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The Crucified Messiah

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THE CRUCIFIED MESSIAH

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In the Christian life the sign of the cross is a symbol of faith in the saving power of God. The sign of the cross found by archaeologists in the ruins of excavations explicitly indicates a Christian presence and a place of worship. For Christians, the cross is not an empty or a magic sign, but it is a deep expression of faith which refers to Golgotha in Jerusalem – to the place of Jesus Christ's crucifixion, where God confessed his deepest love to his bride, whose name was humanity. The awareness of the importance of the cross and its deep acceptance in the concreteness of existence both by individuals and by particular nations and continents is a fundamental factor for maintaining the Christian identity.¹

¹ See the previous studies: H.P. KINGDON, *Messiahship and the Crucifixion*, *Studia Evangelica*, ed. F.L. Cross, Berlin 1964, p. 67–86; M. HENGEL, *Crucifixion in the Ancient World and the Folly of the Message of the Cross*, Philadelphia 1977; J. A. FITZMYER, *Crucifixion in Ancient Palestine, Qumran Literature, and the New Testament*, CBQ 40 (1978), p. 493–513; R.H. FULLER – P. PERKINS (ed.), *Who is this Christ? Gospel Christology and Contemporary Faith*, Philadelphia 1983; N.A. DAHL, *The Crucified Messiah, Jesus the Christ. The Historical Origins of Christological Doctrine*, ed. N.A. DAHL, Minneapolis 1991; N.A. DAHL, *Messianic Ideas and the Crucifixion of Jesus, The Messiah. Development in Earliest Judaism and Christianity*, ed. J.H. CHARLESWORTH, Minneapolis 1992, p. 382–403; J.D.G. DUNN, *Messianic Ideas and Their influence on the Jesus of History, The Messiah. Development in Earliest Judaism and Christianity*, ed. J.H. CHARLESWORTH, Minneapolis 1992, p. 365–381; J. MOLTSMANN, *The Crucified God*, Minneapolis 1993; D.W. CHAPMAN, *Perceptions of Crucifixion among Jews and Christians in the Ancient World*, “Tyndale Bulletin” 51 (2000), p. 313–316.

Is the idea of the Crucified Messiah present already in the Old Testament? What was the importance of the Cross of Christ for Jews, Gentiles and Christians? How did communities of the early Church welcome the fact of Christ's death on the cross? What was the evolution of the Kerygma in early Christianity in which Paschal events were of decisive importance? What is the proclamation of the Cross addressed to the modern Church and the world?

We will try to find the answer to these questions in this present article, which is divided into two parts: 1. The Crucified Messiah in the Light of the Old Testament Scriptures; 2. Different Attitudes Towards the Crucified Messiah.

1. The Crucified Messiah in the Light of the Old Testament Scriptures

There is no way to understand the idea of the crucified Messiah without entering the narrative space of the Bible. An example of using the Holy Scriptures as a sort of hermeneutic key to understand the idea of the crucified Messiah is given by Jesus Himself, who – in a conversation with distressed and downcast disciples from Emmaus – explains to them the cross and sense of His suffering through the Scripture. Jesus explains, interprets (gr. διερμηνεύω) to his disciples Messianic prophecies which refer to Him (Lk 24:27)². That is the reading of the Word of God from a Christological perspective. In a further context Luke clearly specifies that the Risen Lord using the Torah of Moses, Prophets and Psalms explains to his disciples the deep sense of Paschal events (Lk 24:44-46). In Luke's text, just like in St. Paul's writings – the Scripture is seen to be a prophetic forerunner of all the Paschal events – (1 Cor 15:3-5). Jesus Himself explaining the Scriptures emerges as the greatest Exegete and Hermeneutist who reveals to humanity the truth about the crucified Messiah. The sign of the Word read and explained in the aspect of the history of salvation opens His disciples' eyes to the presence of the Crucified and Risen Lord. The disciples – focusing on the Word of God and living faith – can answer, deep in their hearts, their Master's question – “Was it not necessary for the Christ to suffer these things and to enter into His glory?” (Lk 24:26). Jesus puts before their very eyes the cross as the tool of the glorious passion and salvation of mankind. God's suffering, which is beyond human comprehension, becomes a source of true power and glory for them. As it was the case with the three earlier prophecies of His Passion (Lk 9:22.44; 18:31-33) Jesus does not talk about suffering and the cross in isolation from the glory of his resurrection. His martyr's death is not only an ordinary martyrdom, but a fruitful

