**Roman Violence**

*After Jesus Before Christianity*

Excerpts and comments by Robert Traer

The Gospels of the New Testament in their descriptions of the crucifixion of Jesus. In the Gospels of Mark, the cry of Jesus from the cross is, “*Eloi, Eloi, lama sabacthani*?” These words are in Aramaic, the spoken language of Jesus and his Galilean community. English New Testaments provide a translation such as, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?”

This seems to be a cry of despair. Yet, turn to Psalm 22 in your Bible, and you will find that this statement is the first sentence of the psalm. In the first and second centuries, psalms were identified by their first sentence, not by a number. Invoking the first sentence of a psalm not only identified a psalm, but also *brought to mind the entire psalm* for those who knew the psalms.

With this background, someone reading the crucifixion account in the gospel of Mark might assume that Jesus was not despairing any more than the psalmist was. The psalm begins with the psalmist crying out for God’s help, and the psalm ends with an affirmation of faith in God:

To him, indeed, shall all who sleep in the earth bow down; before him shall bow all who go down to the dust, and I shall live for him. Posterity will serve him; future generations will be told about the Lord, and proclaim his deliverance to a people yet unborn, saying that he has done it. (Psalm 22: 29-31)

The gospel of Matthew also has Jesus crying out the first sentence from Psalm 22, but this gospel uses Hebrew for “my God” and Aramaic for the second part of the sentence. “*Eli, Eli, lema sabacthani*?” As the author of Matthew wrote with knowledge of the gospel of Mark, his choice of languages might suggest to readers who knew Hebrew that Jesus was at least familiar with the scriptures of Israel written in Hebrew, as educated rabbis in Judea would have been.

The crucifixion of Jesus as reported in the gospel of Luke does not have Jesus quoting Psalm 22, but Luke 23:14 includes verse 18 from Psalm 22: “they divide my clothes among themselves, and for my clothing they cast lots.” In Luke’s crucifixion story when one of the criminals being crucified with him asks, “Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom,” Jesus replies, “Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in Paradise.” (Lk 23:42-43) In this version of the crucifixion of Jesus, there are no words reflecting the pain and suffering of a person being crucified. Instead, Jesus warmly promises the criminal who repents of his sin, that he too will be with Jesus in Paradise.

The gospel of John’s account of the crucifixion also quotes Psalm 22, verse 18. (Many current biblical scholars believe these gospels were composed by drawing on images from Psalm 22.) As Jesus is dying, he says, “I am thirsty,” which the gospel author asserts, was “to fulfill scripture.” Scholars suggest this is a reference to Psalm 69, verse 21: “for my thirst they gave me vinegar to drink.” After the soldiers lift up to his mouth a sponge dipped in wine, Jesus says, “It is finished.” Then the gospel reports, “he bowed his head and gave up his spirit.” (Jn 19:30)

The crucifixion of Jesus in each of these gospel versions illustrates Roman cruelty. Reports of the thousands of crucifixions outside Jerusalem, after Roman armies have crushed the Judean rebellion in 70 CE, threaten a terrible death for anyone who resists Roman rule. Yet, AJBC tells us, “many of the early communities of the Anointed emphasized the centrality of crucifixion for defining who they were. Early Anointed-association envoy Paul said, ‘I know nothing but Jesus Anointed and him crucified’ (1 Cor. 2:2). The Gospel of Mark has Jesus saying, ‘Those who want to be a follower of mine . . . let them take up a cross (8:34).’

Perhaps this is why the gospels of Mark and Matthew include references to Psalm 22, which transforms the fear of the psalmist into an affirmation of faith and hope. In addition, the gospels of Luke and John also link the crucifixion of Jesus to the promise of salvation. In Luke’s story Jesus promises Paradise to a repentant criminal, and in John’s account Jesus announces that he has completed his mission on earth and then, after bowing his head, dies without seeming to experience any pain at all.

In addition to destroying the temple in Jerusalem in 70 CE and slaughtering its defenders, the Romans enslaved about one hundred thousand survivors and took them to Rome. AJBC reports that many of these slave “built the Colosseum, the amphitheater still central to tourism in central Rome today.” Slavery was public policy in the Roman empire. “In addition to the huge number of enslaved people doing manual labor, many people of high social rank or status from the nations Rome seized were enslaved to help administer Roman affairs and imperial networks. They were displaced throughout the empire to staff remote villas and become the bureaucratic scribes who churned out the writing that managed the empire.

