



## Paul's Use of Lament Psalms in Romans

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Readers of the New Testament are agreed that its authors sometimes present Christ as the speaker or the unique addressee of specific Psalms texts. Whether in the case of the evangelists, who may have written their passion accounts with Psalms open before them, as Donald Juel suggests, or in the case of letter writers who could—depending on the implied narrative in the psalm—view Christ as speaking or hearing the psalm spoken to him, all agree that there is significant intertextuality between the prayer book of Israel and the discourse ascribed to Jesus in the New Testament.<sup>1</sup> It is significant that key psalms in view here are lament psalms, the most prevalent genre found in the biblical psalter, a fact contemporary readers are often surprised to learn. In the case of the Gospels, Psalms 22 and 69 are especially formative in the Gospels' passion accounts, and in the case of Paul's attribution of psalm-speaking to Christ, the premiere example is Psalm 69. But identifying the literary phenomenon of intertextuality between Psalms and the New Testament does not fully address the existential questions all readers of Israel's prayer book face in the lament psalms: how to read and pray psalms that

<sup>1</sup> Donald Juel, *Messianic Exegesis: Christological Interpretation of the Old Testament in Early Christianity* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1988), 93–98. Christ is presented as the speaker of prayers from the psalms in Rom 15:3; Heb 2:12; 10:5–7. Christ is presented as the addressee of Psalm texts in Heb 1:5, 8–9; 5:5–6; 7:17, 21.

*The psalms of the Old Testament are a treasure for Christians to use, but there are some, especially the lament psalms, that are challenging. The way Paul employs these lament psalms in Romans provides his reader a new, christologically focused way of understanding and using these psalms.*

blame God for evil, plead to God for deliverance from evil, or ask God to bring evil or judgment on one's enemies. Anyone who has sung Martin Luther's chorale "Aus Tiefer Not," which is based on the lament psalm identified as Psalm 130 in our Bibles, knows that the lament psalms offer plenty of stimuli for theological reflection. In order to read or pray a lament psalm, one must decide how to proceed through some weighty questions such as: "Does God exist?"; "Did God will the evil I am experiencing?"; "Is there any value in praying to God?"; "Did God raise up those who oppose me?"; and "Can I pray for God to harm those who oppose me?" In this essay I hope to argue for a modest hypothesis: Paul's use of lament psalms in Romans represents a christological approach based on four developments he offers in response to the theological and ethical questions these psalms raise.

Let us first establish the relatively extensive use of Psalms texts in Romans and see how prevalent the lament genre is among these texts. As one can see in the following chart, of the thirteen quotations from Psalms in Romans, six of them, marked by bold font, come from lament psalms. This chart represents my additions of NRSV and MT (Masoretic Text) references to the Psalms texts within the Old Testament quotations in Romans provided by Koch, whose list is oriented toward the LXX (Septuagint).<sup>2</sup>

#### Psalms Quotations in Romans, with Special Attention to Lament Psalms

Romans	NRSV Psalm reference	MT Psalm reference	LXX Psalm reference
1:23	106:20	106:20	105:20
2:6	62:12	62:13	61:13
3:4	51:4 IL	51:6 IL	50:6 IL
3:10–12	14:1–3 = 53:1–3	14:1–3 = 53:1–3	52:2–4
3:13a–b	5:10	5:10	5:10
3:13c	<b>140:3</b> IL	<b>140:4</b> IL	<b>139:4</b> IL
3:14	10:7	10:7	9:28
3:18	36:1	36:2	35:2
4:7–8	32:1–2	32:1–2	31:1–2
8:36	<b>44:22</b> CL	<b>44:23</b> CL	<b>43:23</b> CL
10:18	19:4	19:5	18:5
11:9–10	<b>69:22–23</b> IL	<b>69:23–24</b> IL	<b>68:23–24</b> IL
15:3	<b>69:9</b> IL	<b>69:10</b> IL	<b>68:10</b> IL
15:9	18:49	18:50	17:50
15:11	117:1	117:1	116:1

<sup>2</sup> Dietrich-Alex Koch, *Die Schrift als Zeuge des Evangeliums: Untersuchungen zur Verwendung und zum Verständnis der Schrift bei Paulus*, BHT 69 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1986), 21–23. The first pairing (Rom 1:23 and LXX Ps 105:20) is not in Koch's list but is generally recognized—see Arland J. Hultgren, *Paul's Letter to the Romans: A Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2011), 93. IL stands for individual lament psalms and CL stands for communal lament psalms.

