

A History of Biblical Interpretation of Psalm 22

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The following paper analyzes three historical readings of Psalm 22, starting with Augustine's *Exposition on the Psalms* compared and contrasted to the interpretations given by John Calvin's *Commentary on the Book of Psalms* and that provided by Charles Spurgeon in *The Treasury of David*. These three authors provide some valuable perspectives on the interpretation of Scripture in light of the different periods of church history in which they lived. In all three of these commentaries, there is a clear Christological theme surrounding the Passion of Jesus found in Psalm 22. The stages of Jesus' Passion reflect the structure of the book, starting out as a lamentation and turning into a psalm of praise to God. This essay will also look at how Augustine's Christology influences and is influenced by the correlations he makes between prophetic passages in Psalms 22 and their fulfillment in the life of Christ.

Augustine's *Exposition on the Psalms* has been called the "longest and at the same time the least read" of his works. Augustine started writing it in 392 but did not finish it until 418. Throughout his exposition of the Psalms, Augustine focuses on Christ. He says, "Christ is the comprehensive mystery underlying all of Scripture."¹ His main point is that Christians, as members of one body with Christ as the Head, are united with Christ in His sufferings on the Cross, as well as His victory over sin and death (1 Cor. 12:12-27).² The apostle Paul notes, "We

¹ Dr. Stephen Nichols, "Augustine on the Psalms," Minutes in Church History, (November 23, 2016), <https://www.5minutesinchurchhistory.com/augustine-on-the-psalms/>.

² Bruce Waltke, James M. Houston and Erika Moore, *The Psalms as Christian Lament* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing, 2014), 124.

share in the terrible sufferings of Christ, but also in the wonderful comfort he gives” (Cor. 1:5 CEV).³

John Calvin’s theology and writings were heavily influenced by Augustine. Calvin’s interpretations of Psalm 22 are therefore, similar to Augustine’s but he carefully distinguishes the historical David from Jesus while not separating them.

Spurgeon, writing in the nineteenth century, had the benefit of drawing upon, in addition to Augustine and Calvin, a multitude of ancient, medieval and contemporary scholars to form his interpretations of Psalm 22. Spurgeon’s commentaries on the Psalms, *The Treasury of David*, is often described as his “magnum opus”. The entire seven volume set, consisting of over 5,000 pages.⁴ Along with the sections on Augustine and Calvin, this paper also looks at how Spurgeon interprets Psalms 22 from a Christological point of view.

Background

In order to fully appreciate the three theologians’ interpretations of Psalm 22, it’s helpful to have some background on this passage. In Psalms 22:1, King David states that this is “For the Choirmaster. To the tune of ‘The Doe of the Dawn’ (Ps. 22:1 BSB). Most scholars conclude that, while the music for this psalm has been lost, it was originally meant to be sung by the Temple choir as it was written for the Choirmaster.⁵ Several Christian churches in the world have written music to accompany this song and call it “Good Friday Psalm”. Lusher suggests that the

³ Contemporary English Version. Unless otherwise noted, all other biblical passages referenced use the New American Standard Bible version.

⁴ Charles Spurgeon, *The Treasury of David*, vol. 1, (Peabody: Hendrickson Publishers, 1988), v.

⁵ Robert Fausset, *Fausset's Bible Dictionary*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing 1979), 234.

“Doe” in the Psalm’s title may be a metaphor for Christ.⁶ “The doe symbolizes a lovely and innocent one hounded to death, as the bulls, lions, dogs in the psalm are the persecutors.” The reference to the wild dogs and lions in Psalm 22:16,21 may be alluding to the Sadducees and Pharisees who wanted to kill Jesus or, as Augustine notes in his exposition of the psalm, to the crowds roaring, like a lion, “Crucify, Crucify” (John 19:6).⁷ Jesus’ death and resurrection ushered in the dawn of a new day, proclaiming victory over the powers of darkness and shining His glorious light upon the world.⁸ “The people walking in darkness have seen a great light” (Isa. 9:2a NIV).

