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ABSTRACT

In the book that bears his name, Job is argumentative, demanding answers from God as to the cause of his suffering. Jewish scholars, particularly Anson Laytner, view Job’s arguments as the pinnacle of the Hebrew Bible’s permitted and encouraged “law-court prayer.” Yet the New Testament’s only mention of him praises “the patience of Job.” This description sits uneasily in the Christian tradition, and many Christian scholars criticize Job for arguing against God. Because most Christians believe that Jesus was sinless, the cry of dereliction provides a fitting text by which to challenge the widespread Christian view of Job’s complaints as sinful. Jesus himself complains to God when he asks, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” Thus, Christian scholars should not criticize Job simply for complaining, but they can criticize Job for claiming that God is the source of his suffering.

Keywords: Book of Job, Innocent Suffering, Cry of Dereliction, Book of James, Theodicy, Wisdom Literature, New Testament.

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INTRODUCTION

Job is mentioned by name only once in the New Testament, and that is in James 5:11; “Indeed we call blessed those who showed endurance. You have heard of the endurance of Job, and you have seen the purpose of the Lord, how the Lord is compassionate and merciful” (*The New Revised Standard Version*). The more widely known translation in the King James Version highlights “the patience of Job.” Yet this verse seems unusual—Job, at least as we encounter him in the canonical book that takes his name, is hardly the epitome of patience. He spends the bulk of the book arguing with his companions and God, demanding a reason for his suffering rather than waiting patiently for God to restore him. Based on the lack of evidence for this characterization in the book of Job itself, “It would seem that James has considerable responsibility for shaping the perception of ‘endurance/patience’ as the most memorable feature of Job.”² Though many Christian interpreters “desire to exalt [Job] as a moral exemplar, probably due to the influence of the James passage, none can treat his behavior in the dialogue as completely exemplary given his vehement complaints against God.”³ This paper aims to explore

¹ Naomi Brill, Smith College class of 2022, is a senior studying religion and archaeology. She is especially interested in comparisons between Jewish and Christian interpretations of the Hebrew Bible. This paper was written for a seminar on Job with help from Professors Joel Kaminsky and L. Scott Brand at Smith College.

² Luke Timothy Johnson, *The Letter of James*, vol. 37 A, The Anchor Bible (New York, NY: Doubleday, 1995), 320.

³ Will Kynes, “The Trials of Job: Relitigating Job’s ‘Good Case’ in Christian Interpretation,” *Scottish Journal of Theology* 66, no. 2 (May 2013): 174–91, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0036930613000045>, 187.

the ways in which James and the broader Christian tradition on innocent suffering have influenced Christian interpretation of the book of Job, and how this issue is complicated by the existence of Jesus' own complaint to God: the cry of dereliction.

THE CONTEXT OF JAMES 5:11

The Epistle of James is the first of the Catholic Epistles, and traditional attribution holds that it was written by James the brother of Jesus, a prominent figure in the early church in Jerusalem. If this were the case, the letter would have had to be written between 33 and 62 CE.⁴ However, many scholars have contested this attribution because, like many of Jesus' followers, James was probably uneducated and illiterate, and almost certainly not capable of the well-composed Greek found in the epistle that bears his name.⁵ If the letter is indeed pseudonymous, the dating becomes less clear, but most scholars estimate that it was written around the end of the first century.⁶ The book focuses on a number of themes, as James (as we will continue to call him despite the contested authorship of this book for the sake of simplicity) encourages self-control, warns against the danger of riches, and asserts the necessity of patience in the face of suffering.⁷ This last topic is the focus of chapter 5. Here, James condemns the rich who have gained their wealth through deceit, warning that they will be punished after the imminent Parousia (the Second Coming of Jesus Christ). To the faithful, he leaves instructions to "be patient...until the coming of the Lord" (James 5:7), and to follow in the example of "the prophets who spoke in the name of the Lord" — though he does not name any individual

⁴ Patrick Gray, "Points and Lines: Thematic Parallelism in the Letter of James and the Testament of Job," *New Testament Studies* 50, no. 3 (July 2004): 406–24, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0028688504000232>, 408.

⁵ Bart D. Ehrman, *The New Testament: A Historical Introduction to the Early Christian Writings*, 6th ed. (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2016), 515.

⁶ Johnson, *The Letter of James*, 322.

⁷ Ehrman, *The New Testament*, 516.

prophets (James 5:10). It is after this that James names Job as another example for his readers to follow.⁸

So why does James choose Job as the primary example of patience? Scholars present different theories. Some scholars claim that James refers to an older version of the story, represented today by the prologue and epilogue, typically termed the story of "Job the Patient."⁹ Some claim that this is the version that is also referenced in Ezekiel 14:14, so it is sometimes called the story of the "legendary intercessor Job" who is compared to Noah and Daniel.¹⁰ Others argue that James is referring to *The Testament of Job*, a pseudepigraphal document that presents a much more conventionally pious and patient version of Job.¹¹ Christopher Seitz takes a different view, arguing that the word "patience" as it appears in the KJV is an inaccurate translation from the Greek, and that the word would be better translated as "endurance," "perseverance," or "steadfastness."¹² This, he argues, eliminates any contradiction that might lead modern readers to believe that James is referring to anything other than the canonical book of Job, because,

"[E]ndurance" would be a wholly inappropriate characterization of Job in the Prologue. It would serve far better as a description of Job in the dialogues...[as] it is only as Job moves toward God and demands to know him [in the dialogues],

⁸ Johnson points out that it is possible to read this as Job being included among the prophets. See Johnson, *The Letter of James*, 319.

