Second Samuel 23:1–7 was set to music by two North American composers in the 20th century. Randall Thompson's work was commissioned by Boston Symphony Orchestra in 1949 and remains popular with choral groups. Lesser known is Louis Appelbaum's 1980 composition for chorus, cantor, harp and organ, that weaves together the Hebrew text sung by the cantor in a traditional Jewish cantillation style and the English translation sung by the chorus in free musical idiom.


Last Words of Jesus

I. New Testament
II. Judaism
III. Christianity
IV. Literature
V. Visual Arts
VI. Music
VII. Film

I. New Testament

In the Christian tradition, seven sayings of Jesus are usually known as his "last words (on the cross)"; the four final words from the four Gospels (Mark 15:34; “Eloi, eloi lema sabachthani” [mainly par.] Matt 27:46; Luke 23:46: “Father, into your hands I give over my spirit.”); for they do not know what they are doing); Luke 23:43: “Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in Paradise,” and John 19:28: “I am thirsty.” The discussion regarding their authenticity as Jesus’ actual words is open (cf. Funk/Hover).

Mark's Gospel, likely our earliest Gospel, reports Jesus' words in Aramaic and offers his readers a translation: “And in the last hour, Jesus cried out with a ‘great voice’ (Luke 23:46), though, in Luke, this is not a subsequent shout to his final words but rather a description of the voice in which he said his final words. Luke changes the words themselves, but he does so in a manner that, similar to Matthew’s version, highlights Jesus’ giving of the spirit: “And, crying out in a great voice, Jesus said, ‘Father, into your hands I give over my spirit.’” Jesus’ last words in Luke are a citation of Ps 31:5: Luke thus continues the tradition of placing the Psalms upon Jesus’ lips before his death. Assuming his knowledge of at least Mark’s Gospel, Luke's changes are interesting for two reasons.

First, Luke also interprets Jesus’ death through the lens of Ps 22 since his narrative also alludes to Ps 22 (Luke 23:34//Ps 22:18; Luke 23:39//Ps 22:7). Anomalous to Mark’s account, justifying the consensus view that Matthew’s Gospel is here dependent upon Mark’s Gospel. The only substantive difference is that Matthew presents Jesus’ words “My God, my God” in Hebrew (“Eli, Eli”; Matt 27:46). The bystanders in Matthew’s Gospel also misunderstand it as a call for Elijah and Matthew similarly includes the same allusions to Ps 22 in the broader narrative (Matt 27:35//Ps 22:18; Matt 27:39//Ps 22:7). Thus, although many readers of Mark’s Gospel have viewed Jesus’ last words as an indication of divine abandonment, the interpretation should likely be much more positive (see further Carey).

Matthew’s account of Jesus’ last words is very similar to Mark’s account, justifying the consensus view that Matthew’s Gospel is here dependent upon Mark’s Gospel. The only substantive difference is that Matthew presents Jesus’ words “My God, my God” in Hebrew (“Eli, Eli”; Matt 27:46). The bystanders in Matthew’s Gospel also misunderstand it as a call for Elijah and Matthew similarly includes the same allusions to Ps 22 in the broader narrative (Matt 27:35//Ps 22:18; Matt 27:39//Ps 22:7). Another commonality between the Markan and Matthew accounts is that, after speaking, Jesus cries out in a “great voice” before dying (Mark 15:37//Matt 27:50), with Matthew adding that, having done so, Jesus “gave up the spirit.”

Luke’s Gospel similarly reports that Jesus cried out with a “great voice” (Luke 23:46), though, in Luke, this is not a subsequent shout to his final words but rather a description of the voice in which he said his final words. Luke changes the words themselves, but he does so in a manner that, similar to Matthew’s version, highlights Jesus’ giving of the spirit: “And, crying out in a great voice, Jesus said, ‘Father, into your hands I give over my spirit.’” Jesus’ last words in Luke are a citation of Ps 31:5: Luke thus continues the tradition of placing the Psalms upon Jesus’ lips before his death. Assuming his knowledge of at least Mark’s Gospel, Luke’s changes are interesting for two reasons. First, Luke also interprets Jesus’ death through the lens of Ps 22 since his narrative also alludes to Ps 22 (Luke 23:34//Ps 22:18; Luke 23:39//Ps 22:7). Anomalous to Mark’s account, justifying the consensus view that Matthew’s Gospel is here dependent upon Mark’s Gospel. The only substantive difference is that Matthew presents Jesus’ words “My God, my God” in Hebrew (“Eli, Eli”; Matt 27:46). The bystanders in Matthew’s Gospel also misunderstand it as a call for Elijah and Matthew similarly includes the same allusions to Ps 22 in the broader narrative (Matt 27:35//Ps 22:18; Matt 27:39//Ps 22:7). Thus, although many readers of Mark’s Gospel have viewed Jesus’ last words as an indication of divine abandonment, the interpretation should likely be much more positive (see further Carey).

