" gave rise in Targum to "they bite like a lion my hands, etc.," and in versions to "they pierced my hands and my feet"—probably a Christian rendering. Aquila, Symmachus (?), and Jerome knew the verb as "bound," and this is what the context requires, since a corpse was swathed in grave-clothes for burial. On Symmachus, cf. W. E. Barnes, *Commentary on the Psalms*, 2 vols. ("Westminster Commentaries," London: Methuen, 1931), Vol. I, p. 114f.

7. Reading, with most moderns, "my afflicted one," for MT, "Thou hast answered me."

The lament is over. But, like a concert audience, the *šodh* only stirs a little to relax muscles, and remains silent for the second movement. The lament has had the usual elements of Invocation, Recital of Woes, and Plea for Help. But there may be, in this case there surely will be, more to come. Often the lament-maker is so sure of a favourable answer that he adds an Anticipatory Thanksgiving for his coming deliverance. It serves the double purpose of thanking God for redemption and asserting in the strongest terms that such a deliverance will indeed take place. Often, too, in the Thanksgiving there is the Vow, the promise to witness publicly to the favour and goodness of Yahweh towards the psalmist. Often, again, while the lament is intensely personal and self-descriptive, the Thanksgiving is formal, corporate, and liturgical in tone, for thanksgiving is an act of witness, a testifying to the goodness of God. The little group of the *šodh*, who are well aware of all this, recognize that the recital of the psalm is itself a part-fulfilment of such a vow, though, no doubt, a more formal thanksgiving-sacrifice will follow at some convenient season. As they listen to the Thanksgiving, which does indeed now follow, they are in no doubt of the genuine gratitude of the psalmist, of the unhappiness and danger of his plight, and of the reality of his deliverance. Partly personal, partly liturgical, it sums up his experience of salvation. He was ill, and is convalescent; he was dying, and is alive to tell of his escape from death; he was apparently out of favour with God but by his recovery is now triumphantly vindicated as righteous in the sight of all men. The complete reversal of his fortunes is so remarkable that even the distant heathen, when they hear his story, will be convinced of Yahweh's power, and will seek to worship him. The psalmist's voice gains in strength as he approaches the joyous, confident conclusion:

I will declare thy nature to my fellows,
 I will praise thee in the full congregation.
 Worshippers of Yahweh, praise him!
 All the descendants of Jacob honour him!
 Reverence him, all you of Israel's stock!
 For he did not despise nor turn from the affliction of the afflicted,
 Nor did he hide his face from him,
 But when he cried to him, he listened.
 Of him⁸ shall my praise be in the full congregation!
 My vow I will fulfil before his worshippers;
 The Sufferers⁹ shall eat of my sacrifice with satisfaction,
 The Seekers shall praise him, [and say to me:]
 "May your heart live for ever."¹⁰
 The most distant frontiers shall take it to heart¹¹ and turn to Yahweh,
 All the Gentile tribes shall bow down to him.
 For sovereignty belongs to Yahweh,
 Lordship of the nations!

8. MT reads 2nd pers. The 3rd pers. is required in English, but Hebrew was accustomed to these frequent changes of person, and felt no difficulty.

9. Literally, "the afflicted," but it is of course a party label and means "the godly pious," of whom the psalmist was one. "Seekers" is another such term.

10. Was this the toast of thanks to the giver of a sacrificial feast?

11. *z-k-r* means much more than "remember." Cf. Gen. 8:1; Ps. 42:5.

Surely to him¹² they shall bow down, all those opulent,
 Before him shall kneel all mortal men,
 Every man who depends on him for life.¹³
 A whole nation shall serve him, and be accounted Yahweh's,
 To a generation to come¹⁴ they will tell of his goodness,
 To a people yet to be born: "This is what He did."

We may think that a low murmur of approval followed the final words, and then a silence, and that then perhaps an elder member struck up a familiar chant in which all joined:

Praise Yahweh all ye nations,
 Laud him, all ye peoples!
 For his love is great toward us,
 And the sureness of Yahweh is forever.
 Halleluja! (Ps. 117)

And the little group broke up, and the men went silently towards their homes in the gathering dusk.

This then is the psalm at its primary level. It leaves us with many questions. Was the author a deeply spiritual man, as his account of his life-long religious experience would suggest, or was he self-righteous and a prig, as his enemies evidently saw him? Was he somewhat neurotic, with a touch of persecution-mania, or were his family really wanting him off their hands? The probable answers are affirmative to most of these questions. He *was* somewhat of a prig, he did have a rich religious experience, his family would not have wept too many tears at his going; but his idea that people were plotting to hustle him off before his time is probably part of his inflated sense of his own importance.