² See: M.S. WRÓBEL, *Uczniowie z Emmaus w drodze z Jeruzolimy śmierci do Jeruzolimy życia*, „Pastores” 35 (2007), p. 7–14.

fulfilment of God's saving plans. In the light of the Easter morning the cross becomes a key to the interpretation of the Scripture, and the Scripture becomes the best commentary to express the truth about the glorious cross.

Jesus uses the Old Testament texts to enlighten for His disciples the truth about the mystery of His Passion, death and resurrection. In the Torah of Moses, the text of story of the *Aqedah* (Gen. 22), describing Abraham's obedience in sacrificing his only son, Isaac, is important in the context of the suffering and death of Jesus on the cross. The fact that the "theme" was alive in the early Christian tradition can be proved by some texts (Rom 8:32; 1 Jn 4:9-10; Jn 3:16).³

A text from the Book of Numbers presenting the healing power of the bronze serpent (Num 21:4-9) is used by John the Evangelist so as to present the elevation of Jesus through His death on the cross – Jn 3:14-15 "And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of Man be lifted up; that whoever believes may in Him have eternal life." The text in the Book of Numbers strongly emphasizes the theme of death and life.⁴ Death is perceived as a consequence of the bites of venomous snakes, while life depends on looking at the bronze snake on a pole. It is evident here that the snake is presented as a concrete and visible reason for life and death. There is a visible pattern in the story: grumbling – punishment – confession of a sin – intercession of Moses – rescue (Num 11:1-3; 12:1-15). There is here a strong emphasis put on the saving work of God, who saves His people from death to life. That is how actions of God the Saviour are understood by the author of the Book of Wisdom (16:5-7). The Gospel of John emphasizes the truth about the glorious exaltation of Jesus on the cross. John's term "to exalt" (gr. υψώω) refers to the death of Jesus on the cross perceived as a moment of glory and victory in the radiance of the Resurrection (Jn 3:14; 8:28; 12:32-34). The fourth Gospel indicates the saving work of Jesus as a remedy that returns the dead to true life. In Messiah exalted on the cross the Old Testament image of the bronze serpent lifted up in the desert finds its fulfilment and deeper meaning. John the Evangelist clearly uses the theme "death-life" with reference to the person of Jesus Christ. Messiah exalted on the cross becomes a remedy for humanity on its way from death to life. According to the Evangelist the way is determined by a look of faith at the Exalted One. For St. John faith is an encounter with Christ and acceptance of the Son of God, who comes to humanity as the revealer of His Father. By making a reference to the imagery of the bronze serpent – lifted up

³ See. J.E. WOOD, *Isaac Typology in the New Testament*, NTS 14 (1967–68), p. 583–589; R. BROWN, *The Death of the Messiah*, vol. 2, New York 1994, p. 1435–1444; K. BARDSKI, *Gen 22,1-14. Les intuitions parallèles des traditions juive et chrétienne dans le dialogue créatif entre le texte biblique et la communauté de foi*, CT 71 (2001), p. 5–13; H. WITCZYK, „Weź, proszę, twego syna, idź i złóż go w ofierze!” (Rdz 22,2). *Biblijny obraz Boga i Abrahama*, [in:] *Stworzył Bóg człowieka na swój obraz. Księga Pamiątkowa ku czci Bp Prof. M. Gołębiowskiego*, ed. W. CHROSTOWSKI, Warszawa 2002, p. 441–456.

⁴ E.N. ZWIJACZ, *Obraz Ludu Bożego według Księgi Liczb*, Kraków 2010.

by Moses in the desert, the Evangelist calls for faith in Jesus – the Messiah and the Son of God – exalted on the wood of the cross, who redeems us from death endowing believers with salvation and happiness of eternal life.

