

## Psalms 22 — The Psalm from the Cross — Forsaken, Pierced, and the Praise That Reaches the Ends of the World

*Psalm 22: a psalm of David, superscribed 'to the chief Musician upon Aijeleth Shahar' — the supreme individual lament, opening in the darkness of abandonment and mockery, moving through the pierced hands and parted garments of a death by exposure, and turning at last to a thanksgiving that widens from one sufferer's brethren to all the kindreds of the nations and a people yet unborn. David's own tenth-century-BC anguish (scriptural chronology c. 1000 BC) becomes, in the Gospels and on the Savior's own lips, the most detailed prophetic witness of the Atonement in the Old Testament.*

There is a moment in the New Testament when the darkness over Golgotha breaks open with a sentence, and the sentence is a quotation. "About the ninth hour Jesus cried with a loud voice, saying, Eli, Eli, lama sabachthani? that is to say, My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?" (Matt. 27:46). The dying Christ, with breath running short, reaches back a thousand years and speaks the first line of Psalm 22. So before we read a word of this psalm as David's, we have to reckon with the fact that its author's greater Son took it into his own mouth at the worst hour of the world — and thereby told us how to read it.

### Hebrew Word Studies

**azab (H5800) (אָזַב)** — **to leave, forsake, abandon, let loose v. 1.** The first word of the psalm's agony, and one of the heaviest in the Hebrew Bible. *Azab* means to let go, release, abandon — it is what a man does to a field he leaves fallow, to a burden he sets down, to a person he walks away from. Its terror in verse 1 is that it is the covenant's own promise-word turned inside out: "The LORD... will not forsake (*azab*) his inheritance" (Ps. 94:14); "he will not fail thee, neither forsake thee" (Deut. 31:6); "I will never leave thee, nor forsake thee" (echoed at Heb. 13:5). The whole Old Testament swears God does not *azab* his own — and here his own cries out asking why he has. The Restoration reads the mystery reverently: on the cross the Son bore the withdrawal of the Father's Spirit so that we need never bear it, "that he may know according to the flesh how to succor his people" (Alma 7:12). Isaiah frames the same tension and its resolution: "For a small moment have I forsaken thee; but with great mercies will I gather thee" (Isa. 54:7). The forsaking is real, and it is not the last word — the psalm itself will prove that in twenty-one more verses.

**tola'at (H8438) (תּוֹלַאֲתַי)** — **worm, crimson grub — and the scarlet dye crushed from it v. 6.** The sufferer does not call himself the common earthworm (*remes* or *rimmah*); he calls himself *tola'at*, the coccus scarlet-worm. The same word names both the insect and the brilliant red dye extracted by crushing it — so *tola'at* is Hebrew for "scarlet" in Exodus's tabernacle instructions ("blue, and purple, and scarlet," Ex. 26:1) and in Isaiah's promise, "though your sins be as scarlet (*tola'at*), they shall be as white as snow" (Isa. 1:18). The image folds two truths into one word: utter self-abasement — "no man," lower than human — and the paradox that from the crushing comes something that covers and cleanses. The Christian eye cannot miss it: a King mocked in a scarlet robe (Matt. 27:28), a body crushed, and a redemption dyed in the color of that blood. Job reaches for the same abasement — "man, that is a worm" (Job 25:6) — but only here does the crimson-worm word carry the whole freight of a suffering that becomes a covering.

**ka'aru / karah (H3738) (כָּרַח / כָּרַח)** — **they dug, bored through, pierced v. 16.** The KJV "they pierced" renders the verbal root *karah*, "to dig, hew, bore through" — the verb used for digging a pit ("Whoso diggeth a pit shall fall therein," Prov. 26:27) or hewing out a well or a grave ("in my grave which I have digged," Gen. 50:5). Applied to hands and feet, "dug through / bored through" is exactly the wound of a nail. The reading is textually contested — the Masoretic tradition points the word as *ka'ari*, "like a lion" — but the Septuagint (■*ryxan*, "they pierced," rendered by Jewish translators c. 200 BC), the Syriac, and the oldest surviving Hebrew copy of the psalm (the Nahal Hever scroll, 5/6■evPs) all attest the verb of piercing, not the noun "lion." The King James Version, the whole Christian tradition, and the Restoration read the wounds: "they shall look upon me whom they have pierced" (Zech. 12:10; quoted of the crucifixion at John 19:37). Handle the crux honestly and then let it rest — the weight of the oldest witnesses, the flanking lament (bones, garments, thirst), and the Savior's own displayed prints all fall on the same side.