“The economy of the empire was built on, driven by, and grew by enslaving more and more people. Besides being enslaved through warfare, people were enslaved for being in debt, committing or allegedly committing crimes, or being born of enslaved women. Slavery was everywhere throughout Roman society: both the government and private individuals engaged in the slave trade; most kinds of work received substantial support from the enslaved; and the empire used the enslaved to construct huge monuments to Rome’s glory.

Roman policy uprooted many of the peoples it conquered, and enslavement was one way of doing this. Rome’s program of expanded road building and commerce pushed people into places other than where they had lived for centuries. The population of entire villages moved far away because work was available somewhere else. This lure of work in distant parts of the empire destroyed families, neighborhoods, and villages. Rome also built many new cities and colonies either from scratch (the Decapolis region near Galilee) or from former cities destroyed by war (the rebuilding of Corinth). Many of these new cities were then populated by combinations of retired soldiers and conquered peoples who played major roles in the building of these cities.” (AJBC, 37-40)

“Rome normally tolerated local religions while requiring participants to offer sacrifices to the honor of the emperor and to pray for him.” Many religions in the Roman Empire had their roots in the conquered nations and tribes. “Others, like Egypt’s cults of Isis and Osiris, were ancient religions spread around the empire and were even welcomed in the city of Rome. Both the Babylonian and Egyptian versions of the religion of Israel derived from migrations from the homeland. Because of the breadth of the spread of the religious practice of Israel throughout the empire, “members of the nation of Israel were exempt from the requirement of sacrifice, but not the requirement of praying for the emperor.

“Rome developed its own imperial religion in ways that supported its violence and power. Beginning with Augustus Caesar, most emperors were divinized to one degree or another, and votive offerings were made in temples and public venues, at meals, and in private villas. Most emperors were proclaimed gods after their death, and stars were named for them as the emperors were considered to be the stars, in and from which they continued to rule.”

Early Jesus groups, AJBC explains, “feared Rome’s oppression and brutality.” They responded to Roman violence, however, with “imagination, resistance, and humor.” Jesus groups coped with Roman violence with varied strategies: “some focused on resistance, others on creativity, and some employed both. In sly yet tangible ways, they worked to stop Rome from damaging their lives and to help people heal from torture and loss. At the same time, most Jesus peoples were even more drawn to joyful and imaginative ways of carving out their own spaces that left them freer to be lively and present.

Simply telling the story of Jesus’s crucifixion by Roman soldiers “and celebrating it, was an act of resistance to Rome.” Stories of Jesus being tortured to death allied his story with those of hundreds of thousands of people who were similarly executed. Early Jesus groups dramatically described how their Anointed leader was crucified by the Roman empire. They proclaimed openly that Jesus was an executed enemy of the state.

“Later Christians obscured Rome’s violence” by emphasizing their belief that Jesus was crucified to save people from their sins. In the first and second centuries, however, communities of the Anointed proclaimed that “Rome’s defeat of Jesus the Anointed was actually Rome’s defeat.”

“Most of the stories of Jesus’s crucifixion also proclaimed that Jesus was vindicated and raised up by God. This claim would have been understood as an anti-Roman claim of victory over Roman violence. Like Jesus’s successful resistance to crucifixion, the reports in the second century of Romans killing Jesus followers—who were later called ‘martyrs’—ended in those followers being raised up to their God’s heavenly throne.” (AJBC, 41-43)

Paul also knew and triumphed over Roman violence. “Paul, a teacher, envoy, and letter writer, brags about having been beaten, thrown in prison, whipped, and stoned. He acknowledges similar violence against those who follow the Anointed, and he associates the Anointed’s crucifixion with the cruelty most of them have experienced. Paul even cites a song about Jesus’s death, praising him as an example when “he took the form of an enslaved person . . . even accepting death on a cross” (Phil. 2:7, 8). This is why, Paul says, he is preaching ‘good news.’ It is also why the New Testament uses the Greek word for ‘good news’ more than one hundred times. (AJBC, 41-44)

AJBC argues: “The first two centuries involved two ‘good news’ parties: the Romans and the Jesus peoples.” In contemporary English the Greek word *euangelion* is translated as ‘good news,’ because “its two Greek word stems are ‘good and ‘news.’ [The Old English word, *gōdspel*, comes from gōd meaning ‘good’ and spel meaning ‘news.’] Good news, of course, could be ordinary or extraordinary. In the ancient world, *euangelion* was used for ordinary good news as well as “an official governmental announcement of some particular good news for the whole Roman Empire.”

