

“Babeş-Bolyai” University of Cluj-Napoca
Faculty of Orthodox Theology
Doctoral School “IsidorTodoran”

**Jesus’ “Agonies”: the Tragedy from Gethsemane
and the Abandonment on the Cross. A
Perspective of the Synoptic Gospels**

– abstract –

Professor,

REV. PROF. PHD. STELIAN TOFANĂ

Candidate,

GLIGAN (MRS. LUKACS) MIHELA

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CONTENTS

ABBREVIATIONS	4
I. Biblical abbreviations	4
II. Other abbreviations.....	5
INTRODUCTION	8
I Structure and content of the thesis.....	9
II Objectives and methodology of the research.....	10
III. Current state of research in the academic literature and its analysis.....	12
III.1 National state of the research	12
III.2. International state of the research	13
CHAPTER I. “THE AGONY” FROM GETHSEMANE (MATTHEW 26:36-46; MARK 14:32-42; LUKE 22:39-47). A SYNOPTIC EXEGETICAL PERSPECTIVE	16
I.1. GETHSEMANE GARDEN – THE PLACE OF “AGONY”	18
I.1.1. Common elements and differences in the narrations of the Evangelists.....	18
I.1.2. The symbolical interpretation of the Gethsemane Garden	20
I.2. CHOOSING APOSTLES PETER, JACOB AND JOHN IN THE GETHSEMANE EPISODE	21
I.2.1. Common elements and differences in the synoptic narrations	22
I.2.2. The reason for choosing the three Apostles.....	24
I.2.3. The relation between vigil and temptation in Matthew 26:41 and Mark 14:38	28
I.2.4. The meaning of the phrase “ <i>the spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak</i> ”	30
I.2.5. The sorrow and trouble of the Savior in the Gethsemane episode(Matthew 26:37; Mark 14:33)	34
I.3. JESUS’ PRAYER IN GETHSEMANE GARDEN.....	37
I.3.1. Common elements and differences in the narrations of the Evangelists	39
I.3.2. The meaning of the term <i>ποτήριον</i> (“cup”) in the writings of the Old Testament and in the narrations of the Evangelists.....	41
I.3.2.1. Symbolical interpretations of the word <i>ποτήριον</i>	46
I.3.2.2. The meaning of the word <i>ώρα</i> (“hour”) in the light of the Gospels.....	49
I.3.3. The meaning of the phrase “ <i>ἀββᾶ (ὁ πατήρ)</i> ” from Mark 14:36	54

I.3.3.1. ἄββᾶ in the writings of the Old Testament	55
I.3.3.2. ἄββᾶ in the writings of the New Testament	57
I.3.4. The presence of the angel in the Gethsemane garden and the meaning of the phrase "sweat like <<drops of blood>>" (Luke 22:43-44)	61
I.3.4.1. The role of the angel in the agony from Gethsemane	66
I.3.4.2. The temptation of Jesus from Gethsemane Garden.....	69
I.3.4.3 The meaning of the phrase "(sweat) like drops of blood"	74
I.3.5 The triple prayer and the triple return of the Savior to the sleeping Apostles.....	77
I.3.5.1. Common elements and differences in the narrations of the Evangelists	78
I.3.5.2. The meaning of the phrase "Sleep and rest now!"	81
Conclusions.....	84
CHAPTER II. "THE AGONY" ON THE CROSS (MATTHEW 27:33-54; MARK 15:22-39; LUKE 23:33-47). THE RELATION BETWEEN THE SYNOPTICS	88
II. 1. THE EVENTS THAT HAPPENED ON THE WAY TO GOLGOTHA	89
II.1.1. Simon of Cyrene and the carrying of the cross	89
II.1.1.1. Differences and common elements in the narrations of the synoptic Gospels.....	89
II.1.1.2. Simon of Cyrene – model of discipleship?.....	92
II. 1.1.3. The meaning of the term ἀγγαρεύω („to force”) in the narration of Evangelists...96	
II.1.2. The lament of women in Luke 23:27-31.....	97
II.1.2.1. Jesus’ prophecy about the destruction of Jerusalem (Luke 23:28-30; Luke 19:41-44).....	98
II.2. EVENTS HAPPENED DURING CHRIST’S CRUCIFIXION	106
II.2.1. Common elements and differences in the narrations of the Evangelists.....	106
II.2.2. Hermeneutical difficulties regarding the moment of crucifixion	108
II.2.3. The two criminals in the narration of the Evangelists.....	113
II.2.3.1 The dialogue between Jesus and the criminal in the narration of Saint Evangelist Luke	115
II.2.4. Interpretations regarding the darkness during crucifixion (Matthew 27:45; Mark 15:33; Luke 23:44-45a)	123
II.2.5. Jesus’ last words on the Cross and the reaction of the people.....	131

II.2.5.1. Jesus' cry on the Cross and the reaction of the people in the narrations of the Evangelists Matthew and Mark.....	131
II.2.5.2. Jesus' last words on the Cross in Luke's perspective	138
II.3. THE EVENTS THAT HAPPENED AFTER THE DEATH OF JESUS	142
II.3.1. Common elements and differences in the narrations of the Evangelists.....	142
II.3.2. Interpretations regarding the tearing of the curtain of the Temple (Matthew 27:51; Mark 15:38; Luke 23:45).....	143
II.3.3. The earthquake and the resurrection of the "saints" in the context of the Passions of Jesus (Matthew 27:51-53)	150
II.3.4. The confession of the centurion – a proof of faith?(Matthew 27:54; Mark 15:39; Luke 23:47)	159
Conclusions.....	164
CHAPTER III. THEOLOGY OF JESUS' "AGONIES"	168
III.1. Theology of the "Agony" from Gethsemane	169
III.1.1. Logic of the "Agony".....	169
III.1.2. Tabor, Gethsemane and Calvary: from Transfiguration to the angst of death.....	174
III. 2. Theology of the "Agony" on the Cross.....	179
III.2.1. The necessity of the bloody sacrifice on Golgotha	179
III.2.2 The role of the Cross in the economy of salvation.....	182
CONCLUSIONS	186
BIBLIOGRAPHY	189

Key words and key phrases: Passions of Jesus, redemption, Gethsemane, Cross, Gospels, justice of God, saving sacrifice, love of God, prayer, Apostles, exegetical perspective

The Passions of the Lord represent one of the most profound themes that have been moving the world for the past two thousand years, an astounding contrast between the love of God and His justice, manifested in the mystery of Redemption. This Redemption of humanity, announced even from the Old Testament finds its fulfillment in the sacrifice of the Savior on the Cross.