⁹ Martin Dibelius, *James: A Commentary on the Epistle of James*, ed. Helmut Koester and Heinrich Greeven, trans. Michael A. Williams, 11th ed., Hermeneia: A Critical and Historical Commentary on the Bible (Philadelphia, PA: Fortress Press, 1976), 246; Hillel A Fine, "Tradition of a Patient Job," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 74, no. 1 (March 1955), 32; Christopher Seitz, "The Patience of Job in the Epistle of James," in *Konsequente Traditionsgeschichte: Festschrift Für Klaus Baltzer Zum 65 Geburtstag*, ed. Rüdiger Bartelmus, Thomas Krüger, and Helmut Utzschneider (Fribourg, Switzerland: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1993), 374.

¹⁰ Dibelius, *James: A Commentary on the Epistle of James*, 246; Seitz, "The Patience of Job in the Epistle of James," 374.

¹¹ Gray, "Points and Lines." Though Gray disagrees with Spitta's claim that there is enough evidence to support a connection between *The Testament of Job* and the reference in James 5:11, he examines the connections between the two texts to illuminate their meanings; Patrick J Hartin, "Call to Be Perfect through Suffering (James 1,2-4): The Concept of Perfection in the Epistle of James and the Sermon on the Mount," *Biblica* 77, no. 4 (1996): 422.

¹² Seitz, "The Patience of Job in the Epistle of James," 378-379.

rather than conventions of his own moving construction [in the prologue]...that the potential for endurance is made real in the book.¹³

While some modern translations such as the NRSV have accepted this translation as more accurate, many of the scholars mentioned previously might protest that this change does not explain the issue away as neatly as Seitz claims. Several of them reference translations in which the word is "endurance," but do not accept this as a guarantee that James was referring to the canonical book of Job. Thus, in order to better understand James' description of Job's endurance, one must broaden the scope of this analysis to view Job in the context of the Christian tradition's perspective on innocent suffering more generally.

JOB AND JAMES IN THE CONTEXT OF THE CHRISTIAN TRADITION: REASONS FOR INNOCENT SUFFERING

Christianity in some places maintains and in others alters the explanations for innocent suffering that are posited in the Hebrew Bible. One of the main reasons behind innocent suffering that is developed in the Epistle of James and other New Testament literature is the fact that it increases endurance. James and Peter specifically hold that this endurance is a necessary component for spiritual growth and salvation; James says to his readers that they should "know that the testing of your faith produces perseverance. Let perseverance finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything" (James 1:3-4). In James and Peter, "endurance in difficulty is the key witness to the reality of a person's faith and a part of the process through which they are saved."¹⁴ James proposes that the development of endurance is the means to self-perfection.¹⁵ The idea that endurance is a necessary component for salvation

¹³ Seitz, "The Patience of Job in the Epistle of James," 380.

¹⁴ Mariam Kamell Kovalishyn, "Endurance unto Salvation: The Witness of First Peter and James," *Word & World* 35, no. 3 (2015): 231.

¹⁵ Hartin, "Call to Be Perfect through Suffering (James 1,2-4)," 479.

stands in contrast to Paul, for whom faith in Jesus Christ is the only way to salvation (Romans 3:28). Yet for all three, "in the suffering of the righteous one, God is working purposefully."¹⁶

Also uniquely relevant to New Testament portrayals of suffering is the imminent eschatology that is present in many of its works. Many Christians at the time when the New Testament works were being produced believed that the Parousia was imminent, and that with this event the entire world as they knew it would end. The righteous believers would be rewarded by God for their faith, and the wicked would perish. James warns that "the Judge is standing at the doors!" (James 5:9), a reference to the proximity of the Parousia.¹⁷ This imminent eschatology makes the New Testament perspective on suffering and patience uniquely temporal, as "the exhortation to be patient is even more pertinent for those expecting an event to happen soon as it is for those who know it is delayed."¹⁸ As well as believing that their suffering was due to end soon, the early Christians who read James' letter would know that the *reason* that God allowed them to suffer was to test them and to develop their endurance. This stands in contrast to Job as he appears in the canonical book, who for the sake of the test's integrity must not know that he is being tested.¹⁹ The imminent eschatology present in the book of James mirrors more closely Job's self-awareness of his testing in the *Testament of Job*—while neither is given a precise time at which to expect God's judgement and renewal, both the early Christians that James writes to and Job in the *Testament* are promised that this will occur at any moment, and thus are given hope to hold onto that Job in the canonical book lacks.

¹⁶ Johnson, *The Letter of James*, 324.

¹⁷ Johnson, *The Letter of James*, 317.

¹⁸ Johnson, *The Letter of James*, 322.

¹⁹ Marvin H. Pope, *Job*, 3rd ed., vol. 15, The Anchor Bible (Garden City, NY: Doubleday & Company, Inc., 1974), lxxiv – lxxv.

Christian literature's perspective on innocent suffering is also influenced by the distinction it makes in which "friendship with the world" and "friendship with God" are inherently incompatible.²⁰ In this view, obedience to God does not guarantee or even predict security or success in life. One's reward for faith and good works is likely to come after the Parousia or death—whichever comes first. This stands in contrast to conventional wisdom literature, which posits that God rewards the righteous and punishes the wicked in this world.²¹ This is also the view that Job's friends take in some sections of the dialogues, where they maintain that Job must have done something deserving of punishment that justifies his suffering (see, for example, Job 22:5). Christian views of suffering usually do not argue that only the wicked will suffer; in fact, the righteous are frequently more likely to suffer due to their fidelity to God, as the prophets did.²²

Another particularity involved in Christian discussions of innocent suffering is the essential fact that in Christian belief, God cannot be the cause of innocent suffering. This is also a perspective maintained in many parts of the Hebrew Bible. Applying this view to the book of Job, Aquinas held that even though Satan is accountable to God in the story, and thus everything that happens on Earth is a result of divine providence, it is important to remember that God permits Satan to do harm, but doesn't order him to do so.²³ While Satan intends to hurt Job and tempt him into blasphemy, God allows the testing so that Job can demonstrate his virtue.²⁴

²⁰ Johnson, *The Letter of James*, 319.

