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The "Cry of Dereliction"— Some Further Observations

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IN HIS ARTICLE, "The 'Cry of Dereliction'—Another Point of View," Professor Robert Holst rendered the readers of this journal a good service by his lucid and timely reminder 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, but, rather, 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.¹ My purpose in this brief paper is to make some further observations in support of this viewpoint and, in particular, to underscore some seldom discussed insights of a profound and thorough evangelical scholar, the late Professor Karl Bornhäuser, of Marburg.²

While it is true that Psalm 22 comes to its conclusion in a mood of confidence and hope, 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 is set from its very beginning within the context of victory and expectation of deliverance. Lofthouse is not strictly correct when he states that the psalm "begins with a poignant complaint, 'My God, my God, why hast Thou forsaken me.'"³ The psalm begins with its title, which sets the stage often 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" and just left the Hebrew as it stood. Moffatt made the suggestion that "Doe of the Dawn" was a popular tune of the time to which the psalm was to be sung. Fantastic!⁴ 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 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 conquer" (*natsach*) and, being in the causative mood of the Pi'el, means "to the one who brings about victory." To this meaning some of the earliest translations attest. Aquila has "To the victory-maker"; Symmachus has the title "A Song of victory"; Theodotion has the heading, "To the victory," and Jerome has *victori*, that is "To the victor." Bornhäuser points to the similarity between this ascription in the psalm title and the words of St. Paul in 1 Cor. 15:57, "Thanks be to God *who giveth us the victory!*" When we look at the Septuagint we again find no reference to a precentor or to musical terminology, but 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," we have St. Paul's quotations from Isaiah 25: 8 in the same resurrection chapter that we have just quoted: "Death is swallowed up in *victory!*" (1 Cor. 15: 55). Symmachus translates Isaiah's words: "Death is swallowed up *at the end!*" The full title in the Septuagint reads: "To the end, concerning the succour of the day-break." The later shift from "succour" or "help" to "doe" came about through a change in the pointing of the vowels; *eyaluth*, ("help") was rendered as *ayyeleth* ("a doe"), the Hebrew radicals being the same. The title thus indicates that the psalm is a song of praise to God, the giver of victory, for help he gave at the break of day! It is in this setting that we must read the words, "My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?"

With the difference between the text of the Septuagint and the standard translations of the Massoretic text as great as we have shown in the psalm's superscription, we ought perhaps to be on our guard against further misunderstandings due to different pointing. We shall 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. Again, Bornhäuser believes 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 midrash on Exodus 15: 1 (the Mekilta) as asking, ". . . and where do I find that Eli means no other thing than the quality of *compassion*? Because it says (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 is 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 far off the mark! The next words in the Septuagint are the prayer, "Rescue me!" These words occur again at v. 20, both in the Septagint and in the Massoretic text. The words were apparently there in v. 2 in the text that the Septuagint translators had before them. Jesus does not pray this prayer for rescue, and we are reminded of His words recorded by John (12: 27): "And what shall I say, 'Father, save me from this hour'? No, for this purpose I have come to this hour!"

Bornhäuser insists that we should read the interrogative adverb as *lemah* ("to what?") and not as *lamah* ("why?"). The most reliable manuscripts of Matthew and Mark have the Hebrew transliterated in Greek as *lema*, and the translations given in the Greek, namely *hina ti* (Matthew) and *eis ti* (Mark) reflect the shades of meaning "for what?" and "To what?" rather than a 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?" is significantly different from "Why have you forsaken me?"

Our Lord's cry thus reflects his consciousness of the role to which God has committed him. In the deep words of St. Paul, "He made him to be sin for us, who knew no sin" (2 Cor. 5: 21). This sense of separation as the world's sin-bearer our Lord accepts 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. 12: 2). For his work on the cross brings about God's final victory over sin and death; hence his last triumphant cry: "It is finished!" Here we see the connection between the opening words of the title of Psalm 22, "To the end-time" (we recall Isaiah's words, "Death is devoured in the end-time," and Aquila's psalm title, "To the victory-giver") and the words of the "cry of dereliction" in the very next verse. The words of the psalmist and of our Lord are set in the context of triumph from the outset—triumph and confidence even in the midst of the experience of separation on account of the sin of the world.