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fact that the motif of ignorance is found elsewhere in Acts (3:17; 13:27; 17:30), it seems, however, that Luke 23:34a may be a Lukan addition to the Markan text (see Eubank, for an overview on the MSS, literary criticism, and reception in the early church; see also “Forgive, Forgiveness”). Luke 23:43, i.e., Jesus’ response to the plea of the criminal (23:42: “Jesus, remember me…”) provides an important element to the interpretation of Luke’s understanding of individual eschatology (cf. Theobald; see also “Lazarus and Dives”).

The author of John’s Gospel, too, apparently did not want to risk a misinterpretation of Jesus’ last words and so also did not use Ps 22:1 as Jesus’ last words, though it is heavily debated whether the au-thor knew Mark’s or Matthew’s Gospels. In the very least, John’s Gospel holds in common with all three Synoptic passion narratives a reference to Ps 22:18 (John 19:24), revealing that Ps 22 was important for all four authors. He also holds in common with Matthew and Luke the conviction that Jesus’ death and last words were associated with a release of the spirit (John 19:30). In contrast to all three of the other first-century Gospels, however, in John’s Gos-per, Jesus’ last words are not those of a psalm but “It is finished” (John 19:30). Just prior to this state-ment, however, his words, “I thirst” in John 19:28 are said to be a fulfillment of Scripture, by which the author likely means Ps 69:21. John’s Gospel also makes no mention of Jesus’ crying out in a “great voice.” Jesus’ last words in John’s Gospel refer to the theme of Jesus’ performance of the work of the Father (John 4:34; 17:4). Just earlier in John 19:28, the author told readers that Jesus knew that everything was “finished,” and Jesus here formally pronounces it in his final words.


Chris Keith

II. Judaism

The Aramaic versions of Jesus’ cry from the cross recounted in Mark 15:34 and Matt 27:46 are echoed in the Targum to Psalm 22:2, which reads in most surviving versions ʾellʾell mitṭal mâ ḥĕbbatant (My God, my God, on what account have you forsaken me?). Although the Targum likely was composed during the late ancient period, its text might encompass an accumulation of past Aramaic trans-lations of the Psalms dating back to the 1st century CE or even earlier. It is, however, possible, albeit unverifiable, that Mark, followed by Matthew, preserves traces of a lost Aramaic-language passion narrative incorporating elements of a version of Psalm 22 authentic to Jesus’ Jewish cultural milieu (Jonė). That possibility is reinforced by the reports in Mark 15:35–36 and Matt 27:47–49 of confusion among the witnesses to Jesus’ crucifixion as to whether he had called for Elijah, the supposed her-alad of the Messiah (cf. Mal 3:23). This garbled tra-dition seems to pivot on the phonetic similarity of Mark’s ēlōr and, less precisely, Matthew’s ṣēḇa’tanî, and what presumably was a common Aramaic rendering of Elijah’s name as Ḥēḇâ (cf. Qum 117 II, 4).

Although classical rabbinc texts alluding to Je-sus make no reference to his last words, some have surmised that the sages knew of Jesus’ reputed in-vocation of Ps 22. Daniel Boyarin (252–54) tenu-ously argues that a story in the Babylonian Talmud parodies the Christian passion narrative in its de-piction of an unnamed Roman official who secures release from his imminent crucifixion by crying out for help from the God of Rabbi Meir, whose sister-in-law the condemned man previously had freed from bondage (bB Ṣeb 18a–b). Tzakz submits that the medieval Midrash on Psalms, which identifies the subject of Psalm 22 as Esther, faithfully preserves an ancient exegetical tradition styling the Jewish queen as a savior figure on par with the Christian Messiah (MidRish on Ps 22; cf. bBMeg 15B). More plau-sibly, Ulmer posits that a sequence in the medieval midrashic treatise Pesiqta Rabbati responds to the Christian passion narrative in foretelling the coming of a “true” Messiah named Ephraim who will endure the suffering denoted in Psalm 22 (PesRab 34–37). Although the midrash does not refer specif-ically to Jesus or his reputed quotation of the Psalm, that its author or authors were aware of the perti-nent gospel traditions seems reasonably certain.