An important role for understanding the sense of the Crucified Messiah is played by four Old Testament texts about the suffering servant of the Lord contained in the Book of the Prophet Isaiah (42:1-4; 49:1-7; 50:4-11; 52:13 – 53:12).⁵ The fourth text is of particular importance (Is 52:13 – 53:12), because many themes contained in it are used by the New Testament authors. Matthew emphasizes that the words referring to the suffering servant of the Lord are fulfilled in the person of Jesus (Mt 8:17 “In order that what was spoken through Isaiah the prophet might be fulfilled, saying, ‘He Himself took our infirmities, and carried away our diseases.’”). Also, the text of Acts 8:32-33 presents a scene in which Philip is explaining to an Ethiopian official that Isaiah’s text about the suffering servant of the Lord refers to Jesus – the Crucified Messiah. The text of Isaiah is also associated with the person of the crucified Messiah by the author of 1 Pet 2:22-24. Jesus is crucified in the presence of two evildoers (gr. κακούργων). The fact that they were crucified together with Jesus may be perceived as the fulfilment of the words of the Prophet Isaiah (Is 53:12).

Psalms – in particular Ps 22, 31, 38 and 69 – play an important role for understanding the Crucified Messiah in the context of the suffering and persecuted King David.⁶ Many words uttered by the crucified Messiah in the narrative of the Passion derive from the text of Psalms. For example, the words of Jesus in Lk 23:46 “Father, into thy hands I commit my spirit” have their source in Ps. 31:6. The text of Jn 19:28 “Jesus, knowing that all things had already been accomplished, in order that the Scripture might be fulfilled, said, ‘I am thirsty.’”

may have a reference to Ps. 42:2-3. The words of Jesus: “My God, My God, why hast you forsaken me?” (Mk 15:34; Mt 27:46) derive from Ps. 22:2. Derision towards the crucified Messiah and the gesture of head shaking (Mk 15:29) may be referred to the drama experienced by a righteous one Ps 109:25. The reference to giving the crucified Messiah wine mixed with bitter gall and vinegar to drink (Mt 27:34,48) has its parallels in Ps 69:22. The description of the Passion of Christ matches exactly the images contained in Ps 22:15-19 referred to as the “crucifixion psalm”.⁷ The early Christian tradition referred the content of this Psalm to the death of Christ on the cross.

The figure of the Crucified Messiah in the context of the narrative of the Passion contained in Gospels shows its parallels to the description of the suf-

⁵ See: R. BROWN, *The Death of the Messiah*, vol. 2, p. 1448–1449; W. PIKOR, *Postać Mesjasza w świetle Izajaszowych prorocत्व, Jezus jako Syn Boży w Nowym Testamencie i we wczesnej literaturze chrześcijańskiej*, ed. H. DRAWNEL, Lublin 2007, p. 9–29.

⁶ See: R.J. DILLON, *The Psalm of the Suffering Just in the Accounts of Jesus’ Passion*, “Worship” 61 (1987), p. 430–440; U.P. McCAFFREY, *Psalm Quotations in the Passion Narratives of the Gospels*, “Neotestamentica” 14 (1981), p. 73–89.

⁷ R. BROWN, *The Death of the Messiah*, vol. 2, p. 1462.

fering of the righteous one in the Book of Wisdom (2:12-20). The text demonstrates a clear relationship with the mockery of the high priests, scribes and the elders, which the crucified Messiah can hear in the description in Mt 27:43.

The Old Testament texts indicate a significant intertextual connection with the narrative of the Lord's Passion, in which the person of the Crucified Messiah plays a key role. In the light of the Old Testament texts the Crucified Messiah can show His deeper and more profound face towards those who are looking for the answer to the question about the meaning of the suffering and death of God.

2. Different Attitudes Towards the Crucified Messiah.

The cross on which Jesus of Nazareth – recognized by His followers as the Messiah and the Son of God – was crucified has been until today a sign of curse and disgrace for some, and a sign of hope and glory for others. It was well expressed, already several decades after the death of Jesus, by St. Paul in 1 Cor. 1:23-24: “We preach Christ crucified, to Jews a stumbling block, and to Gentiles foolishness, but to those who are the called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God.”