For this psalm does not come out of stained-glass religiosity or sentimental biblicistic piety. It comes out of real life, in which men and women of deep religious feeling are not necessarily winsome characters, or always wise and well-balanced personalities; they are often somewhat self-centred, inclined to priggishness and sometimes not a little neurotic. If we meet such people in the Church today, in places of high office or positions of wide influence, we need not sigh for the days of the pristine purity of the Early Church, or the transparent honesties of prophetic times. Jeremiah, to put it kindly, was more than difficult to live with, and Paul himself was not without a strong touch of egoism in his character. The glory of Christianity is that it is in this real world, and not in the picture-book world of illustrated Bibles, that its effectiveness has been proved. The primary message of the psalm is that in a situation of desperate plight, this very human being turned with desperate need to God, and found in him the answer that he sought. Therefore we too, very ordinary and unsaintly characters that we are, can learn to depend

12. MT "they ate," but the same consonants give "Surely to him."

13. Literally, "and (he who) cannot keep his soul alive"—possibly an early gloss.

14. Reading the last word of v. 30 with v. 31 as *ledhor yabo' yaggidhu*.

upon God in our times of distress, as he did, and can join honestly and sincerely in the corporate and liturgical Thanksgiving at the end.

II

But if this is the psalm at its primary level, what of those other levels of understanding and interpretation that it has acquired at the hands of Synagogue and Church?

We notice that it was in the Choirmaster's Anthology, set to the tune, "The Hind of the Morning." A tune with such a title was surely a lovely one, and we are left wishing that some memory of the old melodies had come down to us. The psalm is also reckoned as Davidic, and whether or not that was originally a designation of authorship, there is no doubt that it quickly came to be thought so. It is probable that this psalm was not treasured as inspired, and carefully gathered as scripture, and added to the great collection of Israel's sacred poetry, simply because some unknown *hasidh* had written it. Rather, it was treasured as a psalm of David—but not of David the triumphant soldier, or even of David the strong ruler, but rather of that David who was wounded by his family, driven out by his son, forsaken in the desert by his friends, and who poured out his plaint to God in some desolate cave.

There is much in the historical record to substantiate this picture of David. He had an unhappy domestic life and the prominence given to it by the Court Historian (2 Sam. 8–20) suggests that David himself was a man for whom personal relationships within the family mattered very considerably. A warm-hearted, emotionally impulsive man, he gave affection freely and looked for it in return. It was a great part of his hold over his band of rough outlaws in the cave of Adullam, and it shows itself clearly in such incidents as the pouring out of the water from the well of Bethlehem (2 Sam. 13:13–17). A more prosaic person would have drunk the water with effusive thanks and the men who had risked their lives to obtain it would have been fully satisfied. But David's larger-than-life imagination transforms the pitcher into a chalice and the clear water into a sacred offering and their foolhardy heroics into a lofty idealism, and the men discover themselves to be of a larger, nobler stature than they had ever suspected. It was this that David could do for them, and they loved him for it. But such a nature, thriving as it did in an army bivouac, was nevertheless sadly vulnerable in the artificial atmosphere of the palace harem, and the rectitude of Uriah, the scheming selfishness of Bathsheba, the licence of Amnon, the shame of Tamar, and the ambition of Absalom (more like his father than any of the others) caught David off guard, bewildered him, made him unsure of himself, and finally broke his heart.

It was therefore not wholly inappropriate that the early editors of the psalms should assign to David the authorship of so many of the laments that constitute the main body of the psalter. But because the laments were

actually the product of very different personalities from that of the historical David, he underwent a change at the hands of tradition, and the psalm-titles and the little prefaces depicted a David very different from the successful king of actuality. He was now seen as the classical instance of the righteous, innocent sufferer. Surrounded by hostile neighbours, suffering from illness which apparently indicated his disfavour with God as well as with man, the righteous sufferer found himself defenceless and alone. He was indeed despised and rejected of men, a man of suffering and acquainted with disease. It was out of this situation of ostracism and isolation that he cried to the one resource left to him, the very God whose favour had been apparently withdrawn. David was the type-figure of such a man.

At this level then the psalm has been lifted out of the realm of the particular into that of the general. It has become the classic expression of a perennial question, "Why do the righteous suffer?" Yet to use that formula is to express the matter in its modern form—that of a problem to which (since in mathematics and the physical sciences all problems do have answers; a scientific *Weltanschauung* has conditioned us to this view) one day we shall discover or have revealed to us the answer, which at present is known only to God. But as this psalm, in its role as the classic expression of human reaction to suffering, makes clear, that reaction is not basically a demand to know why, but rather a cry for deliverance. The "problem of pain" is one we have imposed upon the Old Testament, and one for which we have assembled some Old Testament passages as contributory to an answer. For the ancient Hebrews suffering was not a "problem" but a fact. They were content to say "I am in great unhappiness. Yahweh, deliver me!" They looked for salvation, not an "answer."