I am not the first one to notice the lament psalms in Romans. Richard Hays noted in his breakthrough volume on Paul's use of the Old Testament that Paul's language in Romans contains echoes dealing with exile and the yearning for deliverance based on God's justice. He goes on to assert:

If we start tracing these echoes back to their sources, we find a cluster of echoes emanating from the lament psalms and from exilic prophecy. On reflection, this is hardly surprising: the nation's historical experience of adversity calls into question the goodness and faithfulness of the God who once made covenant with Israel. Consequently, the prophetic promise of God's righteousness comes precisely as the answer to this question, that is, as an answer to the problem of theodicy.<sup>3</sup>

Theodicy, the attempt to explain how a just God allows innocent subjects to experience evil, highlights the most challenging question posed by the lament psalms, and therefore is the best place to begin our consideration of Paul's ways of approaching these psalms from a post-Easter perspective.

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#### DEVELOPMENT 1: CHRISTOLOGICALLY FOCUSED THEODICY

Hays asserts that the theodicy question in Romans is focused on how the God of Israel could seemingly abandon her.<sup>4</sup> Both in its focus on Israel and in its transposition onto all of humanity, Paul provides a christologically informed theodicy.

Let us consider where the theodicy question is initially raised most poignantly—in the quotation of Ps 44:22 in Rom 8:36. As some lament psalms do, Psalm 44 maintains the innocence of those for whom the prayer is made. There is no mention of sin on the part of the people but instead an insistence on Israel's faithfulness to the covenant (44:17–18). Thus, the responsibility for the difficulty in which the people find themselves is entirely directed toward God, sharpening the question of theodicy.<sup>5</sup> Many Christian readers might consider this text to refer to the persecution of Christians, as Tyler Stewart does in the article from which I

<sup>3</sup> Richard B. Hays, *Echoes of Scripture in the Letters of Paul* (New Haven: Yale, 1989), 38.

<sup>4</sup> Hays, *Echoes*, 38.

<sup>5</sup> It is thus very understandable why a novel about prisoners in Auschwitz is entitled simply *Psalm 44*. See Danilo Kiš, *Psalm 44*, trans. John K. Cox (Champaign, IL: Dalkey Archive, 2012).

quote below. Hultgren also views the list as indicative of what persecuted Christians experience, linking terms from it to Paul's hardship lists in 1–2 Corinthians.<sup>6</sup> But it is also possible that Rom 8:36 refers to the political trauma God's first love, the Jewish people, found themselves in during the first century, since in the next section of his letter, which originally had no chapter divisions, Paul explicitly focuses on ethnic Israel's situation.<sup>7</sup> Whether the hardship list in Rom 8:35 is intended by Paul to refer to the persecutions experienced by the church or Israel, it is clear from Rom 8:39 that Paul's resolution to the theodicy question, though not explanatory in nature, is christologically informed. It gives the lamenting community a reason to continue living in relationship with God. Tyler Stewart describes the quotation functioning within Paul's letter in this way: "the anguished cry of Ps 44 for God to 'rise up and redeem' is vocalized by the church living in the Adam-age and answered by the God who raises the dead in the Christ-age."<sup>8</sup>

When we move on to the question of God's faithfulness in Romans 9–11, Paul's answer is that Christ will redeem Israel (Rom 11:26–27). It is true that the term *Christ* is not found in the conclusion of Romans 11, but as E. P. Sanders has argued, the context indicates that Paul was expecting the salvation of Israel through Jesus.<sup>9</sup>

In the conclusion to the letter's argument, Paul also presents Jesus as the one who confirms the promises made to Israel's ancestors (Rom 15:8–9). Paul's syntax shows that he considers Christ as the answer both for the Jews and for the gentiles.<sup>10</sup> This confirms that for Paul, Christ can provide a theodicy—an explanation for God's faithfulness and goodness in the face of evil—as it is focused on Israel in the letter to the Romans.

