PSALM 22:
COMPLAINT OF THE INDIVIDUAL

Text

The MT of this psalm is in disarray in places, especially in vv. 16-17, 22, and 30-31, but on the whole the psalm is well preserved.

Structure

	MT	RSV
I. Superscription	1	—
II. Invocation, complaint	2-3	1-2
III. Affirmation of confidence	4-6	3-5
IV. Complaint	7-9	6-8
V. Affirmation of confidence	10-11	9-10
VI. Complaint	12-19	11-18
A. Petition	12a	11a
B. Complaint	12b-19	11b-18
VII. Petition	20-22	19-21
VIII. Hymn of thanksgiving	23-27	22-26
A. Vow	23	22
B. Call to praise	24-25	23-24
C. Vow	26	25
D. Blessing	27	26
IX. Hymn of praise (eschatological)	28-32	27-31

The SUPERSCRIPTION has three components, the first and the last of which are very common in the Psalter (see Psalms 13 and 19). The middle part (*RSV*, "according to The Hind of the Dawn") may point to an animal sacrifice before dawn (Mowinckel, *W* II, 214), to a mode of musical presentation (Gunkel and Begrich, 455-58; A. Jirku, "'Ajjelet haš-Šaḥar (Ps 22, 1)," *ZAW* 65 [1953] 85f.), to the proper time of ritual performance (L. Delekat, *ZAW* 76 [1964] 297), or to

some other cultic feature. The tripartite structure of the headline, including reference to Davidic authorship, occurs also with Psalms 4–6; 8–9; 12; 39; and 62; cf. the superscriptions in Psalms 46; 77; 84; etc.

The prayer itself shows rich, if not dramatic, liturgical movement. Gese et al. are perfectly right in emphasizing the artistic composition (cf. also Ridderbos, 185-92). But overemphasis on literary structure tends to obscure the ritual function of a psalm. Psalm 22 is a cultic prayer, the main elements of which are complaint *(a)*, confidence *(b)*, petition *(c)*, and thanksgiving *(d)*, arranged in the following sequence: *a b a b c a c d* (see "Introduction to Cultic Poetry," section 4B).

The INVOCATION and initial COMPLAINT (vv. 2-3), with strongest emphasis on three appellations of God, are a stark overture to the prayer. As in Pss 4:2 (*RSV* 1); 16:1; 94:1, and in sharp contrast to all the psalms outside the Elohistic collection (Psalms 42–83, see "Introduction to Psalms," section 1), the name of Yahweh is not mentioned at the outset. It occurs for the first time in v. 9 and in vocative function only in v. 20 (cf. vv. 24, 27-29). Instead, the invocation uses *'ēlî*, "my God" (unique double appellation), and *'ĕlōhay*, "my God," as urgent cries for attention. The form *'ēlî* appears only eleven times in the whole OT (also in v. 11 and Pss 63:2 [*RSV* 1]; 68:25 [*RSV* 24]; 89:27 [*RSV* 26]; 102:25 [*RSV* 24]; 118:28; 140:7 [*RSV* 6]; Exod 15:2; Isa 44:17). In comparison, *'ĕlōhay* is present in 114 passages (see, e.g., Pss 3:8 [*RSV* 7]; 5:3 [*RSV* 2]; 7:2, 4 [*RSV* 1, 3]; 13:4 [*RSV* 3]; 18:7, 22, 29-30 [*RSV* 6, 21, 28-29]). Special research done on these and similar formulas (O. Eissfeldt, *KS* III, 35-47 [repr. from *ZAW* 61 (1945-48) 3-16]; Vorländer, esp. 273-76; Albertz, *Frömmigkeit*, 32-37) leads to the conclusion that, in the ancient Near East, appellations of the type "my God" designate the divinity to whom the individual supplicant and his family or clan group are intimately or even exclusively attached. The term indicates the "personal God," originally in small-scale family worship in a setting of primary-group rituals. In calling to the personal God, therefore, there is no need to name explicitly the divinity invoked. Quite naturally, though, after the formation of Israel Yahweh came to be addressed in this fashion, even in familial services.