Nevertheless, conditioned as we are, we cannot help expressing our participation in the psalmist's experience in the form of a question: "Why do the righteous suffer?" And, again because of the age in which we have been educated, we will seek to break the problem down into its constituent parts. The psalmist's suffering is of three kinds, and this is true of all the generations of God's children: physical disease, human enmity, and divine rejection. Despite the hyperbole of Psalm 73, the righteous man has no monopoly of the first. If we want to deal with that aspect of the problem we must rephrase it: "Why do any men suffer from illness and disease?", and that is another matter altogether. The distinctive suffering of the righteous man consists of the second and third elements of our analysis. And this is borne out by the psalm. The references to illness are incidental and illustrative to the major theme: "I am left alone. I am ostracized. I am hated. I am left without resources. Therefore I call upon God!" Even the third element is subordinate to this. Because his illness gave his enemies their opportunity over him, and because the current theological interpretation of illness imputed it to direct divine visitation, he construes his situation as one of being deserted by Yahweh. But a theology always falls short of the religious attitudes it is meant formally to express, and in spite of his theological conviction

that God has deserted him, his religious apprehension assures him that the Lord is still available to him. It is theologically futile to call on a God who has withdrawn himself, for it is a premise of all theology that God can be known only in so far as he chooses to be known, but religiously, when all other help has failed, it is supremely right to call on God, the Last Resource.

When other helpers fail and comforts flee,
Help of the helpless, O abide with me!

We are left then with the problem of the suffering of the righteous man as the problem of the enmity that forces itself upon those who attempt to be loyal to God in their daily living.

We who live in the Western world and more particularly in North America find much in the Psalms of Lamentation foreign to our experience. We know nothing of hunger or poverty or persecution, and even illness is alleviated by skilled and devoted attentions, and we are tempted at times to recite these psalms in our worship simply as memoranda—to remind ourselves that such times have been, and that they may yet return again and that we should at all times be prepared for them. Or we are tempted to echo the Pharisee and thank God that we are not as other men are, and to use the psalms to remind ourselves of our Christian brethren in other lands who are hungry, and poverty-stricken and cruelly persecuted, and to say these psalms vicariously on their behalfs in the unity of the Church. But these usages, legitimate and obligatory as they are, nevertheless become mere evasions if we persuade ourselves that this psalm has nothing to say to us in our present and actual situation.

The fact is that there is a fundamental cleavage between the religious man and the irreligious. In North America, where social patterns are at present (but surely only temporarily!) conformable to religious practices, that cleavage is obscured. President Eisenhower could say in great sincerity, "We all need a faith—I don't care what faith but we must have a faith," and in so doing speak for a great proportion of the population—but these for the most part belong to the unreflective majority. The intellectual *élite* of North America is no more religious in its thinking than that of Western Europe. Those who have studied or taught in a European university know that to be a theologian is to be someone retained in the university circle by anachronism, by the kindly good taste of colleagues who do not want to hurt feelings, and by the shrug that dismisses the matter as not worth making a fuss about. In the modern technological university, religion is an amiable irrelevance. What is true of the university is true *mutatis mutandis* of government, industry, commerce, and the armed services.

The reflective Christian ought to be deeply aware of this intellectual ostracism, and to ask constantly why it should exist. It is not simply because he and his colleagues hold different opinions, however basic those differences may be. This is something that goes deeper than political, social, or racial cleavages. A socialist may be utterly estranged from a diehard conservative

and yet know that when they pray their hot and angry prayers, they pray them shoulder to shoulder on one and the same side of the great divide that separates him from his close socialist colleague who can not pray because he has denied the whole dimension of the religious. The fervent Arab nationalist vowing vengeance on all Israelis nevertheless knows that he as a Moslem and the Rabbi across the boundary have something deeper in common, because they both believe in God, than he can ever share with his "emancipated," religion-less Arab colleague. To be religious is to be aware of a dimension that those without a religion cannot enter, and it is to possess resources upon which those who have no knowledge of God cannot lay hold. It is to live by a scale of values that must by implication condemn all those who do not recognize those values. "The world" will always resent the genuinely religious man, and in subtle or in gross manner as the situation determines, express that resentment in polite indifference, in contempt or ridicule or outright persecution. Jesus said, "Woe to you when all men speak well of you," and we need to remember that if we have not felt the smart of living in an intellectual ghetto, then we have not apprehended what it means to a believer in an unbelieving world.