When one backs up to consider the more general problem behind theodicy, why the righteous or innocent suffer, Paul's quotation of Ps 69:10 in Rom 15:3 seems relevant. Here, Paul offers his second quotation from the lament psalm we know as Psalm 69 (cf. Rom 11:9–10), this time saying that it is what Christ is saying. This exemplifies what became an embedded reading strategy among early Christians, to view the implied speaker in many of the lament psalms as Christ himself.<sup>11</sup> In this case we do not have an immediately following christological resolution to the lament. In fact, Paul asks his readers to follow Christ's example. In Rom 15:1–3,

<sup>6</sup> Hultgren, *Paul's Letter to the Romans*, 339–40.

<sup>7</sup> The chapter divisions in our letter to the Romans were inserted long after Paul wrote the letter, so we need not see a major break between chapters 8 and 9. For an argument that in Romans 9–11 Paul is concerned with Israel's political and social welfare here on earth, see Mark Reasoner, "The Salvation of Israel in Romans 9–11," in *The Call of Abraham: Essays on the Election of Israel in Honor of Jon D. Levenson*, ed. Gary A. Anderson and Joel S. Kaminsky (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2013), 256–79.

<sup>8</sup> Tyler Stewart, "The Cry of Victory: A Cruciform Reading of Psalm 44:22 in Romans 8:36," *JSPHL* 3, no. 1 (2013): 45.

<sup>9</sup> E. P. Sanders, "Paul's Attitude toward the Jewish People," *USQR* 33, no. 3–4 (1978): 175–87.

<sup>10</sup> J. Ross Wagner, "The Christ, Servant of Jew and Gentile: A Fresh Approach to Romans 15:8–9," *JBL* 116, no. 3 (1997): 473–85.

<sup>11</sup> Richard B. Hays, "Christ Prays the Psalms: Paul's Use of an Early Christian Exegetical Convention," in *The Future of Christology: Essays in Honor of Leander E. Keck*, eds. Abraham J. Malherbe and Wayne A. Meeks (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1993), 122–36.

Paul is telling the “strong,” those with robust consciences who can eat anything with no qualms, to abstain from foods that bother the more sensitive, “weak” ones in the Roman house churches. Hultgren’s qualification that the quotation in Rom 15:3 does not import a full appreciation of Christ’s work of atonement is helpful here; Paul is using this passage from Psalm 69 only to motivate the “strong” to respect and support the “weak.”<sup>12</sup> Here one clearly sees the eschatological nature of Paul’s Scripture quotations in Romans. This quotation reads the psalmist’s words from Ps 69:10 as coming from Christ, at the time of his passion, but then applies them also to how the “strong” in Rome ought to respond when dealing with the “weak” whose consciences are bothered by the diet of the “strong.” Indeed, what Alain Gignac calls the “today” of Paul’s Scripture quotations in Romans is worth noting: the today of God (3:4; 12:19), of the believer (1:17; 4:3, 7–8), of believers (8:36; 15:21), of the impious (2:24; 3:10–18), of both pagans and Israel (4:17; 9–11; 15:9–12), and of Christ (14:11; 15:3; possibly 1:17; 15:9).<sup>13</sup> Paul treats the texts he quotes from his Scriptures as though they are pulsing with immediate relevance for his audience.