In the first two centuries, two distinct versions of ‘good news’ go head to head. Rome announces a brash and powerful good news event about the beauty and might of the savior emperor, who destroys his enemies and makes everything right with the world, calling it peace. The budding Jesus schools, parties of the Anointed, and supper clubs, each with different names, announce good news that celebrates a crucified Anointed One and looks forward to a new creation, calling it peace.

“During this time, tens of thousands of people recognize the ‘good news’ that the Roman Empire announces. It is everywhere. It is the good news that the ruling government has saved all people in the Mediterranean. All these people are no longer in danger, for instance, from pirates on the open seas and thieves in their communities and homes. Civil war is at an end. The good news is that now people are safe. This good news spans thousands of miles. In addition, the government and its allies have built extensive and (mostly) safe roads to everywhere. There are magnificent cities with stunning buildings. Baths are built for all, and towering aqueducts carry water into the cities. Countless large and small boats carry goods all over the ocean. The golden age of *Pax Romana* was, indeed, peace for Romans. Empire certainly had its advantages.

“The major caveat to this ‘peace’ was that most people in the Roman Empire experienced it as oppression. [This was especially true for peoples who had been brutally conquered.] For these people, the definition of ‘good news’ came in smaller doses and was mostly experienced in communities. People in these small groups found good news in relationships. They were thankful for the solidarity with others that provided them with help and support in daily life. These groups were known for their joy and compassion. They claimed a wisdom that pointed toward values of generosity, experiments in how to live, and bonding with one another. “

For many living in conquered nations, their good news “was not about winning a great battle or gaining a material foothold. Nor was it about gaining assurance of life in the hereafter. What made a difference for these communities was caring for one another, bestowing forgiveness, being fed, finding a future, and being surrounded by companions. No wonder student sages mused, ‘You are the salt of the earth . . . the light for the world . . . Don’t fret about your life—what you’re going to eat or drink—or your body—what you’re going to wear . . . Take a look at the birds of the sky: they don’t . . . gather into barns . . . You are to seek God’s domain, and . . . justice first, and all these things will come to you as a bonus’ (Mt. 5:13, 14; 6:25, 26, 33). (AJBC, 52-54)

“Stories of Jesus communities exhibit surprises in their daily lives: a worker makes serious mistakes in seeding his field, yet there is a harvest. A woman bakes a huge amount of bread as if she’s expecting a party (Mt. 13:33). Small gatherings of people for supper don’t have quite enough food or couches; other people crash the party, but everybody relaxes, reclines next to each other or on each other’s lap, singing at the top of their voices with plenty to eat and drink (Lk. 7:36–39; 12:17; 10:4–9). The country healer insists that it was the confidence of the sick person that made her better (Mk. 5:34). Judeans and members of other nations figure out what and how they can eat together (Rom. 14:1–210). A large crowd listens to a teacher in the field, people get hungry, and somehow a small amount of shared food is more than enough (Mt. 14:13–21). A woman begs a healer to cure her daughter; the healer insults her; the woman persists; and when she returns home, her daughter is well (Mk. 7:24–30). At a dinner party a young man falls asleep and then falls out of the window, but he is okay, and his companions carry him home (Acts 20:9–12).

“Another hallmark of their lives was the ‘Empire of God’—traditionally translated as the kingdom of God.” The AJBC scholars favor “the comic, ironic, and sociopolitical translation Empire of God because it captures the irony and opposition of this ‘God reality’ to the violence of the Empire of Rome. It reminds us that when speaking of the Empire of God, the Empire of Rome is directly challenged. Moreover, the Greek word is the same in both cases.

“Stories and images about the Empire of God build upon small events in daily life, not long speeches about power and might, nor about the nature of God. Parables about the realm or Empire of God were experiential snapshots, not theological dissertations or moral aphorisms. Empire of God—used as often as ‘good news’—compared God’s action to what happened in the ordinary field, market, and house.