The cry of the psalmist is a cry for vindication. In our desperate situation in which religious faith becomes daily more impossible, we recognize in this psalmist one who stood where we stand. As he cried for vindication, so we too cry for vindication. As he utters no word of animosity toward his persecutors, and breathes no desire for vengeance, so our Christian love would shrink from wanting any triumph over our friends and colleagues and neighbours. *But we do want to know, and we want them to know, who is right.* The uncertainty of faith must give way to the certitude of knowledge. It is true that now we know in part, but then as St. Paul says we shall know as fully as God has known us.

The most distant frontiers shall take it to heart and turn to Yahweh
And all the Gentile tribes shall bow to him
For sovereignty belongs to Yahweh,
Lordship of the nations!

III

But this psalm transmits on yet another wave-length, and we who are Christian have long been tuned in to hear it. The first disciples, struggling to come to terms with the brutal fact of the crucifixion, turned to their Hebrew scriptures for some explanation. Running through all the Old Testament from Abel onwards, they found many instances of the suffering of the innocent righteous, but nowhere did they find it so clearly as in the Psalter of David the Royal Sufferer, and of all those psalms in none was the reference so plain as in the twenty-second.

Mark tells us that when Jesus was nailed to the cross he cried out "Eloi, Eloi, lama sabachthani?" and then the evangelist translates it for us: "My

God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?" There can be no doubt whatever that Mark meant us to recognize the opening line of the psalm. The fact, however, that others understood the cry to be one for help from Elijah shows that we cannot be certain what Jesus said or why he said it; what we can know for sure is that Mark and his friends believed that Jesus was quoting the psalm, and also that they believed that the explanation of his death was to be found in the psalm. Matthew not only repeats this cry from the cross, but he adds a further link with the psalm: the bystander priests actually use the verses of the psalm in which the ungodly taunt the righteous sufferer, to supply the gibes with which they mock Jesus: "He trusts in God; let him deliver him now, if he desires him." Luke is apparently oblivious to the help this particular psalm affords in interpreting the death of Jesus, but on the walk to Emmaus, the Stranger says that the scriptural explanation of the messianic death is to be found not only in the Torah and the Prophetic Books, but also in all the Writings, of which the Psalter is the foremost book. It is the Fourth Gospel that makes the connection most explicit, for he says that the soldiers gambled for the clothes of Jesus,

that the scripture might be fulfilled, which said:

They parted my garments among them
And upon my vesture did they cast lots (John 19:24).

The psalm has thus been made "messianic" and a direct prophecy of the dying of Jesus.

That the soldiers gambled for the few effects of the prisoner is highly probable, but someone then remembered the psalm and the connection, once made, seemed to the first Christian incontestable. The psalm is not likely to have suggested such a commonplace incident, as some have been rather too ready to believe. Even so, the coincidence of the factual incident and the verse in the psalm can hardly have been the sole ground of its messianic interpretation. There are other laments: what drew them so particularly to this one? Was Mark right, and was it Jesus himself? Had he himself been so familiar with this psalm that even in death it was these words that arose in his mind to express his agony? We repeat, that is a question to which we cannot give a sure answer. Mark may have put his own interpretation on an inarticulate cry. But he would hardly have done so without some historical warrant. At the least, it must have been remembered that Jesus often during those days of discipleship spoken of this particular psalm and perhaps explained its significance for him. We may think that he found an especial meaningfulness in the psalm because in its lines the fear, the loneliness, and the utter spiritual desolation of the human heart make themselves felt in universal expression. Each man as he reads finds himself saying: "These words express what I felt in my time of deepest sorrow." It is indicative of his profound humanity that Jesus also recognized the universality of these lines and used them to point to his own unspeakable agony. It is this Christian usage that has given the psalm its deepest ranges

of meaning. When we read the Gospels, we read of the scourging, the hatred, the nailing, and the slow torture of death, as they happened to a third person. But as we read the psalm, we experience them as they happened to a first person, and we know from the inside what it is like to be arraigned, hated, and hounded to cruel death. The four Gospels tell that story from differing points of view, but, for the Christian, Psalm 22 is the Fifth Gospel, and the point of view from which it speaks is that of the centre. When, in St. Mark's Gospel, Jesus says to the disciples in Gethsemane: "My soul is exceedingly sorrowful even unto death" (Matt. 26:38), the verses of the psalm echo in our minds:

I am poured out like water,
 And all my bones are out of joint.
 My heart is like wax,
 It is melted in the midst of my bowels.