Beyond rabbinc circles, some ancient Jews traded in specious knowledge of Jesus’ last words, Several surviving texts of the notorious medieval anti-gospel known as the Toledot Yehu include a passage wherein Jesus, about to be crucified in a cabbage patch, tells his disciples that the hasty dis-appearance of his body from the cross will signal his ascent to heaven. This, however, is a lie, as Jesus knows that the legislation of the Torah requires the burial of his corpse before the dawn of the day fol-low-ing his crucifixion (Deut 21:23). The antiquity of this story seems to be confirmed by the 2nd/3rd-century church father Tertullian, who alleges that certain unnamed detractors of Christianity claimed that Jesus’ disciples stole his body from the cross in order to claim that he had risen from the dead, or, alternatively, that the proprietor of the lettuce gar-den in which Jesus was crucified removed his body to protect his crop from being trampled upon by visitors (Spect. 30.6). Although the particulars of these allegations do not agree precisely with those of the Toledot Yehu passage, their parallels are sug-gestive enough to support the inference that Ter-tullian knew of rumors circulating among his Jew-
ish contemporaries to the effect that Jesus predicted his ministry on deception even down to his final moments. In time, those malicious rumors and others like them were incorporated into the pluriiform narrative tradition attested in the *Toledot Yehu* literature (Newman).

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### III. Christianity

#### A. Greek and Latin Patristics

- Medieval Europe and America

#### B. Medieval Times and Reformation Era

The last words of Jesus (Mark 15:34; Matt 27:46; Luke 23:46; John 19:30; cf. Ps. 22:2) have been broadly received in patristic literature and led to multiple interpretations: according to Ambrose (*Fid. Grat.* 2.7.56), this lament is “a very human response to think oneself abandoned” and thus testifies that not the divinity but the human soul suffered. Augustine explained that Christ consciously adopted conformity to our infirmity so that “we may now learn what is to be despised in this life and what is to be hoped for in eternity” (*Ep.* 140.5). This is relevant not only for the ethical conduct of the individual but for the whole of the history of salvation (ibid., 140.6); by appropriating the Psalmist’s voice, Christ made clear that “the benefits of the old covenant had to be refused in order that we might learn to pray and hope for the benefits of the new covenant.” Thus, Jesus’ last words function mainly pedagogically but do not reveal himself lamenting (see “Lament, Lamentation”). In contrast, Origen understood this passage in a paradoxical way: right in the moment of the utmost abandonment, Christ revealed his glory in the presence of the Father, since the cross turned out to be his victory over the devil (Origen, *Comm. Matt.* 135). John Chrysostom even claimed that, by using the voice of Scripture, Christ “shows how he is of one mind with the Father who had begotten him” (*Hom. Matt.* 88.1). Thus, Chrysostom opts for being attentive only to the source but not to the meaning of Jesus’ last words!

The Fourth Gospel does not use Ps 22:2 as Jesus’ last words, and there are altogether three short sayings when Jesus hangs on the cross. 1) Referring to John 19:26 (“Woman, here is your son ... here is your mother”), John Chrysostom points out that Jesus teaches the necessity of loving one’s parents until our last breath (*Hom. Jo.* 85.2; cf. Cyril of Alexandria, *Comm. Jo.* 12; see also the “Kontakion on Mary at the Cross” by Romanos the Melodist). 2) In John 19:28 (“I am thirsty”), Jesus says, according to Augustine, “that there is something still you have failed to do, that is, to give me what you are” (*Tract. Ev.* Jo. 119.4; cf. *Enarrat. Ps.* 62.5). By doing so, the human may hope to be cleansed by Christ’s humility. 3) John 19:30 (“It is finished”) is understood by Leo the Great that “the scriptures are fulfilled” (*Serm.* 55.4) or by Cyril of Jerusalem that “the mystery has been fulfilled” (*Catech.* 13.32). Eusebius of Caesarea (*Pract. ev.* 4.12.3) explains that Jesus did not wait for death but decided himself when to die.

Hilary of Poitiers agrees with this opinion (*Trin.* 10.11), combining John 19:30 with Luke 23:46: “If he died of his own will and through his own will gave back his spirit, death had no terror, because it was in his own power.”

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*Peter Gemeinhardt*

### Last Words of Jesus

#### Bibliography
- *Joshua Ezra Burns*

### III. Christianity

#### A. Greek and Latin Patristics

- Medieval Europe and America

#### B. Medieval Times and Reformation Era

- Medieval English primers (lay prayer books of hours) included devotions on both the wounds of Christ and his last words. Divided into the seven, prayers and meditations multiplied in the devotional literature (Duffy: 248). The seven last words were interpreted as guides for moral behavior and remedies for the seven deadly sins.

- In his writings on ethics, theologian Peter Abelard interpreted Luke 23:34 as proof that sin is what is done against conscience, even in ignorance.

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Last Words of Jesus

The medieval "art of dying" ("art de mourir") tradition, which continued into the Reformation, gave a central place to the passion narrative and Jesus' last words. The medieval concept of the "last rites" was to read the passion narrative in its entirety. For Martin Luther, the continued focus on the passion is because in the cross, all comfort is given (Leppin: 15). Justus Jonas' report of Luther's own death, in which Luther quotes Luke 23:36, served as a model for how one was to die in Christ. In other Reformation "ars moriendi" books, this word from the cross was an invitation to forgive and ask for forgiveness before death, following the example of Jesus (Resch: 166).