#### DEVELOPMENT 2: AVOIDING SHAME MEANS RECEIVING HOPE

The second way in which Paul develops a question raised by the lament psalms is that he makes more explicit what is only hinted at in the Septuagint (LXX). Paul more explicitly shows that hope is the answer to the shame that the implied authors of lament psalms fear. Pleas to avoid shame are accompanied in close context by references to hope in the Septuagint of the following texts: Isa 51:5–7; Pss 22: 4–5 (Ps 21:5–6 LXX); 31:1 (30:2 LXX); 71:1 (70:1 LXX); Sir 2:9–10. Though not quite as closely aligned as in the texts just listed, Psalm 69 in its Greek translation also juxtaposes hope and not being ashamed (Ps 68:4b, 7a LXX). This association can also be seen in some English translations within a single verse of the psalm, such as “Do not let those who hope in you be put to shame because of me, O Lord God of hosts” (Ps 69:6a NRSV). This is significant because Paul twice quotes from this lament psalm (Rom 11:9–10; 15:3).

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<sup>12</sup> Hultgren, *Paul’s Letter to the Romans*, 525.

<sup>13</sup> Alain Gignac, *L’épître aux Romains*, Commentaire biblique: Nouveau Testament 6 (Paris: Cerf, 2014), 524.

Paul clarifies that hope and avoiding shame are two sides of the same coin in the way he says that hope does not disappoint (Rom 5:5). Besides this, the famous “not ashamed” theme in Romans (1:16; 9:33; 10:11) can be metaleptically linked to hope, since the latter two instances just listed represent Paul’s quotation of Isa 28:16 LXX, which reads “Behold I lay in Zion a precious stone for a foundation . . . and the one who believes on him will not be ashamed.” This comes in the context of the prophet’s cautions against false hope in what cannot save (28:10, 13, 15, 17–19 LXX).<sup>14</sup> And simply by repeating the “not ashamed” theme and the “hope” theme in his letter, Paul is reinforcing the way these themes occur together in some lament psalms and elsewhere in his Scriptures.

### DEVELOPMENT 3: AVOIDING SHAME AND RECEIVING HOPE COME THROUGH CHRIST

A third way in which Paul develops the reading of lament psalms is that he focuses the twin ideas of hope and not being put to shame, found in Psalms 22, 31 and 69 (Pss 21, 30, 68 LXX) on to Christ. In the lament psalms this association is not messianically focused. Paul not only makes explicit the connection between avoiding shame and living in hope as we saw in Development 2 above, he also focuses the hope in a christological way. This may not be obvious at first, if one simply considers the chain of dispositions mentioned in Rom 5:3–5, which includes “love of God” and not “Christ” (Rom 5:5). But being conformed to the image of the Son in his suffering and glorification (Rom 8:17, 29–30) grounds the hope that Paul describes in Rom 8:24–25.

And at the last, key Scripture quotation in Romans, the composite citation from all three parts of the Jewish Scriptures—law, prophets, and writings—Paul cuts off the sentence he is quoting from Isaiah so that it ends with the verb “hope” (Rom 15:12, quoting Isa 11:10 LXX). The object of that hope is none other than the root of Jesse, a poetic expression for the Davidic king, whom Paul has already identified as Jesus (Rom 1:3). So Paul ends his Scripture quotations in the letter of Romans with a very messianic quotation, focused on Christ as the object of our hope.<sup>15</sup>

<sup>14</sup> The translation of LXX 28:16 is mine. *Metalepsis* means filling in a gap in understanding from an unquoted part of the background text. For example, if an American says, “There is no liberty and justice, so I don’t have to,” other Americans might understand that the statement means the speaker does not feel bound to show allegiance to the American flag. The generously inclusive sort of metaleptic reading of Paul, championed by Richard Hays, has now been questioned and helpfully chastened by Katja Kujanpää, *The Rhetorical Functions of Scriptural Quotations in Romans: Paul’s Argumentation by Quotations*, *Novum Testamentum Supplementum* 172 (Leiden: Brill, 2019).

<sup>15</sup> The discussion of hope so far in this essay is developed and considered alongside the Roman state’s worship of *spes*, the deified virtue of hope, in my article, “Hope against Hope in Paul’s Scriptures and in Rome,” in *The Legacy of Romans*, ed. James Harrison and Peter Bolt (Macquarie Park, Australia: SCD Press, forthcoming).