The urgent call for the personal God in Psalm 22 at once turns into complaint (cf. Pss 3:2-3 [*RSV* 1-2]; 13:2-3 [*RSV* 1-2]; 69:2-5 [*RSV* 1-4]). There is no preliminary plea for attention or audience (cf. Pss 5:2-3 [*RSV* 1-2]; 17:1-2; 55:2-3 [*RSV* 1-2]). Worse still, the reproachful question "why do you forsake me?" (v. 2a) makes the complaint an outright accusation (Pss 10:1; 42:10 [*RSV* 9]; 43:2; 44:10, 18 [*RSV* 9, 17]; 88:15 [*RSV* 14]; 89:39, 47 [*RSV* 38, 46]; Westermann, "Struktur," 275-76, 282; A. Jepsen, "Warum?" in *Der Herr ist Gott* [Berlin: Evangelische, 1978] 230-35 [repr. from *Das ferne und nahe Wort* (*Fest.* L. Rost; ed. F. Maass; BZAW 105; Berlin: Töpelmann, 1967) 106-13]). The usage is reminiscent of juridical procedure (Gen 31:30; 1 Sam 22:13; Jer 2:29; Josh 7:7; Boecker). First, the supplicant confronts his personal God (v. 2, using direct address, question, and accusation of negligence and abandonment of

duty). Second, he describes his own incessant toil to reestablish contact with his God (v. 3, using first person of supplicant and reporting futile prayer; see Pss 6:7-8 [*RSV* 6-7]; 38:7-9 [*RSV* 6-8]; 88:2, 10 [*RSV* 1, 9]; 102:6-8 [*RSV* 5-7]; 130:1; 141:1). The supplicant seems to head directly for a full-fledged ritual argument with his personal God, which may loom behind Psalms 6, 73, and 88; or Psalms 7, 17, and 26. Also, the Job literature of the ancient Near East has preserved this contest motif (Job 9–10; 13:23-28; 19; 30; Lambert, 15-17, 21-91; H.-P. Müller, *Das Hiobproblem* [Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1978]).

Quite abruptly, then, the scene changes. Vv. 4-6 represent a strong AFFIRMATION OF CONFIDENCE in the same God just accused of infidelity. This change of perspective in itself is sufficient proof that considerations of liturgy, but not of logic, psychology, or aesthetics, are preeminent in Psalm 22 (against Stolz, "Psalm 22"; Deissler, "Mein Gott"; et al., who defend a "postcultic" interpretation of the prayer). The affirmation of confidence counterbalances in true ceremonial tradition the desperate and accusatory complaint of vv. 2-3. This analysis is plausible enough (see "Introduction to Cultic Poetry," section 4B). But why do vv. 4-6 allude to national history instead of personal and clan experience? Vorländer (pp. 273-74) thinks that vv. 4-6 are a late insertion. Gelin explains the abruptness as a function of adapting an individual prayer to communal worship. Most scholars accept this first affirmation of confidence as original because there is no consciousness of the basic difference between familial and national cult. Presupposing that difference, we have to admit the interpenetration of both spheres in Psalm 22. The small cult of the primary group in fact tends to be incorporated into worship of the secondary organization wherever the latter develops overarching religious institutions (Albertz, *Frömmigkeit*). Psalm 22 is a good example of this phenomenon. The prayer in vv. 2-27 shows sufficient cohesion and liturgical as well as poetic balance to suggest a homogenous composition. Emphasis is clearly on the individual sufferer in a familial and neighborhood context. Yet in vv. 4-6 (cf. v. 24) the psalm draws on the salvation history of Israel (cf. Pss 51:20-21 [*RSV* 18-19]; 102:13-23 [*RSV* 12-22]). Nevertheless, Psalm 22 is not a case of a "reinterpreted" or "reread" text that would transfer personal experience to the community (cf. Psalm 12). It remains a personal prayer for small-group worship that took place within the general Israelite society.