Kylie Schiefleib-Guerro

C. Modern Europe and America

Jesus' final words from the cross have continued to be the subject of significant reflection in modern Europe and America. In liturgical churches, the seven sayings are an important part of the Three Hours Service, which is held on Good Friday. This service, with its specific focus on Jesus' last words, was begun by Fr. Alonso Mesia following an earthquake in Lima, Peru in 1687. Mesia also wrote a small book for the service that offered reflections on the seven words (Apel: 772). This service became popular in Western Europe, and the sayings occasionally served as the basis for musical works on Jesus' passion. The most notable example is Joseph Haydn's The Seven Last Words, commissioned by the Bishop of Cadiz in the late 18th century to serve as interludes between meditations on the sayings. The Church of England began using these pieces in their liturgy in the mid- to late 19th century, and they have been a generally accepted feature of the Anglican Good Friday service since that time, though its popularity has declined beginning in the mid-20th century (Bosworth: 89–90; Cross/Livingstone: 1631; see below "VI. Music").

Outside of the Good Friday service, Jesus' final words have been the regular topic of sermons and works of popular theology, with publications spanning denominational lines (Lutzer, Cries from the Cross: A Journey into the Heart of Jesus; Neuhaus, Death on a Friday Afternoon: Meditations on the Last Words of Jesus from the Cross; Pink, The Seven Sayings of the Savior on the Cross; Seitz, Seven Lasting Words: Jesus Speaks from the Cross). In addition to these meditative works, there has been an ongoing interest in the final words of Jesus in the academy (Harris, The Seven Sayings of Jesus on the Cross: Their Circumstances and Meaning). Here, a broad range of historical-critical issues and questions has been brought to bear on them, but the focus is normally on individual sayings in each Gospel rather than the sayings as a group.

The rise of source and form criticism has opened discussions as to whether these sayings reflect Jesus' actual words or were invented by the Evangelists (Funk/Hoover: 126, 268, 464–65). Questions of the originality of sayings, particularly Luke 23:43, have also been derived from developments in textual criticism (Eubank: 521–36). The growing interest in intertextuality has led to a focus in a number of the texts as to how Jesus/the Evangelists made use of the HB/OT, especially in Matt 27:26; Mark 15:34 and John 19:38 (Holst: 286–88; Tabb: 338–45). Furthermore, theological questions continue to be discussed, especially concerning Jesus' cry of dereliction and the impassibility of God (Marshall: 246–98). The saying in Mark 15:34 par. Matt 27:26 has also been the source of ongoing debate as to whether it reflects a cry of anguish (Jinkins/Reid: 33–57) or of confidence (Holst: 286–88). The answers to all these questions have been varied in nature and continue to be the subject of debate.

Last Words of Jesus


Andreas J. Köstenberger

IV. Literature

The last words ascribed to Jesus in the Gospels have not infrequently been echoed or evoked in literature over the centuries.

An allusion to Jesus’ exclamation from the cross at Matt 27:46 has been detected at Dante’s Inferno 33:69, where Count Ugolino is recounting his horrific predicament of being chained and left to starve with his sons in the Muda Tower. On the fourth day, his youngest son, Gaddo, threw himself at Ugolino’s feet, saying “Father, why do you not help me? (Padre mio, ché non m’aiuti)” (Dante: 1:352–53; see also Singleton’s commentary, ibid.: 2:617; see “Commedia”; and “Dante Alighieri”).

Inevitably, quotations or paraphrases of, or allusions to, Jesus’ last words occur in the crucifixion episodes of the medieval Mystery Plays. In the Wakefield (a.k.a. Towneley) cycle, for example, amid his torturers’ mockery and taunts, Jesus cries out: “Eloi, Eloi, lamasabacthany [sic!] / My God, my God, wherefore and why Has thou forsaken me?” (cf. Matt 27:46; Mark 15:34) – words that become especially prominent in her poems (see, e.g., Habegger: 408), the reclusive American poet Emily Dickinson (1830–86) in Amherst, Massachusetts drew Jesus’ last words into intensely personal

He would be with Jesus in Paradise (Matt 23:43): “Tush Christ did call the Theepe upon the Crosse” (act 4, sc. 5; B-text, line 1550, Marlowe: 259; cf. A-text, 1173, ibid.: 258). Near the close of part 2 of Johann Wolfgang von Goethe’s Faust, Jesus’ last words in Luther’s rendering of the Johannine account, “Es is vollbracht [It is finished]!” (John 19:30), are blasphemed through being quoted by Mephistopheles himself in his exchange with the Chorus. This occurs, moments after Faust uttered his own last words and died, when Mephistopheles alludes to time’s triumph over Faust:

Mephistopheles: Die Zeit wird Herr, der Greis hier liegt im Sand.