²¹ Some scholars argue that the wisdom literature poses this as an ideal for the world, a way that the world *should* be, rather than a description of what is actually true in many cases. See Joel S. Kaminsky, "Would You Impugn My Justice? A Nuanced Approach to the Hebrew Bible's Theology of Divine Recompense," *Interpretation: A Journal of Bible and Theology* 69, no. 3 (July 2015): 310, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0020964315578207>.

²² Johnson, *The Letter of James*, 319.

²³ Roger W Nutt, "Providence, Wisdom, and the Justice of Job's Afflictions: Considerations from Aquinas' Literal Exposition on Job," *Heythrop Journal* 56, no. 1 (January 2015): 44–66.

²⁴ Nutt, "Providence, Wisdom, and the Justice of Job's Afflictions."

Putting himself in conflict with both Christian belief and other wisdom literature, Job declares that God is directly harming him. He asserts this particularly in Job 16:12-14, where he says,

I was at ease, and he broke me in two;
 he seized me by the neck and dashed me to pieces;
 he set me up as his target;
 his archers surround me.
 He slashes open my kidneys, and shows no mercy;
 he pours out my gall on the ground.
 He bursts upon me again and again;
 he rushes at me like a warrior.

While the language is certainly metaphorical, Job still places the blame for his suffering squarely on God. This sentiment in which God himself is Job's attacker would be fundamentally unacceptable in Christian thought. While he might permit innocent suffering to serve some greater purpose, God himself is never its cause.

JAMES IN THE CONTEXT OF THE CHRISTIAN TRADITION: APPROPRIATE RESPONSES TO INNOCENT SUFFERING

As well as their unique justifications for innocent suffering when compared to texts in the Hebrew Bible, the New Testament writers give different instructions on how one ought to respond to innocent suffering. One of the primary instructions echoed by James, Peter, and Paul is that Christians should rejoice in suffering. When encouraging communities in the face of trials, the letters of Peter and James encourage them "to rejoice despite these trials—and even in the trials—because they know the outcome"—that is, exaltation in the Parousia.²⁵ James tells his audience to "consider it nothing but joy" when they face trials and suffer (James 1:2). Intensely important to these authors was that innocent sufferers stay loyal to God. This was especially essential for the authors of James and Peter, since they held that the loyalty that developed through endurance was necessary for salvation. For this reason, Johnson argues that James refers

²⁵ Kovalishyn, "Endurance unto Salvation: The Witness of First Peter and James," 235.

to Job in order to highlight the end of the book, in which "God rewarded the one who, despite his suffering, stayed loyal to God."²⁶ Early Christians were also told to celebrate in suffering because it was in suffering in silence that one could emulate Christ, which was always desirable. Paul associated Jesus with the suffering servant described in Isaiah 53, and "as [the] suffering servant, Christ did not complain to God."²⁷ Additionally, Volf argues that Paul condones a specific kind of "self-aware non-understanding," in response to the fact that the reasons for innocent suffering are usually not explained. Instead, like in the Exodus story and the book of Job, "God's response to suffering was liberation, not an explanation."²⁸ On a more specific level, James instructs that those who are suffering should pray (James 5:13), and 1 Peter asserts that the best course of action is that "those suffering in accordance with God's will entrust themselves to a faithful Creator, while continuing to do good" (1 Peter 4:19). None of these authors, it seems, would condone Job's questioning and complaints against God—an issue that will be examined further in the following section.

JOB THROUGH A CHRISTIAN LENS

In light of the explanations for and condoned responses to suffering that are found in the New Testament, later Christian interpreters attempted to apply these lenses in their analyses of the book of Job. Kynes claims that despite wanting to view Job positively due to the influence of James 5:11, they all "share the assumption that challenging God is wrong" based on more general New Testament views.²⁹ On this basis, some prominent interpreters asserted that Job's complaints were not actually accusations against God—Ambrose, bishop of Milan (339-397) and

²⁶ Johnson, *The Letter of James*, 324.

²⁷ Miroslav Volf, "Vanquishing Suffering: Apostle Paul and the Victory Over Suffering," University Center for Christian Thought, March 25, 2019, video, 11:18, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=J9ReIlvDEG0>.

²⁸ Volf, "Vanquishing Suffering: Apostle Paul and the Victory Over Suffering," 17:09.

²⁹ Kynes, "The Trials of Job," 187.

Gregory the Great (540-604) maintained this position.³⁰ In a similar vein, Aquinas (1225–74) and Calvin (1509–64) attempted to lessen the impact of Job’s complaints, Aquinas by claiming his questions are rhetorical rather than an attack on God, and Calvin by condoning Job’s message but not his method of conveying it.³¹ Lastly, Luther (1483–1546) and Barth (1886–1968) argued that while Job is wrong to defy God, God’s mercy is enough to cover that wrong.³² Yet, because of their Christian view that complaining is an inappropriate response to suffering, “none of them can maintain that [Job] is wholly innocent.”³³ While they all attempt to portray Job as praiseworthy, they would all be likely to agree that “God cannot be summoned like a defendant and forced to bear witness against himself. No extreme of suffering gives mere man license to question God’s wisdom or justice as Job had done.”³⁴ It is concerning this assertion that complaint is never the correct response that Christian and Jewish theology on innocent suffering and the book of Job differ the most.