Psalm 22 starts out as a lament and describes the afflictions of the narrator. It is also thought of as a Prophetic Psalm due to the many references pointing to Jesus’ Crucifixion, such as, “My God, my God, why have You forsaken me?” (Ps. 22:1a NASB). These same words are spoken by Jesus on the Cross in Matt 27:46b and Mark 15:34b. Many have called Psalm 22 the “Song of the Cross” or the ‘Fifth Gospel’ account of the crucifixion due to the references to Jesus, The Messiah, the “Suffering Servant”, who “was pierced for our transgressions” (Isa. 53:5a KJB).⁹ This parallels Psalm 22:16b: “They pierced my hands and my feet”. Isaiah 53:5b goes on to say: “he was crushed for our iniquities; the chastisement of our peace was upon him; and with his stripes we are healed”. For the above reasons, Psalm 22 is also known as a “Messianic Psalm” as the reference in Psalm 22:18, “They divide my garments among them, and for my clothing they cast lots” mirrors Matthew 27:35, “And when they had crucified Him, they

⁶ Selderhuis, Herman J., *Psalms 1-72*, Reformation Commentary on Scripture Series, O.T. vol. 6. (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2015), XX?

⁷ Augustine, *Expositions on the Psalms*, from Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, First Series, vol. 8., ed. by Philip Schaff (Buffalo: Christian Literature Publishing Co., 1888), 110.

⁸ Fausset, *Fausset's*, 178.

⁹ George Horne, *A Commentary on the Psalms* (NY: Robert Carter & Brothers, 1854), 167.

divided up His garments among themselves by casting lots.” With this brief background of Psalm 22 in mind, this paper now examines Augustine’s interpretation.

Augustine’s Exposition of Psalms 22

Many scholars believe King David was guided by the Holy Spirit when he wrote the prophetic words to Psalm 22 that serve to foreshadow the Passion of Jesus. Augustine declares that Jesus himself is speaking the words of Psalm 22 from the Cross as a man, sharing our mortal human nature with all its frailty (e.g., like a doe that is hunted by wild animals) yet without sin. Augustine says that “it is the old man nailed to the Cross that speaks”.¹⁰

As a man, Jesus expressed human feelings (He wept, was angry and felt much anguish in the Garden of Gethsemane). Jesus said, “My soul is overwhelmed with sorrow to the point of death” (Matthew 26:38a NIV).

Augustine explains that this passage is written from the perspective of Jesus, the incarnate man, who on the Cross became sin for us (2 Cor. 5:21). In that moment, the man Jesus (I Tim. 2:5) felt the deprivation of the presence of the Father (Ps. 22:1), as though God has hidden his face from Him (Hab. 1:13 says God is holy and cannot look upon sin), in the same way that Adam and Eve experienced separation from God. The Psalms played such an important role in Augustine’s life that, according to his good friend Possidius, Augustine spent his final days in prayer and repentance, requesting that the penitential Psalms of David be hung on his walls so that he could read them.¹¹ His belief in the notion of original sin as a result of Adam’s fall and his views regarding God’s grace weighed heavily upon him. He writes, “The spirit of

¹⁰ Augustine, *Expositions*, 108.

¹¹ Roy J. Deferrari, *Early Christian Biographies* (Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 1952), 122.

grace, therefore, causes us to have faith, in order that through faith we may, on praying for it, obtain the ability to do what we are commanded.”¹² It is important to note that Augustine was influenced, early in his Christian life, by the preaching of Ambrose. Ambrose promoted an allegorical interpretation of Scripture and this appealed to Augustine. Critics of Augustine point out that he had very little knowledge of Hebrew and Latin and thus relied on the Greek Septuagint to write his commentaries of Old Testament Scriptures. Not having a strong foundation in Hebrew would make it difficult to compare the meaning of the text in multiple languages. He only possessed a small amount of knowledge of Hebrew, and very little knowledge of Greek.¹³

Some critics believe that Augustine’s Christological interpretation of a psalm at times seems “forced and unjustifiable” from the text. His over emphasis on an allegorical interpretation of the Psalms over the historical opens him up to criticism that his connections to spiritual truths and foreshadowing go too far and are often influenced by his Christology and desire to find allusions to Christ everywhere in the Psalms and elsewhere.¹⁴

While Augustine was not the first to write a commentary on the Psalms (Origen wrote one around 222-225),¹⁵ his interpretations remain extremely relevant even today, in light of the very important role he played in the development of the theology and Christology of both Catholics and Protestants alike.