There is one last ingenious suggestion of Bornhäuser that merits restatement here. Following the cry, "My God, my God, to what have you handed me over?" come the words, "far from my help the words of my roaring!" if we follow literally the Hebrew as now pointed. It is not impossible to make some sense out of these words as they stand, but it requires some juggling.⁵ Once again, however, the Septuagint has a most interesting divergence from the Massoretic text. It speaks not of "the words of my roaring," but of "the words of my sins"! The Septuagint translators read the unpointed text before them as *shegiah* ("sins," as, for example in Psalm 19: 13) and not as *sheagah* (roaring). *Shegiah* usually means "sins" of inadvertence, sins committed unwittingly, as Luther renders it in the Psalm 19 instance. How does the change from "roaring" to "sins" help in understanding the meaning? Bornhäuser suggests that what originally stood in the Psalm was not "the words of (*dibre*) my sins," but "on account of (*al-dibre*) my sins." The cry thus reads, "My God, my God, to what end have you left me far from help?" Bornhäuser suggests that *rachog* be given temporal and not spatial meaning, that is "for so long without help." Then the words "on account of my sins" are the understood answer to the questioning cry.⁶ The "my" in "my sins" does not necessarily mean, even in the Old Testament setting, the sins committed by the suppliant, but rather the sins which were reckoned to him by his enemies and for which his abusers reproached him. This imputed sin occurs frequently in the Psalms, as for example in Psalm 69: 5f., and Psalm 40: 12. Such an interpretation is most apt when seen in the context of our Lord's cry from the cross, for there, as the suffering servant of God, he "bore the sins of many" (Is. 53: 12). In this cry from the cross we have, therefore, the words of one committed to experiencing the sense of separation from God due to sin, yet, who, in the midst of this experience, calls upon the strong and compassionate Father whose will he is achieving by his death and of whose final victory our Lord is confidently and joyfully assured.

It has been my purpose to lend support to Professor Holst's timely reminder of the necessity to read the words of the "cry of dereliction" in the light of the whole of Psalm 22, and the insights of Bornhäuser, which I believe have long stood in need of re-

emphasis, help us to see these words even more richly and clearly as words in which the dominant note is not tragedy and pathos but victory and joy!

FOOTNOTES

1. *The Springfielder*, XXXV, pp. 286-9.
2. K. Bornhäuser, *The Death and Resurrection of Jesus Christ* (Bangalore: The C. L.'s Press, 1958). See especially Excursus No. 1, pp. 265ff.
3. W. F. Lofthouse, "The Cry of Dereliction," *The Expository Times*, LIII, (1941-2), p. 189.
4. Others before Moffatt, (for example, Kautzsch) had apparently made similar guesses.
5. Luther's rendering is noteworthy: "I howl, but my help is far away!"
6. Bornhäuser, *op. cit.*, pp. 276 and 278.

The Blessed Martin Luther, *Lectures on Galatians* (1535), translated by Jaroslav Pelikan, *Luther's Works* (American Edition), volume XXVII (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1964), pages 41f.:

By his example Paul teaches us to be as firm as he is when he predicts with complete assurance that they will bear their judgment on account of a matter that seemed not only trivial but even wicked to the false apostles and their disciples; for both groups thought they were teaching in a proper and godly way. Therefore, as I often warn you, doctrine must be carefully distinguished from life. Doctrine is heaven; life is earth. In life there is sin, error, uncleanness, and misery, mixed, as the saying goes, "with vinegar." Here love should condone, tolerate, be deceived, trust, hope, and endure all things (1 Cor. 13:7); here the forgiveness of sins should have complete sway, provided that sin and error are not defended. But just as there is no error in doctrine, so there is no need for any forgiveness of sins. Therefore there is no comparison at all between doctrine and life. "One dot" of doctrine is worth more than "heaven and earth" (Matt. 5:18); therefore we do not permit the slightest offense against it. But we can be lenient toward errors of life. For we, too, err daily in our life and conduct; so do all the saints, as they earnestly confess in the Lord's Prayer and the Creed. But by the grace of God our doctrine is pure; we have all the articles of faith solidly established in Sacred Scripture. The devil would dearly love to corrupt and overthrow these; that is why he attacks us so cleverly with this specious argument about not offending against love and the harmony among the churches.