JOB AND LAYTNER’S “LAW-COURT” PRAYER: A UNIQUELY JEWISH APPROACH TO INNOCENT SUFFERING

In contrast to scholars who view the book of Job through this Christian lens, however, there are those who apply a Jewish outlook in their interpretation of the book. Even for Christians, “the broad tradition challenges an easy equivalence between conflict with God and rebellion against him,”³⁵ as many of the most prominent heroes of the Hebrew Bible argue with God and demand that he make things right. Anson Laytner presents Job as “the climax of the

³⁰ Kynes, “The Trials of Job,” 182-183.

³¹ Kynes, “The Trials of Job,” 184-185.

³² Kynes, “The Trials of Job,” 187.

³³ Kynes, “The Trials of Job,” 187.

³⁴ Pope, *Job*, lxxx.

³⁵ Kynes, “The Trials of Job,” 188.

Bible's use and development of the arguing with God motif and the law-court pattern of prayer."³⁶

Laytner describes the law-court pattern of prayer as "a particularly (and perhaps uniquely) Jewish response to the problem of theodicy. The law-court argument prayer is an authentic Jewish form of prayer that, though rooted in deep faith, nevertheless calls God to task for His lapses of duty which result in suffering and injustice."³⁷ Laytner claims that while all three Abrahamic religions allow for their covenant to act as a fealty oath, in which God is the king to whom believers swear loyalty, only Judaism allows for a covenant between two "contractual equals," a "partnership" that becomes "the tool by which an individual can challenge or even defy the will of God."³⁸ Part of this, Laytner argues, is only possible because of the uniquely emotive nature of the Jewish characterization of God—he can be convinced to change his mind, or feel emotions that drive him to act—especially when compared to the way that Christians and Muslims characterize God.³⁹ Laytner describes the ways that this pattern applies in the stories of Abraham, Moses, Elijah, Jeremiah, Job, and in various pieces of rabbinic literature.

Laytner outlines the way in which this pattern defines the book of Job. The climax to the frequent legal language used in the book occurs in chapter 31, where "Job swears a series of oaths designed to ascertain his innocence," through which "Job ceases to accuse God; he now takes steps to compel God to act."⁴⁰ Laytner argues that God's statement that Job is in the right in Job 42:7 proves that God approves of "Job's vociferous insistence of his innocence and his

³⁶ Anson Laytner, *Arguing with God: A Jewish Tradition* (Northvale, NJ: Jason Aronson Inc., 1990), 3.

³⁷ Laytner, *Arguing with God*, xv.

³⁸ Laytner, *Arguing with God*, xvii. One notes that the presentation of the Israelites and God as equals in this or any context may be an overstatement.

³⁹ Laytner, *Arguing with God*, xvi.

⁴⁰ Laytner, *Arguing with God*, 33.

right for justice at the hand of God," and thus would likely approve of the similar complaints in the book of Lamentations and in national lament psalms.⁴¹ This interpretation is in direct conflict with the Christian interpretations described in Section 4, in which Job's complaints and questioning of God were condemned. This view is not held by all Christian scholars, though, and the next section will investigate the claims of Christian interpreters whose views on Job align more closely with Laytner's.

THE EXCEPTIONS: CHRISTIAN INTERPRETERS ALIGNED WITH LAYTNER

Though many Christian interpreters use views from the New Testament to condemn Job's complaint, other Christian scholars refute this stance. Will Kynes, for example, argues that to challenge God, one must have faith in his goodness, and that complaint is thus an act of faith. Additionally, Kynes points out many of the patriarchs and prophets challenge God, and they are not condemned for doing so. Kynes wonders, "if Job had not complained as he did, would he have been restored? Would the submissive Job of the prologue still be sitting in the ash heap?"⁴² Thus, he claims that though Christian interpreters may oppose Job's manner of asking for justice, "Job is not wrong to ask, even to complain."⁴³ Kynes claims that, just as Job's friends do, "Christian interpreters also fall into the trap of defending God," despite the fact that this is explicitly condemned in the text.⁴⁴

Gustavo Gutiérrez, a prominent Peruvian theologian who is one of the founders of liberation theology, examines the story of Job in his book *On Job: God-Talk and the Suffering of the Innocent*. In the book, he aims to apply Job's lessons on innocent suffering to modern humanitarian crises in Latin America. Despite his Christian lens, he too aligns his conclusions

⁴¹ Laytner, *Arguing with God*, 34.

⁴² Kynes, "The Trials of Job," 190.

⁴³ Kynes, "The Trials of Job," 190.

⁴⁴ Kynes, "The Trials of Job," 190.

more closely with Laytner, describing Job as "a rebellious believer" whose "rebellion is against the suffering of the innocent, against a theology that justifies it, and even against the depiction of God that such a theology conveys."⁴⁵ In debating how we ought to speak of God today, Gutiérrez argues, "Job shows us a way with his vigorous protest, his...concrete commitment to the poor and all who suffer unjustly, his facing up to God, and his acknowledgement of the gratuitousness that characterizes God's plan for human history."⁴⁶

Greenstein takes a unique perspective. He argues that whether or not Job is correct in his accusations is completely irrelevant. What matters is that he speaks his own individual truth instead of following the example of his friends, who "have rejected any new thinking in favor of traditional norms."⁴⁷ Job's speaking out is what justifies him to God, as in the speeches from the whirlwind God "stand[s] up for one value, the value that has been classically exemplified by Job—the value of speaking truthfully, with unalloyed integrity, the integrity that had marked Job as different from other people at the beginning of the book."⁴⁸ In Greenstein's view, it is not what Job says that is important—it is the fact that he says it, and speaks truthfully from his own experience.