The Faust myth in more than one of its literary incarnations has occasionally been interpreted as, “My king, my king, my king, my king,” substituting “Goethe” for “Faust” (see “Dante Alighieri”).

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These lines occasioned a rather creative misinterpretation by the orchestra conductor Erich Leinsdorf when he once commented on their partial incorporation in Robert Schumann’s oratorio Szenen aus Goethes Faust (completed, 1853; first performed in its entirety, 1862; Scenes from Goethe’s Faust). Insisting that “unless you know the book [i.e., Goethe’s Faust] from beginning to end, you cannot make much sense of the scenes Schumann strings together” (in Tibbetts: 320), Leinsdorf correctly notes that Schumann completed his depiction of Faust’s death (pt. 2, sc. 6) with the chorus’ postmortem words “Es ist vollbracht.” Yet, evidently misremembering Goethe’s text at that point, Leinsdorf then in effect – unwittingly? – resurrects the freshly deceased Faust by substituting him for the chorus: “But [Schumann] left out Goethe’s original, where we hear not only ‘Es ist vollbracht,’ but Mephisto’s mocking response to Faust’s [sic!] ‘Es ist vorbei’...” (in Tibbetts: 321; italics in text). (Schumann’s libretto designates not Faust but “Goethe” as singing the words “Es ist vorbei,” substituting “Goethe” for the chorus designated in Goethe’s text.)

Writing during the United States’ Civil War (1861–65), a period when the theme of suffering becomes especially prominent in her poems (see, e.g., Habegger: 408), the reclusive American poet Emily Dickinson (1830–86) in Amherst, Massachusetts drew Jesus’ last words into intensely personal
associations. In one four-stanza poem that dates from ca. 1862, the allusion is obvious. Anticipating the explicitly Christic references of the last two stanzas (e.g., “The Palm – without the Calvary – / So Savior – Crucify!” “in old Gethsemane”; “vitalizes Wine”), the second stanza quotes the transliterated Aramaic cry of Jesus from Matt 27:46:

... the Prayer
I knew so perfect – yesterday –
That Scalding One – Sabachthani –
Recited fluent - here -

(Poem 313, “I should have been too glad,” in Dickinson: 147–48)

For Alfred Habegger, the quotation of Jesus’ last words here “justifies pain the orthodox way, as beneficial for the soul” (Habegger: 409), a sentiment consistent with the argument in a sermon by her friend, the Philadelphia minister Charles Wadsworth, sent to Dickinson in 1858: “Character is the creature of development and discipline. It depends quite as much upon experience of pain, as of pleasure” (quoted in ibid.).

The closing couplet of another, shorter poem, putatively composed by Dickinson a year earlier (1861), describes the bleeding heart of a stabbed, moribund songbird, whose oozing blood blends with the final notes of her song: “Bubbel! ‘forgive’ – ‘Some better’ – Blow! / ‘Carol for Him – when I am gone’” (poem 238, “Kill your Balm,” in Dickinson: 109). Here, Habegger takes the term “forgive” as hearkening back to Jesus’ “forgive them; for they know not what they do” (Luke 23:34, KJV) inasmuch as the bird’s imagined “dying ‘Refrain’ seeks what is best for the murderer” (Habegger: 408).

In C.S. Lewis’ space fantasy novel, Perelandra (1944), Jesus’ words from the cross are recalled by an agent of the devil, much as in the Alsfeld Passion Play centuries earlier (see above). Lewis’ hero, the English philologist Elwin Ransom, is mysteriously transported from his terrestrial home to planet Perelandra, i.e., Venus. Gradually realizing that he has been brought to Perelandra as a representative of “Maleldil,” i.e., God, he finds himself in conflict with another earthling there, the mad scientist Edward Weston. Utterly possessed by the force of evil and thereby transformed into “the Un-man,” Weston qua Un-man is trying to cause the first two beings on Perelandra, an innocent primal male-and-female couple, to “fall” in the same way Adam and Eve fell on earth, and it is Ransom’s task to prevent this from happening. The repeating of the crucified Jesus’ words by the Un-man occurs near the climax of Ransom’s confrontation with him, as he tries unsuccessfully to break Ransom’s spirit:

“But this is very foolish,” said the Un-man. “Do you not know who I am?”

“I know what you are,” said Ransom...

“And you think, little one,” it answered, “that you can fight with me? You think He [i.e., Maleldil] will help you, perhaps? Many thought that. I’ve known Him longer than you, little one. They all think He’s going to help them — till they come to their senses screaming recantations too late in the middle of the fire, moulder- ing in concentration camps, writhing under saws, jab- bering in mad-houses, or nailed on to crosses. Could He help Himself?” – and the creature suddenly threw back its head and cried in a voice so loud that it seemed the golden sky-roof must break, “Eloi, Eloi, lama sabachthani.”

