

# Eloi, Eloi, Lema Sabachthani

And at three o'clock Jesus cried out in a loud voice "Eloi, eloi, lema sabachthani?" Which is translated, "My God, my God, why have you abandoned me?"

-Mark 15:34 with almost identical passage in Matthew 27:4

**\*\*\*Warning: this document contains an explicit and graphic explanation of the Crucifixion\*\*\***

This famous passage is often viewed by Christians as suggesting that God the Father, who could not see sin, was unable to see Jesus on the cross because Jesus had become sin in order to save the world. I do not claim this interpretation is wrong, but it appears to me as being overly simplistic. Jesus was still God, and therefore still was able to behold the beatific vision. His obvious distress while saying these words appears to be in conflict with His vision. I'm not saying this can't be reconciled, but things get very complicated very fast when one tries to do so. I have taken a few tentative steps myself down this logic path, and found efforts to reconcile this conflict created conflicts in other beliefs I had. And, unlike this theory, these beliefs were well supported by other scripture.

Finding myself at a theological dead end is not proof I am right in dismissing it, but to sacrifice (or at least largely overhaul) major aspects of my faith for something that has a minor impact on Christianity as a whole seems to violate the Cardinal Virtue of temperance. I would love to simply consider it a mystery of God and move on to more important aspects of my faith. But this is not practical, either. Unitarians (and I'm including Muslims here) consider this passage as proof that Jesus was not divine. To go into a discussion on how God is three persons in one which creates a situation where Jesus could still have seen the beatific vision while the Father looked elsewhere is likely to raise some eyebrows and even more uncomfortable questions. And since I don't even trust my own line of thought in this direction, it would be foolishness to present it against an intelligent and inquisitive interlocutor. What I need in this situation is a different approach. Fortunately, I have two approaches, and they actually supplement each other quite well.

The easiest to explain, and therefore the one that should be led with, is to simply open the Bible to Psalm 22. Before one even begins to read it, notice that the title is "The Prayer of an Innocent Person." Next, look to verse 2 (in the New American Bible and the NAB Revised Edition, verse 1 is the credits, so other translations might have verses numbered one less than mine here). The first line of the actual psalm is what Jesus said on the cross. One might see slight changes, as the NAB/NABRE use "forsaken" instead of "abandoned" in the psalm. This is because the NAB/NABRE translates the New Testament from the original Greek, while most of the Old Testament is translated from Hebrew. But regardless of how one's Bible is translated, there can be no mistake that Jesus was quoting this psalm. As Jesus was praying a recognized prayer, it does not necessarily follow that Jesus was "admitting" He was not God. What it does mean is that this psalm had a special meaning for Jesus in the final moments of His life, a meaning He wanted us to be aware of. It behooves us to look at this psalm. And when we do, we find quite a treasure trove of information.

We see that parts I and II of the psalm (verses 2-22) generally speak of the emotions of one who is in despair when unjustly attacked. Then in parts III and IV (v 23-32) we see that the psalmist (identified as King David) does not really believe God has abandoned him, but acknowledges that God has placed the psalmist through a great tribulation for the greater glory. Certainly Jesus was in great tribulation as He said these words (more on that later). This alone is a mixed blessing for Trinitarians.

This fact does disarm the Unitarian's attack *against* the trinity, but it does nothing to convince the Unitarian he is wrong. After all, many people (whom do *not* claim to be God) are unjustly accused, and many have likely found comfort in this psalm. So let us look even more closely at it.

Consider verse 9, "You relied on the Lord -- let Him deliver you; if He loves you, let Him rescue you." Compare this to Matthew 27:43: "He trusted in God; let Him deliver Him now if He wants Him. For He said, 'I am the Son of God.'" Note that this takes place just before Jesus cried out in despair. It's as if Jesus wants to bring attention to the fact that Psalm 22 is a prophecy. In Mark 15:36, just after Jesus cried out, we see "Wait, let us see if Elijah comes to take Him down." This proves that my interpretation is not mere speculation, as the religious leaders themselves recognized the reference to Psalm 22 and responded by testing Jesus to see if the prophecy would come true.

We also have Psalm 22:19, which says, "They divide my garments among them; for my clothing they cast lots." All four gospels confirm that this is exactly what happened to Jesus (Matthew 27:35, Mark 15:24, Luke 23:34 and John 19:24). Furthermore, John actually quotes the psalm in his account. I find this interesting, because while David was certainly unjustly attacked in horrible ways before he became king, nothing in his history suggests that he personally would have had to suffer this particular indignity. Whether he used it as a metaphor or realized he was making a prophecy here I don't know, but the fact remains he prophesied.