**goral (H1486) (גּוֹרָל)** — **lot; and by extension, the portion or destiny assigned by the lot v. 18.** *Goral* is the physical lot — a stone or marked object cast to let God decide an outcome — and then, by natural extension, the *portion* or *destiny* the lot assigns ("the LORD is the portion of mine inheritance... thou maintainest my lot," Ps. 16:5). Israel divided the Promised Land by *goral* ("the land shall be divided by lot," Num. 26:55; Josh. 18:10), trusting that "the lot is cast into the lap; but the whole disposing thereof is of the LORD" (Prov. 16:33). The bitter irony of verse 18 is that soldiers cast *goral* not for an inheritance

but for a dying man's clothing — dividing his last earthly possessions while, unseen, the true inheritance of all nations is being purchased above their heads. John fastens on this verse as fulfilled prophecy (John 19:24), and the doubled Hebrew parallelism — *garments* parted, *vesture* gambled — matches the Gospel's own distinction between the divided outer clothes and the seamless coat left whole. Human hands cast lots for scraps; the divine *goral*, the portion assigned that day, was the salvation of the world.

**qahal (H6951) (קָהָל)** — **assembly, congregation, the gathered community of the covenant v. 22.** The pivot of the psalm's second half. Twice in verse 16 and back in verse 12 the sufferer was surrounded by a hostile *assembly* — "the assembly ('edah) of the wicked have inclosed me." Now, delivered, he stands "in the midst of the *qahal*" — but this is the covenant congregation, the same word for the whole assembly of Israel gathered at Sinai ("the day of the assembly," Deut. 9:10) and for the worshipping community of the Psalms ("I will praise thee among much people," Ps. 35:18). The hostile crowd that closed in has been replaced by a redeemed crowd gathered to praise. Hebrews translates *qahal* here with the Greek *ekklesia* — "church" (Heb. 2:12) — so that the risen Christ declaring the Father's name "in the midst of the *qahal*" becomes the Lord singing in the midst of his gathered Church. The movement of the whole psalm is the movement from one *assembly* to another: from the congregation of mockers who pierced him to the congregation of brethren who worship with him.

**zera (H2233) (זֶרַע)** — **seed, offspring, posterity — and by extension the coming generation of the faithful vv. 23, 30.** *Zera* is literally "seed" — sown grain, and then, by the oldest metaphor in scripture, human offspring and posterity. It is the word of the great promises: "in thy seed shall all the nations of the earth be blessed" (Gen. 22:18); the Messianic "seed" who would bruise the serpent (Gen. 3:15). In verse 23 it names "the seed of Jacob," the covenant people; in verse 30 it opens forward to "a seed" that "shall serve him" and carry his righteousness "unto a people that shall be born." So the psalm ends on the mechanism of its own survival: a *seed*, a coming generation, declaring the finished work to generations not yet born. Abinadi read the Suffering Servant this exact way — asking of the pierced and afflicted One, "who shall declare his generation? ... behold, I say unto you, that when his soul has been made an offering for sin he shall see his seed" (Mosiah 15:10–11), and then defining that seed as everyone who has heeded the prophets and believed on redemption. Psalm 22's last word is not the sufferer's pain but his posterity — the *zera* who will still be telling the nations, ages hence, "that he hath done this."

### From the Chapter's Architecture

*The psalm's poetry runs on Hebrew parallelism — the doubling of a thought across two matched lines that is the basic building block of biblical verse. Sometimes it intensifies ("all my bones are out of joint: my heart is like wax," v. 14); sometimes it distributes a single scene across two panels, as in verse 18, where "garments" parted and "vesture" gambled are one act seen twice — the very doubling John's Gospel honors when it distinguishes the divided outer clothes from the seamless coat left whole. I will not force a chiasm onto this psalm; its architecture is not a mirror but an arc — a plunge to the pierced center and a long, widening ascent out of it into universal praise. The shape is the message: this is what the Atonement looks like drawn as a line — down to the nails, and out to the ends of the world.*