“Some groups used ‘good news’ and ‘Empire of God,’ or both, in their daily conversations and weekly meals. Others used them sometimes, and yet others rarely or never used them. Some talked a lot about Jesus; others, somewhat; and some, hardly ever. God was seldom the direct topic of exposition, except within the usage of Empire of God, in which good news happened. Rather than a commonly shared vocabulary or set of beliefs, there was the experience of folks gathering together for food, drink, and conversation. This sharing of experience went on in the midst of the Roman Empire’s systemic violence and domination.

“The clubs and schools of the Anointed were an experience of good news and God’s empire in the face of Rome’s violence. Their stories of Jesus’s crucifixion and of others being tortured are featured in their writings, as well as at their meal gatherings. As the wine flowed and conversation unfolded, good news of God’s empire emerged in their everyday experience that challenged and mocked Rome’s empire.

“Humor was a major part of these people’s meals together. Although pietistic Christianity of our day has forgotten how humorous the early Jesus people were, this wit and sparkle is easily spotted in early writings. Jesus in the Gospel of Mark critiques the idea that some food is unclean (that is, not appropriate) with potty humor: ‘It’s not the things that come into a person that are dirty, it’s what comes out of a person that’s dirty’ (Mk. 7:15).

“Perhaps the darkest joke in Mark’s story makes fun of the idea of happy or sad endings. Its madcap version of Jesus’s resurrection (or mysterious lack thereof) doesn’t let things get *too* happy or *too* sad, but they are all confused. Mark’s Gospel, a writing of good news, was probably drafted in the aftermath of Rome’s grinding war against Israel in 68–70 CE and the resulting Flavian propaganda. While Rome was arguing over who was going to be the next emperor, Judea and the Galilee had managed in 67 CE to free themselves from the empire. But when Rome figured out who its next emperor was, it came back and recaptured Israel in vicious fashion, ending with Jerusalem in flames, the Temple destroyed, thousands of people crucified by the Romans, and many more thousands carried off in enslavement. (AJBC, 45-48)

“In the wake of these events, Mark’s good news—full of sadness, healing, loss, and humor—was written. The truest vein of humor aimed straight at the terror of such violence. In Mark, Jesus heals many people; but strangely, when he does so, he commands them not to tell anyone about the healing. When no one pays any attention to his directions, he becomes a famous healer. Then Jesus is crucified and buried. None of Jesus’s male followers come to his tomb, but several of his female followers do, to anoint his dead body. When they approach the tomb, however, they see only a young man, not Jesus. The young man tells the women that Jesus has been raised to life and the women are to tell his followers to meet him in Galilee where they used to be together with him. But the women are amazed and afraid, so they run off and never tell anyone about Jesus’s resurrection. Now, for the first time, no one tells; no one ever knows that Jesus has been raised. And the reader is left to ask, ‘What happened?’

“This is deadly serious comedy. It is about the horrible violence that happens to all the different kinds of people in Israel when the Romans retake Israel in 70 CE. This Gospel is written for the particular Jesus people(s) who have been damaged by Rome in the aftermath of the events of 70 CE. But the tragicomic and quizzical end to Mark’s Jesus story has an incomplete resurrection and witnesses who crazily obey for the first time Jesus’s instructions not to tell anyone. Significantly, it ends not with God wreaking apocalyptic vengeance on his Anointed’s tormentors, but with women running away, afraid and saying nothing. It is incomplete good news in the middle of Rome’s horrendous terror of 70 CE for those who have eyes to see and ears to hear.

“The family movement called the Enslaved of God told stories about a first-century companion of Paul named Thecla with a similar mix of Roman violence and humor. In one of those stories, Thecla is sentenced to death in the arena for encouraging men and women not to get married but to join her and Paul in wandering around teaching and healing. The Roman soldiers strip Thecla naked and take her before the lions and bears. But hundreds of women in the arena throw perfume into the arena, and the animals lie down drowsily, leaving Thecla safe before them. She then escapes the wild beasts, which have suddenly lost their appetites.

“Adherents to the party of the Anointed developed various practices, communities, and ways of life that helped them to understand themselves in different and renewed ways. Their lives centered around regular meals together and public bathing in smaller groups. Most of them had an ongoing relationship with Jesus after his death, many of them focusing on Jesus as the Anointed King of Israel. Other groups formed local schools to explore their understanding of kindness, joy, Jesus’s teachings, mutual support, and the reign of Israel’s God in their world.