And the moment it had done so, Ransom felt certain that the sounds it had made were perfect Aramaic of the First Century. The Un-man was not quoting; it was remembering. (Lewis: 153; italics in text)

Jesus’ last words figured prominently in arguably the two most controversial Jesus novels of the 20th century. One was the Yiddish novelist Sholem Asch’s The Nazarene (1939; translated from Der Man fun Notseres). Though a best-seller among the general English-speaking public, The Nazarene estranged Asch from most of his Yiddish readers, and caused him to be accused of apostasy (see Siegel). The other novel was Greek writer Nikos Kazantzakis’ O τελευταίος πειρασμός (1955, The last temptation), known in English by the augmented title The Last Temptation of Christ (1960), whose intensely humanized portrayal of Jesus led some Greek Orthodox clergy to threaten to excommunicate Kazantzakis.

In The Nazarene, which emphasizes the Jewishness of Rabbi Yeshua (Jesus of Nazareth) and his milieu, the account of the crucifixion and of Jesus’ last words is narrated by Rufus – a student of Rabbi Nicodemus (an admirer of Yeshua) and a witness to Yeshua’s passion and crucifixion. Rufus’ account incorporates quotations of Luke 23:34, Matt 27:46 (par. Mark 15:34), Luke 23:46 sequentially, together with the Shema Israel, which is interpolated into the narrative from outside the Gospels as Jesus’ penultimate utterance:

...he that was on the cross turned his eyes full upon the Roman commander [who had lifted a moistened sponge to his face], and his look was filled with pain, ... and we heard him say:

“Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do!”

Then suddenly the Rabbi on the cross lifted his eyes to heaven, and moaned bitterly, and from his lips came the cry:

“Eli, Eli, lama sabachthani?”

... But the despair and death terror on the Rabbi’s face lasted but a moment. He became strong again, and calmness returned to him... With a last effort he looked up again ..., and in a loud, clear voice called:

“Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God the Lord is One.”

And therewith he let his head fall again, and he closed his eyes. Then over his lips there passed a forgiving smile... We heard him murmur in a song of sleep:

“Into Thy hands I deliver my soul!”

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And he died in sanctity and purity, the smile upon his lips. (Asch 1956: 671–72)

The most extraordinary of all literary uses of Jesus’ last words is made in Kazantzakis’ The Last Temptation of Christ. There, Jesus’ last words serve as the framing device for the dream sequence that constitutes the novel’s controversial final section, chs. 30–33. At the close of chapter 29, as he hangs from the cross on Golgotha with the crowd mocking him, Jesus is able only to commence haltingly, but not to complete, the cry quoted at Matt 27:46:

...a great, heart-rending cry, full of complaint, tore the air from earth to heaven.

“ELI ... ELI ...”

The sufferer was unable to continue. He wanted to but could not; he had no more breath.

The Crucified inclined his head – and fainted. (Kazantzakis: 435)

From the very start of the next chapter (ch. 30) onward, the unconscious, crucified Jesus experienced his “last temptation,” as the devil – in Kazantzakis’ words in the novel’s “Prologue” – “unfolded the deceptive vision of a calm and happy life” (ibid.: 3). In this vision, Jesus imagined himself escaping from the cross and taking the easy path of human beings: marrying, fathering children, and living to old age. Finally, when he is old and moribund, his disciples return as decrepit old men to condemn him as a coward, deserter, and traitor for having not died on the cross decades earlier. In reaction, wracked by anguish and regret, Jesus then began to awake from the dream and tried to complete his aborted outcry from the cross:

He wanted to complete his cry, to shout LAMA SAB-ACHTHANI!... He attempted to move his lips but could not...

But suddenly, while he was falling and perishing, ... he felt a sponge soaked in vinegar rest against his lips and nostrils [cf. Matt 27:34, 48; Mark 15:23, 36; John 19:29]. He breathed in deeply the bitter smell, revived, swelled is breast, looked at the heavens and uttered a heart-rending cry: LAMA SABACTHANI! (Ibid.: 486–87)

Then, aware of himself once again on the cross, amid the jeering crowd, Jesus realizes that “The moment he cried ELI ELI and fainted, Temptation had captured him for a split second and led him astray,” but the joys, marriages, children, and then the condemnation of his aged disciples had all been illusions “sent by the Devil” (ibid.: 487). As he is filled now by the joyful awareness that “Everything had turned out as it should be, glory be to God” (ibid.), the novel ends with his uttering the last words ascribed to the crucified Jesus at John 19:30:

He uttered a triumphant cry: IT IS ACCOMPLISHED! [ΣΤΕΛΕΧΩΝ]

And it was a though he had said: Everything has begun. (Kazantzakis 1965: 515; 1960: 487)
Last Words of Jesus


Luke’s account that Jesus told the penitent thief “Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in Paradise” (Luke 23:43) is seen in depictions of Jesus crucified between the two thieves. The contrast between the unrepentant thief deriding Jesus and the penitent thief asking to be remembered by Jesus has often prompted artists to juxtapose the two figures, emphasizing their differing responses and fates. For example, in early Italian painting, sometimes angels are depicted taking the penitent thief to Paradise, fulfilling Jesus’ words, while the unrepentant thief is attacked by a devil; this motif can be seen in Andrea di Vanni’s 1380s altarpiece (National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C.).