I would like to draw attention to verses 15-16. I don't personally consider them as conclusive as the previous verses I discussed for this approach, but it is critical in the second approach I'll soon address. Nonetheless, the phrases "like water my life drains away," and "as dry as a potsherd is my throat" are very coincidental. Blood and water came out of His side when stabbed to prove His death (John 19:34), and Jesus complained of being thirsty just before dying (John 19:28). And while the rest of the verses in parts I and II are vague, it is undeniable that parallels can be found for all of them in the Passion of Jesus. This circumstantial evidence, when coupled with the pointed prophecies mentioned earlier, points to the rewards parts III and IV promised. Jesus spoke those words to remind us of what is to come.

But the single greatest "nail in the coffin" of the Unitarian interpretation actually comes from part III. In verse 25, we see "for God has not spurned or disdained the misery of this poor wretch, *did not turn away from me*, but heard me when I cried out." (italics mine) A literal translation of the original Hebrew reads "hides his face from." This verse proves that Jesus is not to be taken literally when He claims God abandoned Him. Indeed, this verse also seems to contradict the popular idea that God hid His eyes from Jesus (and the original Hebrew explicitly contradicts it). No, the cry of Jesus was His human nature reacting to the despair of being totally abandoned and mocked and tortured. And this leads us to the second approach to answering this passage.

Many people speak of "faith," but give little cause to consider what it really means. This is an unfortunate affect of living in a culture where so many good things can be taken for granted. Many people claim to have faith, but have never tested it in a meaningful way. It is easy for a Christian to go to a church service if the minister or priest speaks highly of them. It is not easy for a Christian to attend a service if the Christian is at odds with the clergy. In the second case, the parishioner believes his salvation depends on attending a service where he is not otherwise welcome. For him to attend requires some degree of faith, whereas the first one needs little or none. Faith can only be strengthened and demonstrated through adversity. I will soon explain just how adverse things were for Jesus. It had to be this way; He had to be as worldly (fortunately for us, not spiritually) separated from the Father as possible so we could see what pure, perfect faith looked like. Anything less than this, and Satan could

claim that at least some human lives were more wretched than that of Jesus, and therefore could not be redeemed. No, Jesus had to let us know that nothing we can possibly suffer will truly separate us from God (which is the proper interpretation of Psalm 22, verses 2 and 25).

As evidence for this claim, consider this. Anyone who has truly attempted to follow God's will perfectly will at some time (and usually quite often) feel abandoned. We may know that God is with us, but our emotions react to what our senses say, not our reason. When the family is upset that one turned down the promotion because it would lead to making unethical decisions, when coworkers are angry that one is following the established rules instead of taking short cuts, when enemies gaslight us so we doubt our own good intentions, we will feel abandoned. Knowing otherwise will not change that feeling. And although the simple and straightforward approach of all four gospels has left many critics frustrated over the lack of details, we still have all we need in order to know just how abandoned Jesus must have felt.

His enemies the pharisees (which should have been His greatest supporters), convinced the authorities to condemn Him to death. The authorities betrayed their official duties and knowingly executed an innocent man (Matthew 27:23, Mark 15:14, Luke 23:4 and John 18:38). His best friend denied Him three times, with Jesus witnessing at least one of the denials (the last one, Luke 22:61). Virtually all his countrymen, including those who just a few days earlier were welcoming Him with praise worthy of a king, demanded His death over that of a known murderer (what we would call a terrorist today, Matthew 27:20-22, Mark 15:7-13, Luke 23:18-19 and John 18:39-40). Soldiers not only brutally tortured him (it is estimated that 40lb of flesh, bone and muscle was ripped off in the scourging based on studies of the Shroud of Turin), but mocked Him for sport as they were doing so. But it doesn't end here. We have non-Biblical histories and accounts to supplement what went on, so the gospel writers had little reason to delve into too many details. Furthermore, seemingly random details of the Passion have proven to be a veritable gold mine of information for modern medical science, which I'll get to shortly.

For starters, it is perfectly reasonable to assume that spectators along the path to Golgotha would have continued to spit on and mock Jesus as He was led to His death. If the guards were slack, then additional physical abuse was possible. Once there, he was stripped completely naked. The loincloth seen on Catholic crucifixes and in movies are for our sense of propriety, not historical accuracy. We know this because the garment that was gambled over was his linen tunic (John 19:23-24), what we would call "underwear" today. A blend of wool and linen was forbidden (Deuteronomy 22:9-11), and since wool is scratchy, it would be the linen garments that which were worn next to the skin.