Kovalishyn argues that the writers of the New Testament do not actually posit suffering in silence as the ideal at all. In citing as examples the prophets and Job, she argues, James proves that he does not expect his audience to suffer in silence, because none of the examples that he cites did so.⁴⁹ Yet, James draws the distinction that while Job and the prophets "engaged in the process of discerning the purposes of God...the audience *has seen* it," as they know of God's

⁴⁵ Gustavo Gutiérrez, *On Job: God-Talk and the Suffering of the Innocent*, trans. Matthew J. O'Connell (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1987), 14.

⁴⁶ Gutiérrez, *On Job*, 102.

⁴⁷ Edward Greenstein, "Truth or Theodicy? Speaking Truth to Power in the Book of Job," *Princeton Seminary Bulletin* 27, no. 3 (2006): 258.

⁴⁸ Greenstein, "Truth or Theodicy? Speaking Truth to Power in the Book of Job," 258.

⁴⁹ Kovalishyn, "Endurance unto Salvation: The Witness of First Peter and James," 237.

mercy and can anticipate the Parousia.⁵⁰ They are as Job would be if Job knew that his reward was nigh.

So, on one side, some Christian scholars condemn Job's complaints, claiming that acceptance of and rejoicing in suffering are the appropriate responses; on the other side, some Christian scholars argue that Job's complaints, and examples of Laytner's law-court prayer pattern in general, are allowed and even encouraged in both the Jewish and the Christian tradition. To further investigate the debate between these two sides, it would be useful to select a Christian text on which to test these two theses—preferably one from the gospels, as Christianity's commitment to Jesus' sinlessness means that whatever response he has to innocent suffering must be a pious one.⁵¹ Most useful would be a scene in which a comparison between Job and Jesus would be clear. A particularly pertinent moment for this comparison comes at the "cry of dereliction" in Matthew 27:46 and Mark 15:34. In these passages, Jesus utters his final words from the cross: "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" This cry raises troubling questions that are echoed in the text of Job: "Can a God who forsook this Son [or any righteous person] be trusted as just?"⁵² What is the significance of innocent suffering? What is the faithful response to it? Because of these similar questions and themes, the cry of dereliction is a suitable gospel text to compare to the book of Job. Comparing Jesus' and Job's responses to innocent suffering can clarify whether traditional Christian criticisms of the book of Job have been appropriate.

⁵⁰ Kovalishyn, "Endurance unto Salvation: The Witness of First Peter and James," 237.

⁵¹ Raymond E. Brown, *The Death of the Messiah: From Gethsemane to the Grave*, vol. 2, 2 vols., The Anchor Bible Reference Library (New York, NY: Doubleday, 1994), 1049.

⁵² Paul Sevier Minear, "The Messiah Forsaken . . . Why," *Horizons in Biblical Theology* 17, no. 1 (June 1995): 63.

THE CONTEXT OF THE CRY OF DERELICTION

The cry of dereliction (or “abandonment”) occurs in Matthew and Mark. Mark, the shortest and probably earliest of the gospels, was produced around 70 C.E., likely by a Greek-speaking Christian outside of Palestine.⁵³ If one follows the widely-accepted Two Source Hypothesis, Mark was one of two major sources used by the authors of Matthew and Luke to produce their gospels. Thus, Matthew was probably produced later, around 80-85 C.E., by an author in a similar situation to that of Mark.⁵⁴ (Despite the uncertain authorship of the gospels, we will again continue to call their authors by the names of their books for the sake of simplicity.) In both of these gospels, the cry of dereliction constitutes Jesus’ last words. In total, there are seven phrases spread across the four gospels that Jesus is reported to have said during the Passion narrative.⁵⁵ The cry of dereliction is the only one of these seven that occurs in more than one gospel.⁵⁶ The cry is transliterated from the original Aramaic as well as translated into Greek.⁵⁷ The phrase is a reference to Psalm 22, sometimes called the “passion psalm” due to this reference and the close similarities between the events of Psalm 22 and the death and resurrection of Jesus.⁵⁸ While some hypothesize that “Jesus merely cried out in a loud voice, and the church (in the form of the Markan evangelist) placed Psalm 22’s first line in his mouth,”⁵⁹ this is impossible to prove, and thus this paper will address this passage without attempting to investigate its historicity.

⁵³ Ehrman, *The New Testament*, 118.

⁵⁴ Ehrman, *The New Testament*, 147.

⁵⁵ Ryszard Zawadzki, “The Prayer of Jesus on the Cross,” *Verbum Vitae* 22 (2012): 94.

⁵⁶ Zawadzki, “The Prayer of Jesus on the Cross,” 101.

⁵⁷ The transliteration preserves mixed forms of Aramaic and MT Hebrew; see Brown, *The Death of the Messiah*, 1051.

⁵⁸ Brown, *The Death of the Messiah*, 1455.

⁵⁹ Rebekah Eklund, “Jesus Laments (or Does He?): The Witness of the Fourfold Gospel,” *The Covenant Quarterly* 72, no. 3–4 (August 2014): 7.

Before analyzing the cry of dereliction in detail, it is important to acknowledge its absence in Luke and John, and to compare it to what appears in those books. Recent scholarship has focused less on deciding which of the final words of Jesus are historically accurate,⁶⁰ instead honing in on the way in which the words that are chosen are "reflections of the evangelists' particular theological emphases."⁶¹ In Luke, the reference to Psalm 22 is substituted by a reference to Psalm 31, and Jesus says "Father, into your hands I commend my spirit" (Luke 23:46). In changing this reference from the one made in Mark, Luke emphasizes that Jesus, "as a prophet...knew that this had to happen,"⁶² in contrast to Mark and Matthew who choose to emphasize Jesus' agony in his final moments. In John, Jesus only says "It is finished" in the moment before his death (John 19:30). The striking differences between Matthew and Mark's portrayal of the death of Jesus and those of the other gospels emphasize their thematic differences and make the cry of dereliction a somewhat controversial passage.