When we read of the crowd gathered around the cross to watch Jesus die, we understand what it means to be, not on the circumferential edge, but there at the centre, the suffering "I" of the event:

Many bulls have compassed me,
 Strong bulls of Bashan have beset me round,
 They gape upon me with their mouth,
 As a ravening and roaring lion.
 For jackals have compassed me,
 The assembly of evil-doers have inclosed me,
 They pierced my hands and my feet!

The fact that the Septuagint, Syriac, and Latin all display that Christian interpretation of the last line¹⁵ is the strongest indication that Psalm 22 is for the Christian Church the Fifth Gospel account of the crucifixion, and that there the story is told in the first person.

There is yet something more to be added. The psalm takes its place in Christian thought as one among a whole host of scriptural references to "the passion of Christ." The phrase is in itself significant, for the formality of it lifts us into a world where the sordid story of the tortured death of an innocent man has been transformed into high ritual drama. His dying was, the phrase implies, foreordained. It is here foretold in scripture, even as it was enacted in the Temple sacrifices twice daily for a thousand years before the event itself took place. The "Passion of our Lord" was all part of the divine wisdom, the ordered, measured plan of salvation. That a pitiful human being called Jesus of Nazareth was horribly caught up in the remorseless wheels of its machinery is incidental. What he thought and felt about it all is irrelevant. This deed is ritual murder, the sacrilegious yet sacrificial immolation of the eternal Son of God. On this mystery hangs the salvation of every human soul that ever was or ever shall be. Because this psalm so

15. See note 7 above.

clearly foretells the event, and was itself written so long before the fact came into being, it is part of the evidence that points to the liturgical and theological significance of the crucial act of all time. Just as the celebrant before he robes knows himself as a queasy old man who always feels faint in the mornings until he has some hot coffee inside him, but once robed appears to the people and to himself as the priest of God Most High, remote from human frailties, so too this psalm, when viewed as part of scripture prophecy, points us to a theological Christ who suffered a mythological death, into which liturgically we may be caught up week by week, generation by generation.

Herein is profound truth. Despite the common element of profound nobility, there is an infinite difference between "Socrates drinking hemlock and Jesus on the rood." The one is a good man dying for his principles, leaving behind him the tenuous admonition of a good example; the other is the Son of God offering himself as a full, perfect, and sufficient sacrifice for the sins of the whole world. If Jesus were only a man, however noble and however good, his death had only the dimension of tragedy, arousing the emotion of pity; but because he is the Eternal Son of God, Second Person of the Holy Trinity, humbling himself divinely to death for us men and our salvation, his dying acquires the dimension of sacrifice, and the emotion aroused in us is mingled shame and awe and thanksgiving and utter devotion:

Were the whole world of Nature mine,
That were an offering far too small,
Love so amazing, so divine,
Demands my life, my soul, my all.

It is because Jesus is more than a man, and his dying more than a death, that the crucifixion has caught the imagination of millions and has attracted to itself the religious fervour of more men and women than any other symbol, event or thought. Our psalm is among those writings that, beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, point to Jesus as the Christ whom it behoved to suffer.

But it also shows more than that. In the Anticipatory Thanksgiving the psalm went on to prophesy a vindication and a restoration. It looked for world-wide praise of God for salvation achieved. The Church has always seen here a revelation of the Divine Pattern—the Humble Acceptance of Role; the Rejection and Defeat; then Death; and finally Resurrection and Vindication and Glory. This was the pattern of the old Kingship Ritual; this was the prophetic interpretation of Israel's career, from Sinai to the New Jerusalem; this was the career of the Servant of Yahweh in Second Isaiah; this was the pattern clearly discernible to the Early Church in the life and death and resurrection of Jesus—clearly discernible, that is, if you have read your Bible and know your Scripture well. In this psalm the pattern is especially clear, for there is the Invocation, with an expression of

faith, the Description of Situation, as one of desperate need, the Appeal for Help, and the Thanksgiving for vindication given. It is the same scriptural pattern, and so plainly set out that the first Christians could have no possible doubt—it was in terms of this pattern that the death of Jesus was to be explained and interpreted. And the pattern is one of final triumph and vindication.

IV

Here then is Psalm 22, the greatest of all the Individual Laments. As its primary level, it is the account of the religious experience of some anonymous Hebrew, and it speaks to us out of its sincerity and its realism. At the scriptural level it is the psalm of David the Suffering Righteous Man, and it speaks to us of what it means to be *hasidh*, *hagios*, a believer, in an unbelieving world. At the messianic level, it becomes the Fifth Gospel, and also a theological assertion of the significance of the Cross. But at every level, the lament becomes a triumph, because it is caught up into the divine purpose of him who makes all things new.