

Exegetical Brief: Psalm 69:22—They Gave Me Gall

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In this prophecy the enemies of the suffering Messiah give him רֵאשׁ and חֶמֶץ as food and drink. The exegetical issue is what these words mean in Hebrew and how the evangelists understood these terms and applied them to Christ in the passion accounts.

The Hebrew Text

21 חֶרְפָּה שִׁבְרָה לְבִי וְאִנּוּשָׁה
וְאֶקְוֶה לְנוֹד וְאֵין וְלִמְנַחֲמִים וְלֹא מְצֵאתִי:
22 וַיִּתְּנוּ בְּבִרוֹתַי רֵאשׁ וְלִצְמָאֵי יִשְׁקוּנִי חֶמֶץ:

The Messiah's Shame

21 Scorn has broken my heart and I am helpless, and I waited for sympathy, but there was none, and for comforters, but I did not find any.

22 Instead, as my food they gave me gall, and for my thirst they gave me sour wine to drink.

Translation Notes

וְאִנּוּשָׁה, "I am helpless," is a qal 1st singular cohortative from אִנּוּשׁ, a word that appears only here. The Septuagint appears to treat it as a feminine participle from אִנּוּשָׁה.

לְנוֹד is an infinitive. This verbal root refers to shaking one's head from side to side. Sometimes this action may express grief or scorn, but here, as elsewhere, it expresses pity. Literally, the phrase says, "I waiting for nodding." Above, it is translated as the equivalent of a noun, "sympathy."

According to the Masoretic pointing verse 22 starts with a *vav* consecutive which contrasts it with the preceding verses. Hence, the rendering "instead."

The Issue

It is not certain what the Hebrew word רֵאשׁ refers to. In the Old Testament this word occurs 12 times. Sometimes it means "poison" or "venom" (Dt 29:17/18; Dt 32:33, Job 20:16), but at times it may simply refer to something bitter. In Hosea 10:4 רֵאשׁ is the name of a plant, perhaps hemlock (*conium maculatum*). Some have thought רֵאשׁ is the poppy, a plant with large heads (רֵאשׁ) from which a narcotic can be made. רֵאשׁ may refer to a substance which served as a sedative or pain killer at one dose, but was a deadly poison at a higher dosage. In Psalm 69:22 רֵאשׁ seems to refer to something that is bitter and unpalatable but not necessarily poisonous. All the references in Jeremiah (8:14, 9:15, 23:15) seem to allow bitterness rather than poison as the basic meaning, as do most of the rest of the Old Testament references. A comparison of Deuteronomy 32:32-33 is especially interesting. In verse 32 *rosh*, spelled רוֹשׁ in most manuscripts, seems to refer to bitterness of grapes. In verse 33, spelled רֵאשׁ, it refers to venom of snakes. In summary, *rosh* may well be something bitter, but not necessarily poisonous. Even the reference in Deuteronomy 29:17 [18E], where the NIV has "poison," could well refer to bitterness, as the allusion to this passage in Hebrews 12:15 indicates.

There is also much debate about the New Testament allusions to this verse. In Matthew 27:34 the drink which Jesus was offered is identified as wine mixed with gall (οἶνον μετὰ χολῆς μεμιγμένον). "Gall" is bile or,

by extension, any bitter substance. Mark 15:23 identifies this drink as wine mixed with myrrh (ἔσμυρνισμένον οἶνον). Jesus refused this drink. There is little evidence for the common notion that this drink had painkilling properties beyond that of the alcohol. Spiced wine was often a weaker wine, favored by women (compare Song of Solomon 8:2). Myrrh was apparently used as a flavoring to mask the sourness of the wine. It may also have served as a preservative. Why then did Jesus refuse the drink? Perhaps the soldiers had added an extra dose of the naturally bitter myrrh to the drink, making it unpalatable. This mockery of Jesus was a perfect example of the lack of sympathy spoken of in verse 21 of the psalm. Mark describes the wine additive literally—it was myrrh. Matthew uses the term "gall" to make the connection between this incident and the psalm more explicit. (The Septuagint uses the word χολῆν in verse 22 of the psalm.) Matthew and Mark seem to place the offer of this drink before the crucifixion. Neither of them makes an explicit connection with Psalm 69. Luke 23:36 refers to an offer of "sour wine" (ὄξος) which seems to come somewhat later. John 19:28 refers to a drink of sour wine (ὄξου) offered to Jesus shortly before his death, in response to his cry, "I thirst." John says that this incident is a fulfillment of Scripture, but he may be referring to Jesus' thirst as foretold in Psalm 22:15 rather than to the offer of sour wine. Jesus accepted this drink, perhaps because his suffering was complete and now he was ready to depart with a triumphant cry.

Application

After the interlude of prayer in the preceding verses of the psalm, verses 21 and 22 of Psalm 69 resume the description of the scorn that the Messiah suffers from his enemies. The fulfillment of Psalm 69's prophecy that the Messiah will be scorned by his enemies is obvious throughout the gospel accounts of Jesus' suffering. The mockery of the soldiers during Jesus' trial, the taunts of his enemies gathered around the cross, the flight of his disciples, and Peter's denial—all of these contributed to the loneliness and anguish of Christ during his passion. The references to bitter gall and sour wine in Matthew 27:34 and 48 point to a more specific fulfillment of this psalm during the suffering of Christ. We look in vain for a literal fulfillment of these words in the life of David. Though it is true that David was a type of Christ, some of the statements of the Messianic psalms exceed any experiences of David's life, and the psalms containing such statements should be understood as direct prophecies of Christ.

Psalm 69:22 is an instance of such prophecy.