¹² Augustine, *On Grace and Free Will*, trans. by Peter Holmes and Robert Ernest Wallis (Buffalo: Christian Literature Publishing Co., 1887), 28.

¹³ Bertrand de Marjorie, *St. Augustine*, vol. 3 of *An Introduction to the History of Exegesis*, trans. Pierre de Fontnouvelle (Petersham, Massachusetts: Saint Bede’s Publications, 1991), 126.

¹⁴ Marjorie, *St. Augustine*, 127.

¹⁵ Neale, *A Commentary on the Psalms*, 289.

John Calvin's Commentary on Psalms 22

John Calvin wrote during the Reformation period so his theological views are reflective of that era but he was also heavily influenced by Augustine. He wrote, "Augustine is so wholly within me, that if I wished to write a confession of my faith, I could do so with all fullness and satisfaction to myself out of his writings."¹⁶ Although Calvin's Commentary on the Psalms quotes Augustine extensively, his interpretation of Psalm 22, nevertheless, has some unique aspects that clearly set it apart from Augustine's. Calvin concludes that David, in writing Psalm 22, presents, "in his own person, a type of Christ who he knew by the Spirit of prophesy".¹⁷ While Calvin sees David as an archetype for Jesus, his ultimate Messianic heir,¹⁸ Augustine only sees Jesus, the incarnate man speaking in Psalm 22. He makes heavy use of allegorical interpretations to a point where some argue that he stretches his interpretations a little too far in order to see Jesus where perhaps a more literal interpretation is more appropriate. Augustine's view is that it is Jesus himself speaking. He says, "for it is the old man nailed to the Cross that speaks".¹⁹ While Calvin relates Psalm 22 to the prophesy in Isaiah 53:8, "He was taken from prison and from judgment: and who shall declare his generation?", Augustine does not make this connection. Although Calvin agrees that this psalm is a prophesy concerning Christ, he does not interpret the reference to the doe in the title of Psalm 22, as having some mystical or allegorical meaning. Augustine's interpretation of Psalm 22 relies heavily on allegory as exemplified in his

¹⁶ John Calvin, *A Treatise on the Eternal Predestination of God*, in John Calvin, *Calvin's Calvinism*, trans. Henry Cole (Grandville, MI: Reformed Free Publishing Association, 1987), p. 38.

¹⁷ John Calvin, *Commentary on Psalms, vol. 1*, trans. Rev. James Anderson (Grand Rapids: Christian Classics Ethereal Library, n.d.): 351, accessed May 04, 2020, <https://ccel.org/ccel/calvin/calcom08/calcom08.xxviii.html>.

¹⁸ John Mason Neale and Richard Frederick Littledale, *A Commentary on the Psalms: From Primitive and Medieval Writers*, vol. 1 (London: Joseph Masters & Co., 1884), 289.

¹⁹ Augustine, *Expositions*, 108.

understanding of Psalm 22:21, “save Me from the mouth of the kingdom of this world: “and my humility from the horns of the unicorns”.²⁰ Calvin explains it better, by saying that God provided a greater deliverance to Jesus the man by allowing Him to die and rise again than had He prevented Him from dying when He called out from the Cross. Another example of Augustine’s difficulty in explaining a verse using a mystical/allegorical approach is Psalm 22:29a, “All the rich ones of the earth shall eat and worship.” Augustine’s interpretation of this verse is: “The rich of the earth too have eaten the Body of their Lord’s humiliation, and though they have not, as the poor, been filled even to imitation, yet they have worshipped.”²¹ This explanation is confusing but seems to be a reference to the Mystical Body of Christ that Augustine believed, in the Eucharist, is the real Body and Blood of Christ. Here again, Calvin’s interpretation is much clearer when he states that “this sacrifice will be as common to those who are in opulent circumstances as to those who are poor; that the former, laying aside their pride, may humble themselves before God, and that the latter, though they may be brought low, may lift up their minds by spiritual joy to God.”²²