Speaking strictly about forms, we should note that the affirmation of confidence contains a hymnic attribution "you are holy" (v. 4a; cf. the formula "I am holy" in Lev 11:45; 19:2; 20:26, and various objective designations in 1 Sam 2:2; 6:20; Isa 6:3; 30:15; Pss 71:22; 77:14 [*RSV* 13]; 99:3, 5, 9; H.-P. Müller, *THAT* II, 597-601). Then it mentions "our fathers," the physical and spiritual forbears (cf. Deut 26:7; Josh 24:17; 1 Kgs 8:21; Pss 44:2 [*RSV* 1]; 78:3-4; H. Ringgren, *TDOT* I, 8-14, dealing with the "solidarity of generations"). The formulation, aside from reflecting a historical conscience, demonstrates the active participation of the worshiping group in the prayer ritual for one sufferer. The key word in vv. 5-6 is *bāṭaḥ*, "trust" (Gerstenberger, *THAT* I, 300-305).

A second round of complaint and expression of confidence (vv. 7-9 and 10-11) follows the first one, a feature not unusual in prayers of petition (Gunkel and Begrich, 241-43). This time the affirmations focus on the supplicant and his fate. Neighbors gloat over his misery (v. 7b) and even express open hostility (vv. 8-9). Such experiences are typical of the sufferer (see Pss 31:10-14 [*RSV* 9-13]; 38:11-13 [*RSV* 10-12]; 69:4-5, 8-13 [*RSV* 3-4, 7-12]; Job 19:13-19; 30:1-15; Gerstenberger and Schrage). Stylistically, we find first-person discourse in v. 7 with a stressed "but I" marking the contrast to the foregoing part (for the metaphor "worm," see Job 25:6) and descriptive third-person speech, the supplicant now being the object of abuse, in v. 8. Quotation of enemy taunts (v. 9) certainly is a climax of lament (Gese, 186; cf. Pss 3:3 [*RSV* 2]; 10:4-5; 35:21, 25; 41:6-10 [*RSV* 5-9]; 42:4 [*RSV* 3]; etc.). The second affirmation of confidence (vv. 10-11) is very personal throughout. It addresses Yahweh directly, insisting on an indestructible, almost parental, affiliation to him. The personal God is the creator of this particular supplicant, therefore he has the obligations of a parent (see Pss 71:6; 139:13-16; Judg 16:17; Isa 44:2; 49:1; Job 10:19; Albertz, *Frömmigkeit*, 37-38). The declaration comes to a high point with the final confession "you are my God" (v. 11b), which reflects the beginning of the prayer (v. 2a; Ridderbos). Technically speaking, the psalm could end here, perhaps with a vow or a petition.

Surprisingly, Psalm 22 does not conclude after v. 11. Instead, the petition of v. 12a opens a new, rather serious and lengthy complaint (vv. 12-19) that prepares for the petition of vv. 20-22. Is this whole section a later accretion? Did the psalm grow during its long history of ritual use (cf. Weimar)? Possibly so. In any case, the passing petition of v. 12a creates a firm link with vv. 2-11 (cf. the formulation of vv. 2b and 20a). Furthermore, renewal of plaintive and petitionary prayer within one ceremony is a liturgical necessity. Rituals of this type generally use repetition (cf. Lev 4:6; Josh 6:14; 1 Kgs 18:26; 2 Kgs 13:18; Heiler, 154, 175; Wyman and Kluckhohn), perhaps subconsciously recalling magical practice. The ritual prescriptions of Babylonian incantations show many similarities to this ceremony for an individual supplicant (Gerstenberger, *Mensch*, ch. 2; Caplice, *Namburbi Texts*).