For Jews the death on the cross was considered as a curse. The tradition was rooted in the text of the Torah of Moses, which clearly expressed the idea that a wrongdoer who was hanged on a tree is cursed by God (Deut 21:22-23).⁸ The text is referred to by St. Paul in Gal 3:13. In the Jewish mentality, a malefactor sentenced to death on the cross was excluded from the covenant of life. Every blasphemer who perished by such a death was excluded from the communion with God and people. We can deduce the attitude of inhabitants of Jerusalem toward the crucified Messiah from the content of the Gospel (Lk 23:35-43). The person of Jesus of Nazareth hanging on the cross was the subject of a contemptuous reaction of the people and leaders. The people acted in a passive way. Its role was limited to a passive observer standing and staring detachedly at the agony of Jesus. The leaders mocked Jesus emphasizing the theme of the saving power of Jesus, who is hanging on the cross, humiliated and helpless. The leaders' words in: “He saved others; let Him save Himself if this is the Christ of God, His Chosen One” were supposed to emphasize the helplessness and defeat of Jesus. They yielded to the temptation of pride and unbelief in the saving power of Jesus. The Messiah and God's Chosen One dying on the cross became the contradiction of their beliefs and expectations. In the person

⁸ See: R. RUBINKIEWICZ, *Dlaczego Pan Jezus musiał umrzeć na krzyżu?*, [in:] *Qumran. Pomędzy Starym a Nowym Testamentem*, ed. H. DRAWNEL, A. PIWOWAR, Lublin 2009, p. 227–239; M.S. WRÓBEL, *Krzyż – narzędzie hańby czy chwały?*, *Krzyż – Kryzys – Cierpienie*, „Zeszyty Odnowy w Duchu Świętym” nr 2 (107) 2010, p. 29–36.

of Jesus they saw only a helpless convict who could not even help himself. The cross of Jesus constituted for them a sign of defeat and weakness. They were not convinced by the teaching that power is made perfect in weakness (2 Cor 12:9) and that the cross is the power and wisdom of God. The words of Jesus, who taught about the power of dying, seemed empty to them: “Truly, truly, I say to you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains by itself alone; but if it dies, it bears much fruit.” (Jn 12:24).

To the Gentiles the cross constituted an empty sign, and death on the cross was considered as the most cruel execution method. It is well illustrated by Cicero’s phrase – “crudelissimum supplicium”⁹ or Tacitus’ phrase “servile supplicium”¹⁰. Justin Martyr – in his First Apology to emperor Antoninus Pius written approximately in the middle of the second century A.D – states that opponents of Christians “proclaim that our (Christian) madness consists in this, that we give to a crucified man a place second to the unchangeable and eternal God, the Creator of all”¹¹. Pagan opponents reproached Christians for worshipping a “criminal and his cross”. For the Greeks and Romans the belief that the Son of God died on the cross as an ordinary criminal was considered utter foolishness. The Greek and Roman humanism considered the “religion of the cross” as unaesthetic and deprived of any dignity.¹² Cicero strongly urged that “Nomen ipsum crucis absit non modo a corpore civium Romanorum, sed etiam a cogitatione, oculis, auribus” (*the very word “cross” should be far removed not only from the person of a Roman citizen but from his thoughts, his eyes and his ears*)¹³. The crucified Messiah destroyed any aesthetics, harmony and order in human search for good, truth and beauty. The gods of Greece and Rome were not subject to death and it was unthinkable for any of them to die on the cross. In *Imperium Romanum* from the IInd century A.D. the term *crux* or its Greek equivalent *stauron* used to function as a curse among people of the lower classes, in particular slaves and prostitutes.

The cross of Christ was also rejected by the Gnostics who believed that God could not have suffered and died. They rejected the death of the Messiah on the cross. According to Cerinthus, the divine Christ left Jesus before His death on the cross. In the opinion of Basilides, Simon of Cyrene was nailed to the cross instead of Christ and at this time Christ came back to heaven. The views were strongly opposed by Christian authors.¹⁴

⁹ CYCERON, *In Verrrem* II 5,64.

¹⁰ TACYT, *Hist.* IV, 11.