The influence of Jesus’ words in Luke 23:46, “Father, into your hands I commend my spirit,” can be seen in a tradition of depicting the Trinity with three figures at the foot of the cross in crucifixion images. They appear, for example in the Isenheim Altarpiece with the body of Jesus after the crucifixion (1515–16, Musée d’Unterlinden, Colmar), and a dove descending for the Holy Spirit. This motif was a popular subject for English alabaster carvers in the 15th century (examples in the Victoria and Albert Museum, London). Rubens painted a variation on this theme, showing the Father supporting the body of Jesus after the crucifixion (1620, Royal Museum of Fine Arts, Antwerp), suggesting the fulfillment of Jesus’ words.

John’s account of Jesus saying to his mother and John “here is your son” and “here is your mother” (John 19:26–27) informs the widespread inclusion of both figures at the foot of the cross in crucifixion images. They appear, for example in the Isenheim altarpiece, with John supporting the swooning figure of Mary. El Greco’s painting (ca. 1603–5, John and Mable Ringling Museum, Sarasota, Fla.) is unusual in focusing on the moment of Jesus’ saying itself, with Jesus still alive, and John reaching out to Mary, indicating his acceptance of Jesus’ request to take Mary as his mother.

Also in John, Jesus says “I am thirsty” (19:28); a soldier then gives Jesus sour wine on a sponge—a detail which is commonly included in depictions of the crucifixion. An example is Hans Memling’s painting Crucifixion (15th cent., Museum of Fine Arts, Budapest).

Jesus’ final utterance in this Gospel, “It is finished” (John 19:30), in Latin consummatum est, which is the title of an alabaster sculpture of the body of Christ by Jacob Epstein (1936–37, National Galleries of Scotland, Edinburgh). The Latin also appears on Eric Gill’s Twelfth Station of the Cross (1918, Westminster Cathedral, London). The feeling of this saying can also be seen in depictions of the crucifixion where Jesus has an expression of strong resolve.


VI. Music

The seven short sayings or phrases uttered by Jesus as he was dying on the cross have inspired numerous compositions in music since the 16th century to the present day in choral, orchestral, and instrumental works for piano and organ.

Apart from medieval chant settings, especially in connection with the recitation of the passion, the early settings in Latin of the Seven Last Words began in the 16th century with Orlande de Lassus’ motet for five voices, Septem verba Domini Jesu Christi. This was followed in the 17th century by works in German by Heinrich Schütz, the cantata Die Sieben Worte Jesu Christi am Kreuz: SWV 478 (1645), and a lesser known oratorio Passio, sive Septem Verba Christi in cruce pendenti (ca. 1670) by Augustin Pflüger.

One of the most celebrated settings originating from the 18th century is undoubtedly Joseph Haydn’s oratorio Die sieben letzten Worte unseres Erlösers am Kreuze (1796) for SATB soloists, SATB chorus, and orchestra. It was commissioned in 1786 for the Good Friday service in the Oratorio de la Santa Cueva, Cádiz as an orchestral meditation on the Seven Last Words of Christ (Hob. XX/1A). It was adapted for string quartet in 1787 (Hob. XX/1B), for piano in 1787 (Hob. XX/1C), and later as an oratorio (Hob. XX/2, 1796) (see also “Haydn, Joseph”). Other 18th century works include settings by Giovanni Battista Pergolesi (attributed), Christoph Graupner (1743) and Francisco Javier Garcia Fajer (1787).

In the 19th century, there were three major choral works composed in Paris by well-known French composers, Charles Gounod, Les Sept Paroles de Notre Seigneur Jesus-Christ sur la Croix (1855), César Franck, Paroles du Christ sur la Croix (1859), and Theodore Dubois, Les Sept Paroles du Christ (1867), the latter, which is regarded as one of the composer’s best-known works. Other lesser-known settings include works by Christian Friedrich Hermann Uber (1822), Saverio Mercadante (1838), Fernand de la Tombelle (n.d.) and Adolphe Desplandres (1883).