The nails were placed just below the wrist (not the palm as seen in many crucifixes). This not only severed the tendon that allowed movement of the hands (so He could not use them to help Him breathe), but it also aggravated the median nerve in the arms. This would be an intense pain that lasted until He died (a pain so powerful and unique that the word "excruciating" had to be coined to describe it). When hoisted up, the weight of His body not only caused his shoulders to dislocate (it is estimated they were pulled out by about 6 inches), but the pull on the diaphragm forced his lungs to fill with air. After being hoisted up, His feet were nailed one on top of the other on an angled board to serve as a platform that He could push up against (more on that soon). The nails in the feet provided a suffering similar to what He felt in his wrists. With this information on the crucifixion (which was not known in King David's time, the practice began about 400 years after his death), we see some more prophecies come true. Verse 17 says: "They have pierced my hands and my feet," and verse 15: "all my bones are disjointed."

Getting back the crucifixion, the only way Jesus could exhale in this situation would be to push Himself up with His feet, but the crossed feet and angled board encouraged cramping when doing so. Furthermore, bleeding from the scourging would continue, and no doubt sensitive skin would be ripped when the wounds clotted against the back beam of the cross were forced back open by having to push up with His feet.

It is true that there were a few women there to cry over Him, but even this would bring Him shame. They depended on Him for their survival, and His death would leave them defenseless (without a doubt his mother, and a strong argument can be made for the others). While we don't know the thoughts of Jesus here, we do know that His culture would have considered His witnessing these women there as a reminder of how He failed to properly provide for them. And we cannot underestimate just how complete His culture would have considered this failure to be. And all of Israel would have know about it. This was not just any Friday He was executed, it was just before the Passover, the greatest holy day of the Jews. Literally every Jew in the world who wanted to be looked upon as a Jew would have been there to sacrifice at the Temple (this is the reason Jews did not spread much farther than Rome; they would not have had time to make the journey). And in those days, the *appearance* of being a good Jew was very important. Any and all Jews who cared anything at all about their faith and culture was there to see how He failed His mother (and possibly some other women).

For my final points, I want to talk about the actual death. Using evidence from the Bible and modern science of pathology, a very strong case can be made for the following narrative (see Lee Strobel's book *The Case for the Christ*, Chapter 11 for more details). The blood Jesus sweated in Gethsemane (Luke 22:44) is a medical condition known as hematidrosis. It causes capillaries in the sweat glands to break down. While the loss of blood in the garden was of no big consequence (other than giving medical science a huge clue as to what happens later), it meant that the skin of Jesus was very fragile and extra sensitive to the flogging that was soon to come. The scourging, as can be imagined, resulted in a great loss of blood, but this was compounded by the hematidrosis and led to hypovolemic (literally, little volume of blood) shock. This is why Jesus passed out on the way to His crucifixion and needed Simon to carry his cross beam (all three synoptic gospels attest to Simon carrying the cross, Christian tradition holds that Jesus fell three times, two of which were after Simon bore the cross beam), and why he was dehydrated ("I thirst," John 19:28). Hypovolemic shock also caused his heart to race in an effort to keep the body's needs met with the limited blood left. This would cause a clear fluid to build up on both the lungs and the heart (pleural effusion and pericardial effusion respectively), which is why "blood and water" came out when His side was pierced. John 19:34) The actual death of Jesus, however, was caused from asphyxiation. In His hypovolemic shock weakened state, the ability of Jesus to push Himself up to breathe became harder and therefore slower. Carbonic acid began to build up in His blood, and at a certain point His heart began to beat irregularly from the toxins and then stopped altogether. Feeling His heart suddenly stopping is what let Jesus know the moment of His death had happened ("Into your hands, I commend my spirit," in Luke 23:46 and "It is finished," from John 19:30)

So, if we really understand what Jesus actually went through, which was literally man's most successful endeavor to cause the most humiliating and painful death possible, I feel it is absurd to question why the emotional human nature of Him would *feel* abandoned by God, even if He knew in His mind that the opposite was true. In my humble opinion, I do not think the proper question is, "Why did He feel abandoned?" but rather "Why did He have to suffer unto this extreme?" And this question I have already addressed on two grounds. The first is that Jesus had to experience humanity at its lowest point or else Satan would have had at least a partial victory. The second is that only perfect faith can

rise above perfect feelings of abandonment, and only Jesus as God could have had such faith.

The highest condition of the human will is in sight ... I say not the highest condition of the Human Being; that surely lies in the Beatific Vision, in the sight of God. But the highest condition of the Human Will, as distinct, not as separated from God, is when, not seeing God, not seeming to itself to grasp Him at all, it yet holds Him fast.

-George MacDonald, UNSPOKEN SERMONS, First Series, *The Eloi*

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