## OBJECTION: DID PAUL ACTUALLY INTEND TO PRESENT A NEW APPROACH TO THE LAMENT PSALMS?

This is a good place to take a step back and consider an objection that I hope has already emerged in some readers' minds: *Paul was probably not consciously reframing how to read some lament psalms, so this description of Paul's developments in reading the lament psalms is simply a collection of unrelated phenomena in Paul's citations of Scripture.* This objection is correct in that Paul's intention cannot be conclusively discerned. Given the other concerns and goals of his letter writing, it is unlikely that Paul sat down with Tychicus and announced, "In this letter we're going to teach the Roman house churches some new ways of reading the lament psalms."

But I am not claiming that Paul has consciously or intentionally developed a new way of reading the lament psalms. And we do see Paul, immediately after quoting from a lament psalm christologically, offering the meta-hermeneutical guideline that the Scriptures, through the perseverance and encouragement they engender, bring hope to the readers (Rom 15:3–4; Ps 69:9). If Paul can so readily extend the texts he quotes into his contemporary situation, as we saw in Gignac's observation about "today" above, and since he claims that "whatever was written beforehand was written for our instruction" (Rom 15:4a), it stands to reason that he will see Christ within his Scriptures in places that others who do not follow Christ will not.

## DEVELOPMENT 4: HOW TO PRAY THE CURSES IN LAMENT PSALMS

A final way in which Paul resolves problems or questions raised by the lament psalms relates to the ethical question of how to pray the sections of some lament psalms that ask God to curse one's enemies. How can one ask God to forgive one's own sins, while asking God not to forgive another person's sins?

The first brush that this letter makes with curses is in Rom 3:13. The lament psalm quoted in the catena of Rom 3:9–18 (Rom 3:13, quoting Ps 140:3) simply contributes scriptural language to support the rhetorical impact Paul wishes to make: both Israel and the nations are sinful. Though this lament psalm includes imprecations after the phrase Paul quotes (Ps 140:8–11), it is best not to read these into Paul's use of a phrase from Ps 140:3.<sup>16</sup>

Paul responds to the ethical and liturgical questions embedded in the psalter's imprecations by tapping into the teachings of Jesus that he has received and by presenting Jesus as the speaker of a lament psalm. In a sense, we might say that Paul provides a sort of syllogism related to what Jesus followers should do with lament psalms. Christ taught that we bless those who persecute us and not curse

<sup>16</sup> Kujanpää, *Rhetorical Functions*, 55, 60–61.



them (Rom 12:14). This is one of the places in Romans chapters 12–15 where Paul taps into the teachings of the historical Jesus.<sup>17</sup>

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Paul does quote from the curse section of Psalm 69 but introduces it simply with “And David says . . .” (Rom 11:9–10). The curse is thus historicized: it is David who said it. The grenade exploded long ago. It is obvious that Paul is not praying down this curse on Israel, since in the climax of chapter 11 Paul describes Israel’s salvation (Rom 11:26–27). One could read Paul’s quotation of the curses from Psalm 69 in Rom 11:9–10 as his affirmation that those not trusting God will receive God’s judgment, as Stendahl has argued in regard to Rom 12:19–21.<sup>18</sup> But this ignores the conclusion toward which Paul’s discourse in Rom 11 is heading, the salvation of ethnic Israel (11:26–27).

Since when Christ prayed a lament psalm, he did not pray the imprecations (curses) of these psalms on to those against him, we also are not to pray them down on others but instead are to look to Christ as the first victim, the human representative who absorbed the injustices of God and eventually found hope. In this sense, Barth’s insistence that Christ is the first human being, rather than the “second Adam” that a literal reading of Rom 5:19 or 1 Cor 15:45 might indicate, is helpful.<sup>19</sup> As the first or prototypical human being, Christ experienced undeserved death. If he could accept this without cursing, we also are called to accept undeserved evil without cursing.