One of the major debates surrounding the cry of dereliction is whether it should be called a cry of dereliction at all. Is Jesus really abandoned by God on the cross? And, perhaps more importantly, does Jesus *feel* that he has been abandoned? Pertinent to this issue is whether one considers Jesus' words in isolation or within the context of the rest of Psalm 22. While the psalm begins with "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" the rest of the psalm proves that the innocent sufferer is not actually forsaken—in verse 21 the psalmist's tone shifts; he no longer cries out to God for deliverance but instead celebrates being redeemed by God:

From the horns of the wild oxen you have rescued me.
I will tell of your name to my brothers and sisters;
in the midst of the congregation I will praise you:
You who fear the Lord, praise him!...

⁶⁰ Some, however, do maintain that the cry of dereliction should be treated as the "only authentic cry from the cross" due to the widely accepted notion of Markan priority, see Eklund, "Jesus Laments (or Does He)?" 7.

⁶¹ Eklund, "Jesus Laments (or Does He)?" 4.

⁶² Ehrman, *The New Testament*, 163.

For he did not despise or abhor the affliction of the afflicted;
he did not hide his face from me, but heard when I cried to him (Psalm 22:21-24).

Because of the way in which this psalm seems to mirror the Passion narrative, many scholars maintain that Jesus' cry is in fact a reference to the entire psalm, and thus is not a cry of dereliction after all—it is in fact “a confession of faith and trust in ultimate vindication.”⁶³ Some maintain that Jesus actually recited the entirety of Psalm 22 from the cross,⁶⁴ since “citing the first words of a text was, in the tradition of the time, a way of identifying an entire passage.”⁶⁵ Others maintain that the connection was merely implied, and readers can supply the context of Psalm 22 based on their prior knowledge while reading the text.⁶⁶ In these interpretations, the cry of dereliction is not really one of dereliction at all—it is one of redemption and victory.

Yet there are also scholars who maintain that the cry of dereliction is just that—the cry of one who feels utterly abandoned. Brown points out that many Christians, “from the early Church Fathers to contemporary scholars and preachers... have resisted the surface import that would have Jesus expressing the sentiment of being forsaken by God.”⁶⁷ Some scholars maintain that Luke's use of Psalm 31 instead of Psalm 22 “seems to reveal a bias or a trajectory away from a lamenting Jesus in the earliest Christian tradition”⁶⁸ and that “the tone of despondency is probably what caused Luke not to copy this psalm prayer from Mark and to substitute a much more positive psalm prayer.”⁶⁹ Yet, Yocum points out, “while this is possible, there seems to be no evidence for such a development, beyond the fact that the two later gospels do not contain the

⁶³ Robert Holst, “Cry of Dereliction: Another Point of View,” *Springfielder* 35, no. 4 (March 1972): 286; see also R.E.O. White, “That ‘Cry of Dereliction’ ...?,” *The Expository Times* 113, no. 6 (March 1, 2002): 188–89, <https://doi.org/10.1177/001452460211300604>.

⁶⁴ Holst, “Cry of Dereliction,” 287.

⁶⁵ James Luther Mays, “Prayer and Christology: Psalm 22 as Perspective on the Passion,” *Theology Today* 42, no. 3 (October 1985): 322.

⁶⁶ White, “That ‘Cry of Dereliction’ ...?” 189.

⁶⁷ Brown, *The Death of the Messiah*, 1047.

⁶⁸ Eklund, “Jesus Laments (or Does He)?” 8.

⁶⁹ Brown, *The Death of the Messiah*, 1049.

cry.”⁷⁰ Brown claims that Christian scholars might be wary about interpreting the cry in a way that implies that Jesus feels abandoned by God because of Jesus’ assertions elsewhere in the gospels that he has “untroubled communion with God.”⁷¹ This connection would imply a total awareness of God’s intent that should prevent Jesus from feeling abandoned. Yet, Brown maintains, if Mark wanted to convey Jesus as giving a message of victory, he would have chosen a quotation from Psalm 22 that clearly conveys that message, as in other references to scripture he is more direct.⁷² Balthasar maintains that the cry “should not be read as if it implied everything that followed in that psalm, right up to the point of the vindication of the sufferer by God.”⁷³ In these interpretations, the cry of dereliction is aptly named, and is an earnest cry from a Jesus who feels truly abandoned.

As well as being appealing due to its simplicity, this second interpretation is also more strongly implied in the text. One key piece of evidence that seems to support this reading is the way in which Jesus speaks his final words. It is clear that in Matthew and Mark, Jesus lacks the composure on the cross that is characteristic of him in the other two gospels, particularly in John. In John, he converses with the beloved disciple and his mother, asks for a drink, and says his final words—there is no description of how they were said, so one is left to assume it was without extreme distress (John 19:26-27; 19:28; 19:30). In Luke, Jesus is calm enough to ask God to forgive his tormentors and speak to the criminal beside him, before at last he says his final words, “crying out with a loud voice” (Luke 23:34; 23:43; 23:46). In conveying his forsakenness, Jesus also “cried out with a loud voice” or “screamed with a loud cry”⁷⁴ in Mark

⁷⁰ John Yocum, “A Cry of Dereliction?: Reconsidering a Recent Theological Commonplace,” *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 7, no. 1 (January 2005): 75.