In the 20th century there were a number of large-scale choral works and works for organ composed by well-known and lesser-known composers. Marcel Dupré for example alluded to Jesus’ Last Words in Movement XII of Le Chemin de la Croix (op. 29, 1931, “The Stations of the Cross”). This was followed by Charles Tournemire’s monumental Sept choral-poèmes d’orgue pour les sept paroles du Christ (op. 67, 1935), followed thirty years later by Alan Ridout’s Seven Last Words for Organ (1965) and a further thirty years by Ruth Zechlin’s Die sieben letzten Worte Jesu am Kreuz in 1996.

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Other well-known 20th-century works include Sofia Gubaidulina’s Sieben Worte for cello, accordion, and strings (1982), and James MacMillan’s Seven Last Words from the Cross (1993) in seven movements scored for double choir and string orchestra. The libretto of the latter derives from biblical texts (outlined above), the Palm Sunday exclamation (“Hosanna to the Son of David”), the Tenebrae responsories for Good Friday, the Good Friday antiphon (Venite adoremus), and from the Good Friday Re-approaches (“I gave you to drink of life-giving water from the rock”). There are also many other lesser-known works composed in the 20th century. In more recent times, works include, among others, the Seven Last Words from the Cross (2013) for baritone soloist, chorus, and orchestra by Paul Carr and Michael John Trotta’s Septem Ultima Verba (2017) for soprano and baritone soloists, mixed chorus, and orchestra.

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### VII. Film

New Testament accounts of the last words of Jesus differ depending on which gospel one reads. Cinematic presentations of those words differ as well.

Some films opt to have Jesus speak verses from only one gospel. For example, The Visual Bible: The Gospel of John (dir. Philip Saville, 2003, CA/UK) includes only words from John’s text. Similarly, Jesus (dir. Peter Sykes and John Krish, 1979, US, a.k.a. The Jesus Film) relies on the Gospel of Luke and, thus, includes only Jesus’ asking mercy for his persecutors, his assurance to the good thief, and the commendation of his spirit to God. The 1964 Italian film Il vangelo secondo Matteo (The Gospel According to St. Matthew, IT/FR), directed by Pier Paolo Pasa-lini, relies solely on Matthew; in that film, Jesus speaks the lament from Ps 22:1, though he alters it slightly. Instead of “My God, my God,” Jesus says, “My father, why have you abandoned me?”

Other movies choose to combine sayings from more than one gospel. For example, the 1912 silent picture From the Manger to the Cross (dir. Sidney Olcott, 1912, US, a.k.a. Jesus of Nazareth), and Cecil B. DeMille’s silent The King of Kings (1927, US) each incorporate passages from both Luke and John.

Martin Scorsese’s The Last Temptation of Christ (1988, CA/US) uses Luke and John as well. Scorsese, however, inserts a thirty-minute sequence during which Jesus, while hanging on the cross, imagines that his life had taken a different path and that he had married and had children instead. At the end of this dream-sequence, Jesus returns to himself on the cross and cries triumphantly, “It is accomplished! It is accomplished.”


Finally, in Jésus de Montréal (dir. Denys Arcand, 1989, CA/FR, “Jesus of Montreal”), an actor named Daniel who is portraying Jesus in a passion play speaks only two words during his staged crucifixion: “Thirsty,” and then “Forsaken.” During the course of the film, this actor becomes a Christ-figure, and he dies shortly after the cross falls on top of him during an altercation. Before his death, the actor delivers portions of Jesus’ Mark 15 sermon, technically making these the last words of Jesus in Arcand’s film.


**Theresa Sanders**

*See also* —Crucifixion; —Passion of Jesus; —Thieves on the Cross

### Lasthenes

Lasthenes (Gk. Λασθενής) is mentioned in 1 Macc 11:31, 32 and in Josephus, Ant. 13.126–127 as the recipient of a copy of a letter from the Seleucid ruler Demetrius II to the Hasmonean Jonathan. In 1 Mac- cabees, he bears the honorary titles of Demetrius’ “Kinsman” and “Father.” Josephus also notes in Ant. 13.86 that Lasthenes had supplied Cretan mercen-enaries to Demetrius, and thus, he likely was the commander of those mercenaries under Demetrius. Lasthenes appears in Appian of Alexandria’s Roman History 5.6.1–2 as a Cretan who waged war against Marcus Antonius, the father of Marc Antony. The Romans defeated Lasthenes at Kydonia, and he fled to Knossos, where, during the Roman siege, Appian says he burned his own house, “which he had filled with money,” and escaped.

*Benjamin G. Wright III*

### Lastman, Pieter

Pieter Pietersz Lastman (1583–1633) was a Dutch painter – a Catholic in a country that had become dominated by Protestantism. He was born in Amsterdam where his father, a town-head, had been dismissed because he was a Catholic, five years be-fore Pieter was born. On the other hand, his mother’s position as an art-appraiser may have helped lead him both toward art and toward good teachers. He was financially able to spend four years