Does Paul tell people elsewhere not to curse? Bruce Winter argues that in 1 Cor 12:3a, Paul is not marginalizing the pronouncement “Jesus be cursed” but is rather saying that no one speaking by God’s Spirit will utter a Jesus-curse—that is, will ask Jesus to curse another person. Winter supports this reading by noting that people in the Greco-Roman world of the first century were not averse to asking the deities they worshiped to curse others.<sup>20</sup> Since curse tablets have been found in the temple of Demeter-Kore in Roman Corinth, it is very possible that at least

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<sup>17</sup> Michael Thompson, *Clothed with Christ: The Example and Teaching of Jesus in Romans 12.1–15.13* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 1991), 96–105.

<sup>18</sup> Krister Stendahl, “Hate, Non-Retaliatio, and Love: 1QS x, 17–20 and Rom. 12:19–21,” *Harvard Theological Review* 55, no. 4 (1962): 346, 352–55.

<sup>19</sup> Karl Barth, *Christ and Adam: Man and Humanity in Romans* 5, trans. T. A. Smail (New York: Collier, 1956), 74–75.

<sup>20</sup> Bruce W. Winter, *After Paul Left Corinth: The Influence of Secular Ethics and Social Change* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001), 164–69.



some of the first hearers of 1 Cor 12:3 would have understood Paul to be prohibiting them from asking Jesus to curse others.<sup>21</sup> One weakness of this reading of 1 Cor 12:3a is that Paul himself seems to utter a Jesus curse in 1 Cor 16:22. But Paul is not concerned about consistency on the literal level of his discourse, as we can see elsewhere (1 Thess 5:2, 4; Gal 6:2–5; Rom 3:21, 31). And it is possible that Paul is saying that those who do not love the Lord are disadvantaged by their own lack of this love.

So how does Paul think people should pray the cursing sections found in some of the lament psalms? His own pattern is to ascribe the curse not to Christ, as he does with another part of Psalm 69 in Rom 15:3, but to David (Rom 11:9–10). In other words, Paul reads the curses as occurring back at the time of the psalm's composition, while other sections of the psalm he extends into the time of Christ's passion and forward into Paul's and our own times. As we saw above in Development 1, Paul quotes Christ as speaking another part of Psalm 69, part of its actual lament, not its imprecation.

## CONCLUSION

There is no question that lament psalms contain plenty of stimuli for existential and theological reflection. Though Paul probably did not deliberately set out to develop a Christian reading of lament psalms, his letter to the Romans, concerned as it is with establishing how the divine gospel was promised beforehand in the Scriptures (Rom 1:1–2), provides some significant developments in the Christian use of Israel's prayer book. By offering a christologically informed theodicy, confirming that the quest to avoid shame is accompanied by a quest for hope and then focusing that hope on Christ, and allowing the curses found in the imprecatory psalms to detonate when they were first uttered, Paul's letter to the Romans provides a way for its readers to pray these moving psalms.<sup>22</sup> ⊕

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<sup>21</sup> The curse tablets from Roman Corinth are available in Ronald S. Stroud, *The Sanctuary of Demeter and Kore: The Inscriptions, Corinth: Results of Excavations Conducted by the American School of Classical Studies at Athens 18.6* (Princeton, NJ: American School of Classical Studies at Athens, 2013).

<sup>22</sup> A flood of warm memories of Luther Seminary has washed over me while writing this essay for *Word & World*. During the two decades I worked at Bethel University, I enjoyed and learned much in conversations with James Boyce, Bruce Eldevik, David Fredrickson, Mary Hinkle Shore, Arland J. Hultgren, Craig Koester, Lois Malcolm, Richard Nysse, Alan Padgett, and Matthew Skinner. To each of you I send sincere thanks and deep respect for you and your work in the vineyard of the Lord. I am indebted to Joel S. Kaminsky and John T. Noble for reading an earlier draft of this essay and offering valuable comments.