⁷¹ Brown, *The Death of the Messiah*, 1049.

⁷² Brown, *The Death of the Messiah*, 1049.

⁷³ Yocum, “A Cry of Dereliction?” 76.

⁷⁴ Zawadzki, “The Prayer of Jesus on the Cross,” 103.

and Matthew (Mark 15:34; compare Matthew 27:46). Yet in these two gospels, there is no other dialogue from the cross besides the cry of dereliction—and this difference is stark. In Matthew, Jesus lets out another wordless scream before dying (Matthew 27:50). The violence inherent in the image of a scream—one let out without any calmer words spoken beforehand to mitigate its impact — makes the argument that Jesus' cry was actually one of victory seem implausible in context.

Another particularly relevant detail in the cry of dereliction is Jesus' use of "my God." This stands in contrast to the rest of the gospels of Matthew and Mark, where Jesus frequently refers to God as "father." Zawadzki maintains that this use of "my God" instead of "my father" shows Jesus' identification with the suffering humanity.⁷⁵ It also demonstrates a certain level of alienation from God, as, "Feeling forsaken as if he were not being heard, [Jesus] no longer presumes to speak intimately to the All-Powerful as 'Father' but employs the address common to all human beings, 'My God.'"⁷⁶ This seems to indicate a real alienation from God that would be absent if Jesus were letting out a cry of victory.

Boring presents a nuanced view on the cry of dereliction, in which readers *can* examine the cry within the context of Psalm 22, but "the Matthean Jesus should not be pictured as merely reciting the opening line for an outline of salvation history. The human Jesus is pictured as dying with a cry of anguish and abandonment on his lips."⁷⁷ This is the view that the remainder of this paper will take, as it allows for both sides of the argument to contribute to the conversation; while the context of Psalm 22 can certainly provide an interesting lens through which to examine

⁷⁵ Zawadzki, "The Prayer of Jesus on the Cross," 104.

⁷⁶ Brown, *The Death of the Messiah*, 1046.

⁷⁷ Eugene Boring, "The Gospel of Matthew: Introduction, Commentary, and Reflections," in *New Testament Articles, Matthew, and Mark*, vol. 8, 12 vols., *The New Interpreter's Bible: A Commentary in Twelve Volumes* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1995), 492.

the Passion narrative, it should not be assumed that this was inarguably or even probably the intent of the author, and thus one is inclined to defer to the simpler option: Jesus meant what he said when he cried to God, "why have you forsaken me?"

THE CRY OF DERELICTION AND APPROPRIATE RESPONSES TO INNOCENT SUFFERING

The cry of dereliction posits a unique condoned response to innocent suffering in the Christian theological tradition. It directly contradicts the idea of a Jesus who is utterly silent in the face of his pain, on which Paul based his assertions about the appropriate response to innocent suffering.⁷⁸ It also creates tension between the Passion narrative and the instructions presented in James and maintained by traditional Christian interpreters on how one ought to respond to innocent suffering. This section will examine these tensions, aiming to discover whether they can be reconciled. As summarized in Section 3, James gives three primary instructions to Christians who are suffering: to be patient and endure; to rejoice in suffering, knowing that endurance will result in exultation; and to pray.

The first two instructions offered by James are echoed in Jesus' own teachings. Jesus tells his followers, "Blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, and for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you" (Matthew 5:11-12; compare Luke 6:22-23). Yet, one might argue, Jesus is hardly rejoicing in his suffering when he utters the cry of dereliction. This seems to indicate a conflict between what Jesus instructs his

⁷⁸ Volf points out that Paul could not take this into account because he was likely unaware of the gospel accounts (as his works were probably produced earlier). Additionally, Volf argues that it is possible that, even if Paul was aware of the cry of dereliction from the oral tradition, he might have taken "the lesson of it from what followed after the cry of dereliction rather than the cry of dereliction itself." Unfortunately, Volf did not have time to expand upon this point extensively in the lecture. See Volf, "Vanquishing Suffering: Apostle Paul and the Victory Over Suffering," 12:00.

followers to do (to rejoice in suffering) and what he himself does (cry out to God and lament his forsakenness). Yet, one could also argue that this is not a contradiction at all. The remainder of this paper will argue that both more traditional Christian perspectives and those that are aligned with Laytner can co-exist as canonically condoned responses to innocent suffering.

To begin, a simple question must be asked: what does it mean to rejoice in suffering? Jesus tells his followers that persecution is a sign of blessedness (Matthew 5:11, Luke 6:22). The instruction to rejoice in the face of persecution is heavily based on the anticipation of a future reward; in Matthew Jesus says "Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven," (Matthew 5:12) and in Luke he says "Rejoice in that day [when you are persecuted] and leap for joy, for surely your reward is great in heaven" (Luke 6:23). One should rejoice in suffering because it is a sign that they are blessed and because it will bring them to their heavenly reward, *not* because suffering is sacred or desirable in itself. Because of this, one could argue that a pious Christian can rejoice in the blessedness that leads to their suffering *while simultaneously asking God for deliverance from that suffering*, since suffering itself is not inherently sacred, blessed, or desirable. It is in this nuance that one can find space to allow for a more Laytner-aligned view to co-exist with the instruction to rejoice in suffering.

The final instruction which James gives to his readers is to pray in the midst of innocent suffering. He does not specify what these prayers should contain. One could argue, based on the cry of dereliction, that this instruction leaves room for prayers that are complaints and requests for deliverance. Mays claims that in the cry of dereliction, Jesus "gives all his followers who are afflicted permission and encouragement to pray for help. He shows that faith includes holding

the worst of life up to God."⁷⁹ With this in mind, could James' instruction allow for prayers that fit the pattern of Laytner's law-court prayers?