“The standard way to describe how these peoples emerged has for centuries focused on the aspect of ‘believing in’ Jesus. Curiously, this long-held model has had little to say about the Roman Empire or its violence. For the most part, violence is ignored, except in the case of the deaths of community heroes later called martyrs. In the past twenty-five years, however, scholars have discovered the importance of the intensity of Roman violence and how much the writings and life of communities of Jesus Anointed were about resistance to Roman violence as well as aliveness and depth.

“A more accurate picture would see the Jesus movements in the grips of Roman terror as a range of partially formed social identities that carry unresolved brokenness, authentic renewal, good news, and mixed messages. We do not see these peoples simply as the beginning of an otherworldly religion, but as complex, growing, and creative humans struggling toward the good news of the Empire of God.” (AJBC, 48-51)

“Communal meals are the practice that comes closest to being universally characteristic of the widest range of early Jesus groups. These meals attracted people who had lost other connections through violence, poverty, or the disruption of family connections. The exuberant moods of these meals, the chance for people to have both light and heavy conversations, and the humor characteristic of these meetings reframed what life could be for the many people experiencing disruption. Eating regularly in groups of six to fifteen developed intimacy, loyalty, community, shared values, and intelligence.

“Much of the Gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John in the New Testament, as well as the Gospels of Mary and Thomas, depict Jesus and his students teaching in marketplaces, at community meals, on roads, at seasides, and in fields. Their teaching was directed mostly to people at work, on the way someplace, or in their neighborhoods. The teaching and learning occurred in groups with lots of discussion. Our sources point strongly toward the teaching in the form of small sayings like parables, proverbs, questions and answers, and short stories, most not lasting more than two to three minutes. Topics of conversation were rarely formally philosophical and not explicitly about heaven or politics. Rather, the main topics were about work, nature, relationships, conflict, sickness, and possessions. The approach to all of these give-and-take discussions varied between debate, humor, and consensus.

“It is hard to overestimate what these kinds of conversations can do for people who experience them day after day—as was the case in the first two centuries. Spending a great deal of time in dialogue leads to learning about life, people, and nature; building working relationships and friendships; learning skills in meaning making, strategic thinking, and community building. The ancients called this wisdom, so we might call these kinds of conversations ‘wisdom circles.’ Wisdom regularly explores long-term projects, God or some other kind of ultimate concept, and loss and pain. Such engagement with the everyday is good news.” (AJBC, 59-60)

“By the mid-second century, half the population of the city of Rome were descendants of enslaved people. Some responded to Roman violence by eventually becoming citizens, while others joined communities of Jesus Anointed.” (AJBC, 60-62, 77)

The Roman war in Judea in 68-70 was not only against the people of Israel but was also against their God. “Vespasian and Titus’s triumph and not rebuilding the Jerusalem Temple set policy both for the Flavians and for the remainder of antiquity.”

“The tensions reached a crisis when the emperor Hadrian (reign, 117–138 CE) built a new city named Aelia Capitolina at the site of the destroyed Jerusalem.” Hadrian “escalated tensions yet again when he began the construction of a temple on the site of the old Judean Temple that he dedicated to Jupiter Capitolinus, named after the temple in Rome, which was the final destination of Vespasian and Titus’s triumph and the principal temple of that city. The intended insult could not have been more direct. This was Roman erasure of Judean presence. This in turn provoked the Bar Kokhba War of Judean rebellion in 132–135 CE, which led to more enslaved Judeans taken to Rome and Judean survivors fleeing to Galilee and elsewhere in the Roman empire.

The authors of AJBC assert that Roman violence “is the context in which all the stories of good news, the gospels, were written and much of what later became the New Testament. The Roman Empire’s stance toward the people of Israel also affected, shaped, and distorted the emerging Jesus peoples’ movements as they interacted with their fellow inheritors of Israel’s traditions and eventually grew into the Christian church.

“The significance of this transfer of the anti-Jewish policy of the Flavians, first to the subsequent emperors and then to the Christian church, cannot be overestimated. This is the genesis of the twisted and tragic Christian church policy of anti-Judaism and anti-Semitism.” With tragic consequences, “the violence continues.” (AJBC, 78-80)