The extensive complaint passage (vv. 12-19) in a way elaborates the complaint of vv. 8-9, depicting outside hostility and its evil consequences for the supplicant. Similar long laments appear in Pss 31:10-14 (*RSV* 9-13); 38:2-9 (*RSV* 1-8); 41:6-10 (*RSV* 5-9); 69:2-5, 8-13 (*RSV* 1-4, 7-12); 88:4-10a (*RSV* 3-9a); 102:4-12 (*RSV* 3-11). Animal imagery has mythical and demonic roots (see Keel, *Feinde;* idem, *Bildsymbolik*, 75-78). Here it serves to give profile to the anonymous evildoers or to materialize the evil suffered. A corrupted text in vv. 16-17 gave rise to speculations especially in regard to prefigurations of the life and death of Christ (see Daniélou; Gese, "Psalm 22"; Hasenzahl; Lange; Scheifler). In reality, the psalmist talks only about the tortures of the afflicted who

were seeking the help of Yahweh. "You throw me into the dust of death" (v. 16c) is a reference to near death (Barth, 111-12) in exceptional second-person address to Yahweh. The conjectured "my hands and feet are bound together" (v. 17c) points to some mistreatment (see Mowinckel, *Tricola,* 39-40; Drijvers; Schmidt, *Psalmen;* Kraus, *Psalmen*).

The final petition (vv. 20-22) again addresses Yahweh directly. There is a negated jussive (v. 20a) and a series of imperatives (vv. 20b-22, the two last ones with personal suffix to indicate the supplicant), all of which seek to induce Yahweh to save the afflicted. The last word of v. 22 is under debate, however. The MT reads "you have answered me." The parallelism of vv. 21 and 22 would suggest another vocalization of the consonants *'nytny,* as a noun: *'ănîyyātî,* "my poor one," i.e., "my poor life." The arguments pro and con usually reflect only the interpreter's prior position regarding the so-called salvation oracle (*"Heils-orakel"*; see Begrich; Kilian). If there was a formal answer to the supplicant within the prayer ritual whenever the text shifts suddenly from complaint to thanksgiving, this response did not necessarily involve a cultic prophet or a high-level priest (cf. Psalm 12). The officiant at a small-scale group worship was certainly able to communicate to the supplicant a liturgical and nevertheless divine answer to his plea.

Judged all by itself, the thanksgiving song in vv. 23-27 features all the necessary elements of a ceremony in commemoration of a salvation experience (see Psalms 30 and 40) except the narration of past affliction (see Gese, 190-91) (see "Introduction to Cultic Poetry," section 4C). This song is therefore not an independent thanksgiving prayer but an anticipatory psalm that belongs to the preceding complaint and apparently was recited together with it in the hour of petition. A similar phenomenon can be observed in the OT prayers in Jonah 2 and Isa 38:9-20 and, for example, in popular modern Brazilian prayers that are being published in journals and recommended for emergencies. They are very often pure thanksgivings to be recited to reinforce petition.

The last part (vv. 28-32) is eschatological if not apocalyptic in nature (see Gese, "Psalm 22"). It very probably is a final accretion and reinterpretation to the text (Keel-Leu; Becker, *Israel,* 49-53). On the whole, the structural profile of Psalm 22 gives a varied but authentic picture of a prayer ritual for the suffering individual.

Genre/Setting

This psalm is a true COMPLAINT OF THE INDIVIDUAL (see "Introduction to Cultic Poetry," section 4B). There are no real signs of royal origin (against Mowinckel, *W* I, 226-39; Soggin; Gettier; et al.). Psalm 22 was recited within communal offices for afflicted members. Its final interpretation (vv. 28-32) presupposes late postexilic life and theology. Perhaps the psalm served for cases of extreme and prolonged suffering (notice the threefold complaint, desperate accusations, pleading confidence, and anticipated thanksgiving). The proximity

of death lends urgency to the prayer (vv. 16, 21). The thanksgiving part (vv. 23-27) in fact may heighten the sense of urgency, as in Jonah 2 and Isaiah 38.