Charles Spurgeon’s Interpretation of Psalms 22

Although Charles Spurgeon is perhaps more famous for his preaching (nicknamed “The Prince of Preachers”²³) than his theological writings, he did leave behind a legacy of Christian books, including his literary masterpiece on the Psalms entitled *The Treasury of David* (often referred to as his “magnum opus”). Like Calvin, Spurgeon was also influenced by Augustine but

²⁰ Augustine, *Expositions*, 110.

²¹ Augustine, *Expositions*. 111.

²² Calvin, *Commentary*, 376.

²³ Charles Spurgeon, *The Treasury of David*, vol. 1 (Peabody: Hendrickson Publishers, 1988), v.

draws from a much broader range of scholars in his interpretation of the Psalms. Spurgeon includes quotes and comments from many of the greatest theologians in history. In Volume 1 of *The Treasury of David*, Spurgeon included twenty-nine references to Augustine. He once said that “Augustine obtained his views, without doubt, through the Spirit of God.”²⁴ The diversity of views presented by Spurgeon in his commentary on the Psalms gives his work a greater depth of insight as he ‘stood on shoulders of giants’ when he wrote *The Treasury of David*. Spurgeon thought Jesus could have spoken Psalm 22 verbatim on the Cross. He states, “We should read reverently, putting off our shoes from our feet, as Moses did at the burning bush, for if there be holy ground anywhere in Scripture it is this psalm.”²⁵ Spurgeon believed that the ultimate message of the Psalm 22 is that, although God often delays in answering prayer, He does answer and upholds ultimate justice. Like Augustine, he believes the reference in the title of the psalm is to Jesus, “The Hind of the Morning” and the descriptions of the wild animals hunting the Hind are those who wanted to kill Jesus. He says Psalm 22 “is the photograph of our Lord’s saddest hours, the record of His dying words, the container of His last tears, the memorial of His expiring joys. Before us in Psalm 22 we have a description both of the darkness and of the glory of the Cross, the sufferings of Christ and the glory which shall follow.”²⁶ Unlike Augustine, Spurgeon doesn’t stress the union of all believers in some mystical way with the Eucharist and our sharing in His actual body and blood.

²⁴ Spurgeon, *The Treasury*, vi.

²⁵ Spurgeon, *The Treasury*, 323.

²⁶ Spurgeon, *The Treasury*, 324.

Conclusion

The commentaries on Psalm 22 written by Augustine, Calvin and Spurgeon, though spanning over a thousand years, from the fourth to the nineteenth century, provide some valuable perspectives on the interpretation of Scripture in light of the different periods of church history in which they were written. In all three of these commentaries, there is a loud and clear Christological message that cries out in the affliction and sorrow that Jesus, in his humanity, felt as He took upon Himself the sins of the whole world and died on the Cross, only to be raised victorious on that third morning which turns the narrative from a psalm of lamentation to one of praise and glory to God for what He has accomplished through His son.

Some Bible scholars maintain that the latter portion of Psalms 22 (verses 27-31) should be interpreted eschatologically, with the reference in Ps. 22:27 to all the nations of the world bowing down and worshipping before God, much like the vision of John in Rev. 7:9 when all the nations are gathered before the throne of God and bow down to worship Him. Other scholars would like to suggest that some if not the majority, of the verses merit a more literal interpretation that reflects David's own anguish and affliction when faced by real enemies who sought to kill him.²⁷

Augustine takes a purely Christological approach to interpreting Psalm 22 and sees the entire passage as Jesus Christ Himself speaking. Certainly, there are numerous verses in Psalm 22 that are clearly prophetic in nature (Ps. 22:8,16,18) as Psalm 22:1a is spoken by Christ Himself on the Cross. The parallelism between Psalm 22 and what Christ accomplished on the Cross is even reflected in how the book ends: "They will tell people yet to be born about his

²⁷ Neale, *A Commentary*, 289.

righteousness-that He has finished it” (Ps. 22:31 GWT). The Apostle John writes that Jesus’ last words on the Cross before He died were: “It is finished” (John 19:30).