¹¹ JUSTYN MĘCZENNIK, *Pierwsza Apologia* 13.4; See: *Pierwsi apologeci greccy*, ed. R. MISIARCZYK, J. NAUMOWICZ, Kraków 2004.

¹² See: M. HENGEL, *Crucifixion in the Ancient World and the Folly of the Message of the Cross*, Philadelphia 1977, p. 1–10.

¹³ CYCERON, *Pro Rabirico* 5.16.

¹⁴ M. HENGEL, *Crucifixion in the Ancient World and the Folly of the Message of the Cross*, p. 15–21.

For Christians, the cross constituted a sign of love and salvation. The issue of the death of Jesus on the cross in connection with His resurrection from the dead is raised many times in the letters of St. Paul. In most of his texts, St. Paul captures Paschal events not only through the prism of bare historical facts, but he refers their results to the life of believers. The disciples of Jesus – as it is evidenced by the teaching of St. Paul – associated the death of Jesus the Messiah on the cross with the idea of redemption from the very beginning. St. Paul strongly emphasizes that the essence of his preaching is the person of the Crucified Messiah, who appears as the power and wisdom of God (1 Cor 1:23-24).¹⁵ The Apostle of the Nations teaches that anything that is not related to the Crucified Messiah is excluded from his preaching of the Gospel (1 Cor 2:1-2). In a letter to the Galatians he compares his teaching to drawing a picture of the Crucified Messiah (Gal 3:1). To Paul the cross is a sign of the greatest glory (Ga 6:14). God’s power, which leads from death to life, is manifested in the cross, which in human terms seems to be weakness and failure (2 Cor 13:4). In the early Christian tradition the cross of Jesus, devised by His executioners as tool of murder, emerges as a tool of glory and exaltation in God’s plans. This truth is expressed very explicitly in a Christological hymn in the Letter to Philippians 2:6-11, which presents the kenosis and humiliation of Christ until His death on the cross as a theme of exaltation and glory. The hymn strongly emphasizes that Christ voluntarily accepts his death on the cross. The phrase: “He humbled Himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross”, indicates the voluntary sacrifice of Jesus. The act of the death of Jesus on the cross may be perceived as an act of supreme love toward all humanity.¹⁶ St. Paul explicitly refers to it in Gal 2:20 “I have been crucified with Christ; and it is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me; and the life which I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me, and delivered Himself up for me.” The teaching corresponds to the tradition contained in 1 Jn 4:9-10 “By this the love of God was manifested in us, that God has sent His only begotten Son into the world so that we might live through Him. In this is love, not that we loved God, but that He loved us and sent His Son *to be* the propitiation for our sins.” The most valuable form of response to the love of the Crucified Messiah is the response of love consisting in sacrificing your own life in the manner of the sacrifice of Jesus on the cross. It is expressed vividly by St. Paul when he talks about his being crucified (Gal 2:19). The true life of a Christian consists in “co-dying” and “being born to a new life” with the Crucified Messiah (Rom 6:5-6; 2 Kor 4:10-11). St. Paul emphasizes that proclaiming the death of Christ takes place at every Eucharist (1 Cor 11:26). For

¹⁵ See: J. MURPHY-O’CONNOR, „*Even Death on a Cross*”: *Crucifixion in the Pauline Letters*, [in] *The Cross in Christian Tradition: From Paul to Bonaventure*, ed. E. DREYER, New York 2000, p. 21–50; L. MORRIS, *Apostolic Preaching of the Cross*, Grand Rapids 2001.

¹⁶ Rom 3:25; 5:8; Gal 2:20; 2 Cor 5:16.