One question is particularly relevant in this discussion: does the cry of dereliction itself qualify as a law-court prayer? Unfortunately, this single line does not provide enough of a structured argument to see whether it matches up with Laytner's pattern. But it is worthwhile to examine whether the *intentions* underlying the cry of dereliction are similar to those that Laytner argues are at the heart of this pattern. To do so, it is useful to return to the definition which Laytner offers for the law-court pattern of prayer, which he describes as "an authentic Jewish form of prayer that, though *rooted in deep faith*, nevertheless *calls God to task for His lapses of duty which result in suffering and injustice* [emphasis added]."⁸⁰ Many scholars who analyze the cry of dereliction describe it as a lament. Lament is defined as "a form of speech directed toward God that *presumes a God who keeps promises*, and *calls upon that God to keep those promises in the midst of distress* [emphasis added]."⁸¹ One can see immediately the similarity between this definition of lament and Laytner's explanation of the intent of the law-court prayer: both present to God a call to action, rooted in deep faith in God's justice. Daniel argues that the cry of dereliction is "the lament to end all laments and lamenting."⁸² Jesus' *protest* in the face of apparent abandonment is a key part of the Passion narrative and constitutes a radical act of faith and trust—one that closely mirrors that of the figures of the Hebrew Bible who similarly demand justice from God in Laytner's analysis. This trust is implied in the cry itself—even if Jesus does not address God as Father, "he still addresses his lament to God, and as 'My God.'"⁸³

⁷⁹ Mays, "Prayer and Christology," 323.

⁸⁰ Laytner, *Arguing with God*, xv.

⁸¹ Eklund, "Jesus Laments (or Does He)?" 9; Daniel provides a similar definition: F Harry Daniel, "Where Is God?: Matthew's Passion Narrative and the Triune God," *Journal for Preachers* 24, no. 2 (2001): 34.

⁸² Daniel, "Where Is God?" 34.

⁸³ Boring, "The Gospel of Matthew," 492.

There are some obvious limitations to this argument. Laytner focuses particularly on the structure of the law-court prayer, which cannot be applied to this single line. Additionally, Laytner highlights that many examples of this pattern are based on appeals to the covenant, which is not mentioned explicitly in the cry of dereliction.⁸⁴ Yet the connection between the intentions at the heart of the law-court prayer and the cry of dereliction is enough to assert that calling for God to take action in the face of innocent suffering cannot be condemned on principle by Christian scholars, as is common practice when they examine Job. If these scholars condemn Job simply because he protests, they are condemning Jesus, too.

CONCLUSION: JESUS AND JOB

The previous section established the possibility of an intermediate position between Christian scholars aligned with James and those aligned with Laytner, asserting that it is possible simultaneously to rejoice in suffering as a sign of blessedness and to cry out to God for deliverance from that suffering. If the cry of dereliction adds this nuance to Christian views of appropriate responses to innocent suffering, one is inclined to ask: what does this mean for Christian interpretations of Job? To begin, it casts doubt on interpretations in which Job is condemned merely for crying out in his suffering, such as those of Luther and Barth. If Jesus, the obvious moral exemplar of the Christian faith, can cry out to God in his suffering, then others who suffer innocently (including Job) should not be condemned for doing the same. Additionally, Job should not be condemned for failing to rejoice in his suffering. Because the instruction to rejoice in suffering is so heavily based on the promise of a heavenly reward, it seems inappropriate to extend it to Job, who in his Hebrew Bible context had little reason to anticipate the Parousia or even a reward after death (see, for example, Job 14:10).

⁸⁴ The covenantal relationship *is* implied, however, in the wider context of Psalm 22; see Psalm 22:4.

Yet Job is not left without criticism from a Christian point of view, even when one takes the cry of dereliction into account. Even though Jesus protests, he accuses God of abandoning him, not of actively harming him. In contrast, as established in Section 2, Job claims that God is actively harming him and has become Job's enemy. Even at the peak of his suffering, Jesus never goes so far as to accuse God of this. Thus, while Christian scholars cannot condemn Job for crying out for justice, they can condemn passages in which he takes this extra step and accuses God of actively attacking him.

In conclusion, James' use of Job as an exemplar of patience has raised many questions, leading Christian scholars to attempt to mitigate Job's often-impatient nature in the canonical book with this high praise. Despite wanting to portray Job as blameless, however, many Christian interpreters have found fault with him based on broader Christian views of the causes of and appropriate responses to innocent suffering. Many condemn him simply for demanding justice from God. In contrast, Anson Laytner's analysis of the law-court prayer pattern promotes Job as a prime example of traditionally Jewish argument with God that is present and condoned throughout much of the Hebrew Bible. Some Christian scholars align themselves with Laytner's view, arguing that Job's complaints are justified and encouraged. The cry of dereliction has provided a test case on which to debate whether the appropriate response to innocent suffering is rejoicing or protest. While the cry of dereliction seems to conflict with Jesus' teachings to rejoice in suffering, this difference can be reconciled if one remembers that a person can simultaneously rejoice in the blessing that has led to their suffering *and* ask God for deliverance from that suffering, since suffering in itself is presented as neither sacred nor desirable. While James gives little specificity in his encouragement to innocent sufferers to pray, one can argue that Laytner's law-court pattern of prayer is permitted within this instruction, especially with the cry of

dereliction as context. Therefore, while some Christian criticisms of Job are justifiable, Job cannot be condemned simply for speaking out in the midst of his suffering due to the influence of the cry of dereliction.

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