Augustine does a good job explaining how Psalms 22 relates to Romans 6:6: “Knowing this, that our old man is crucified with Him, that the body of sin might be destroyed, that henceforth we should not serve sin” and states that “it is the old man nailed to the Cross that speaks” in Psalm 22:1.²⁸ On the other hand, some of his interpretations of other passages are unclear and leave much to be desired. It seems as though he is trying to draw some “hidden meaning” or revelation from the Scripture that doesn’t quite fit with the text.

Comparing Augustine’s interpretation of Psalm 22 from the fourth century with that of John Calvin in the sixteenth century and Charles Spurgeon in the nineteenth century provides some valuable perspectives from history on how theologians’ views over time helped shape the interpretation of Scripture and reaffirms Augustine’s belief that “Christ is the comprehensive mystery underlying all of Scripture.”²⁹

²⁸ Augustine, *Exposition*. 108.

²⁹ Nichols, *Augustine*. 1.

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The emerging biblical theology had been musicalized.[9]. Praise and worship became a fully developed liturgical phenomenon, and music was the primary tool used to express the liturgical movement. Interpreting the Psalms, especially from a new covenant vantage point, necessitates a theological framework that recognizes the purpose of the psalms in their original context and placement within the canon. Only after establishing this framework is it possible to more fully understand their application within the new covenant. I will briefly present some pertinent concepts that clarify the interpretation of Psalm 22. "Psalm 72: A Historical and Messianic Current Example of Antiochene Hermeneutical Theoria". *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* (2009): 257-70. first person accounts of Jesus' experiences in the thought forms of Hebrew poetry. These psalms, then, transcend the tenth century BC because they are properly native to the first century AD in the rich context of the faithful life, struggle, death, and resurrection of Jesus. Rhetorical criticism and the interpretation of the Old Testament Modern history of Biblical interpretation presents us with two basic approaches to the text of the Bible, viz. historical and literary approaches. This article proposes rhetorical criticism as a process of interpretation that analyses both the historical and literary features of a text. Use of Psalm 22 through the pre-Christian centuries and critical analysis of our Gospels working back from them to Jesus meet in a picture of the cross as lament in suffering and thanksgiving for what God then did. To that extent, the intent of the psalm came to supreme expression in Jesus. Howard C. Kee, "Scripture Quotations and Allusions in Mark 11-16," *The Society of Biblical Literature, One Hundred Seventh Annual Meeting, Seminar Papers* (1971), Vol. 2, pp. 475-502, rev. forthcoming in the *festschrift* for W. G. Kmmel. This apocalyptic emphasis will crop up in some interpretations of the cry from Psalm 22:1 at the cross. Howard G. Kee, *Jesus in History: An Approach to the Study of the Gospels* (New York Psalm 22 is the 22nd psalm of the Book of Psalms, beginning in English in the King James Version: , "My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?" The Book of Psalms is the third section of the Hebrew Bible, and a book of the Christian Old Testament. In the Greek Septuagint version of the bible, and in its Latin translation in the Vulgate, this psalm is Psalm 21 in a slightly different numbering system. In Latin, it is known as "Deus, Deus meus". *General Principles of Biblical Interpretation. Principle 1: Interpretation must be based on the author's intention of meaning and not the reader. This means we must get into the author's context, historically, grammatically, culturally and the literary forms and conventions the author was working in.* For example, Psalm 24 says, "The Lord owns the earth and all it contains, the world and all who live in it. For he set its foundation upon the seas, and established it upon the ocean currents. Who is allowed to ascend the mountain of the Lord?" Biblical passages must be interpreted according to the intention of the author and in the context in which the statement is made. Interpretation must be distinguished from application.