Intention

Originally used to save members of the congregation from certain death (see "Introduction to Cultic Poetry," section 4B), the psalm since NT times came to be considered as the prayer of the suffering Christ (see Scheifler; Gelin; Gese, "Psalm 22"; Hasenzahl; Lange; Matt 27:33-50; Mark 15:24-37).

Bibliography

J.-C. Basset, "Le Psaume 22 (LXX 21) et la croix chez les pères," *RHPR* 54 (1974) 383-89; E. Beaucamp, "Psaume 22 (21)," *VieS* 118 (1968) 403-19; G. J. Botterweck, "Warum hast du mich verlassen?" *BibLeb* 6 (1965) 61-68; J. Daniélou, "Le Psaume XXII et la initiation chrétienne," *Maison-Dieu* 23 (1950) 54-69; A. Deissler, "Mein Gott, warum hast du mich verlassen . . . !" in *Ich will Euer Gott werden* (ed. N. Lohfink; Stuttgart: Katholisches Bibelwerk, 1981) 97-121; A. Feuillet, "Souffrance et confiance en Dieu," *NRT* 70 (1948) 137-49; L. R. Fisher, "Betrayed by Friends," *Int* 18 (1964) 20-38; S. B. Frost, "Psalm 22: An Exposition," *CJT* 8 (1962) 102-15; O. Fuchs, *Klage als Gebet* (München: Kösel, 1982); A. Gelin, "Les quatre lectures du Psaume XXII," *BVC* 1 (1953) 31-39; H. Gese, "Psalm 22 und das Neue Testament," in *Vom Sinai zum Zion* (Munich: Kaiser, 1974) 180-201 (repr. from *ZTK* 65 [1968] 1-22); J. A. Gettier, "A Study of Psalm 22" (Diss., Union Theological Seminary, 1972); W. Hasenzahl, "Die Gottverlassenheit des Christus nach dem Kreuzeswort von Matthäus und Markus," *Beiträge zur Förderung christlicher Theologie* 39/1 (Gütersloh: Gerd Mohn, 1937); O. Keel-Leu, "Nochmals Ps 22,28-32," *Bib* 50 (1969) 389-92; H. D. Lange, "The Relation between Psalm 22 and the Passion Narrative," *CTM* 43 (1972) 610-21; É. Lipiński, "L'hymne à Yahwé Roi au Psaume 22,28-32," *Bib* 50 (1969) 153-68; P. Millet, Jr., "Enthroned on the Praises of Israel," *Int* 39 (1985) 5-19; J. J. M. Roberts, "A New Root for an Old Crux," *VT* 23 (1973) 247-52; J. Salguero, "¿Quién es el 'desamparado' del Salmo 22?" *Ciencia tomista* 84 (1957) 3-35; J. R. Scheifler, "El Salmo 22 y la crucifixión del Señor," *EstBib* 24 (1965) 5-83; H. H. Schmidt, "Mein Gott, mein Gott, warum hast du mich verlassen?" *WuD* NF 11 (1971) 119-40; J. A. Soggin, "Notes for Christian Exegesis of the First Part of Ps 22," *BO* 29 (1975) 152-65 (tr. from *Bibbia e oriente* 7 [1965] 105-16); F. Stolz, "Psalm 22," *ZTK* 77 (1980) 129-48; G. J. Thierry, "Remarks on Various Passages of the Psalms," *OTS* 13 (1963) 77-97; B. N. Wambacq, "Psaume 22,4," *Bib* 62 (1981) 99-100; P. Weimar, "Psalm 22," in *Freude an der Weisung des Herrn* (*Fest.* H. Gross; ed. E. Haag and F. -L. Hossfeld; Stuttgart: Kath. Bibelwerk, 1986) 471-94; C. Westermann, *Gewendete Klage* (Neukirchen: Neukirchener, 1955).