Christians, the death of Jesus on the cross leading to the glory of resurrection was perceived as God's special plan. It is well illustrated by the speech of St. Peter made just after Pentecost (Acts 2:22-24). The author of Hebrews strongly emphasizes that the disgrace of the cross leads to the victory and exaltation to the glory of God (Hbr 12:2). The gifts of the Crucified Messiah offered to the beloved humanity from the height of the cross are a sign of His power. The gifts are, as John the Evangelist strongly emphasizes, the Holy Spirit and Mary. In Jn 19:34 it is said *explicitly* that the blood and water flowed from the pierced side of Christ. The symbolism of water refers to the sacrament of Baptism and to the reality of the Holy Spirit, who emerges as a gift of the Crucified One. After His resurrection, Jesus shows the Holy Spirit to His disciples so that they could continue His work on earth (Jn 20:22). A gift of the Crucified One for humanity is also His Mother. That can be clearly seen in the scene of His "testament from the cross" (Jn 19:25-27). *Mater dolorosa* matures in the mystery of the cross so as to shine with power as *Mater gloriosa*. Mary becomes a model of faith when she sees in the power of the Holy Spirit the victory of Life over death and the triumph of Love over hate. The mystery of Golgotha shows the profound meaning of suffering and calls for belief in the victory of the cross. Jesus speaks directly from the cross to Mary and his beloved disciple. Mary is called a "woman" with reference to the first woman (hebr. *isza*) – Eve (hebr. *hawa* – mother of the living – Gen 3:20). Mary as a new Eve embodies a new hope of the emerging Church, in which sources of saving power wash all sinners. In this context the cross of Jesus seems to be the Tree of Life and Salvation which opens the way to eternity. What the first woman lost with Adam through the disobedience of sin, the "New Woman" actualizes in unity with the Son through faith and love until the end.

The overall conclusion is that the figure of the Jesus of history and the Christ of faith preached in the kerygma of the early Church is captured in the Crucified Messiah. The Old Testament texts revealing the person of persecuted and humble David – anointed as King of Israel, and the person of the suffering Servant of the Lord, make it possible to look at the mystery of the Crucified Messiah in a full light. The authors of the New Testament use many Old Testament themes and ideas for the purpose of presenting the Passion of the Lord. The cross constituting a curse and disgrace for Jews, foolishness and abomination for the Greeks and Romans is a sign of love, salvation and glory for the Christians. In the sign of the cross there is the fundamental Christian message of the victory of life over death, good over evil and truth over falsehood. Christianity which marginalizes the cross and pushes it to the vestry would be empty and devoid of any expression. To all those who in the XXIst century ignore, neglect, despise and hate the cross, on which the Salvation of the world was hanged, we should as strongly as possible say the words given to us by St. Paul – "But may it never be that I should boast, except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, through which the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world."

3. Summary

The author in the present article tries to describe the mystery of the Crucified Messiah. He tries to answer on the answers: Is the idea of the Crucified Messiah present already in the Old Testament? What was the importance of the Cross of Christ for Jews, Gentiles and Christians? How did communities of the early Church welcome the fact of Christ's death on the cross? What was the evolution of the Kerygma in early Christianity in which Paschal events were of decisive importance? What is the proclamation of the Cross addressed to the modern Church and the world? The article consist on two parts. In the first one the author shows the mystery of Crucified Messiah in the context of Old Testament Scriptures. In the second he analyses different attitudes (Jews, Gentiles, Gnostics, Christians) to the cross and to the Crucified Messiah.

Keywords: Messaiah, crucifixion, the mystery of the cross

Ukrzyżowany Mesjasz

W niniejszym artykule autor podejmuje zagadnienie ukrzyżowanego Mesjasza. Poszukuje on odpowiedzi na pytania: Czy idea Ukrzyżowanego Mesjasza obecna jest już w Starym Testamencie? Jakie znaczenie miał Krzyż Chrystusa dla Żydów, pogan i chrześcijan? W jaki sposób wspólnoty pierwotnego Kościoła przyjmowały fakt krzyżowej śmierci Chrystusa? Jak kształtował się kerygmat pierwotnego chrześcijaństwa, w którym wydarzenia paschalne miały decydujące znaczenie? Jakie jest przesłanie krzyża dla współczesnego Kościoła i świata? Artykuł składa się z dwóch części. W pierwszej części zostaje ukazana tajemnica ukrzyżowanego Mesjasza w kontekście Starego Testamentu. Druga część analizuje różne postawy wobec krzyża i ukrzyżowanego Mesjasza (żydzi, poganie, gnostycy, chrześcijanie).

Słowa kluczowe: Mesjasz, ukrzyżowanie, tajemnica krzyża