In this thesis I focused on analyzing two important episodes from the Passions of the Lord, namely the Agony from Gethsemane Garden and the Agony on the Cross in the narrations of the synoptic Gospels.

The word *ἀγωνία* (“agony”) is found only once in the writings of the New Testament (Luke 22:44) and it describes the spiritual conflict and the profound sufferance of our Lord Jesus Christ in Gethsemane Garden. This agony is best reflected in the prayer spoken “with sorrow to the point of death”, a prayer to the Father, in which the weakness of the human nature is defeated by accepting the divine will: “*Yet not as I will, but as You will*” (Matthew 26:39; Mark 14:36). The agony continues to the hour of death, when Christ feels fully deserted by the father, which is described by the words “My God, My God, why have you forsaken Me?” (Mark 15:34; Matthew 27:46). However, Jesus never doubts the fact that His death will be of short duration and, with His unshaken trust in the Father, He says with His last breath “Father, into Your hands I commit my spirit” (Luke 23:46).

An essential factor, which leads to a more profound knowledge of the tragedy from gethsemane and of the “abandonment” on the Cross, consists of the general view over the passions as narrated by each Evangelist. Nevertheless, since the theme of the Passions is a complex one, the thesis focuses on this theme only from the perspective of the synoptic Gospels.

In the elaboration of the thesis I will make a comparison between the texts describing the Passions from the synoptic Gospels, emphasizing especially the differences that occur and the problems generated by these differences among the exegetes. Besides the exegetical aspect the thesis also comprises a theological part, in which I will underline especially the role and the importance of the sacrifice of the Lord in the reestablishment of the fallen human nature.

I chose this theme convinced that it will constitute a plus in the Romanian biblical theology of the New Testament, taking into account the small amount of information that exists in comparison with the importance and complexity of the subject. Furthermore, the research proposed wishes to offer an answer to the question: “Why was this redeeming sacrifice on the Cross necessary?”, thus indicating that the love and justice of God are not two distinctive elements, but on the contrary.

The justice of God is revealed in the image of a father that waits for us “longingly and offering His arms to embrace us and take us together into the eternal happiness and peace”¹.

Structure and content of the thesis

The thesis comprises two great parts, the first of them dedicated to exegesis and the second part to the theology of the Passions. Structured in three main chapters, the thesis starts with the “Agony” from Gethsemane in the narration of the synoptic Evangelists, presenting the main similitudes and distinctive elements which emerge from the texts of the Gospels.

An exception from this focus are the subchapters in which an unedited detail is presented, one that does not appear in the narrations of the other Evangelists, such as the presence of the angel and of the sweat “like drops of blood” in Luke’s Gospel and the phrase “Abba, Father” described in Mark’s Gospel.

This aspect, that of presenting the similitudes and differences between the texts of the Gospels, contributes to a clearer understanding of the text and of the distinctive elements that are approached within each subchapter. For instance, in the first chapter we observed a series of differences between the synoptic Evangelists among which:

- Luke is the only one who does not mention the name “Gethsemane”;
- Evangelists Matthew and Mark are the only ones that do not mention the fact that Christ took with Him the three disciples: Peter, Jacob and John;
- Only Mark mentions the expression “Abba, Father”;
- Only the Gospel of Luke mentions the presence of the angel and of the sweat “like drops of blood”;
- In the Gospel of Mark two of the Savior’s prayers are mentioned and in the Gospel of Matthew we can find three of them.

¹Ioan CHIRILĂ, *Ipostazieri ale Cuvântului. Eseuri omiletice*, Editura Școala Ardeleană, Cluj-Napoca, 2020, p.13.

Thus, the first chapter, named “*The Agony*” from *Gethsemane* (*Matthew 26:36-46; Mark 14:32-42; Luke 22:39-47*). A *synoptic exegetical perspective* wishes to offer an answer to these differences, starting from the meaning of the key-terms such as κῆπος (“garden”), ἀδημονέω (“to be distressed”), ἐκθαμβέω/λυπέω (“to be troubled”), ποτήριον (“cup”), ὥρα (“hour”), ἀγωνία (“agony”), πνεῦμα (“spirit”) and continuing with the main exegetic and patristic interpretations.

The second chapter is dedicated to the Agony on the Cross, as it can be deduced from the name of the chapter, “*The Agony*” on the Cross (*Matthew 27:33-54; Mark 15:22-39; Luke 23:33-47*). *The relation between the synoptics*. Working on this chapter, I encountered several hermeneutical difficulties, among which I must mention the difficulties regarding the moment of crucifixion, the difference between the terms παράδεισος (“Heaven”) and βασιλεία τοῦ θεοῦ (“Kingdom of God”) in Luke’s narration on the two criminals or the interpretations regarding the significance of the tearing of the Temple’s curtain which, which are various, as one may see in the thesis.

Regarding the differences between the synoptic narrations in the second chapter, I mention:

- In Saint Luke’s Gospel only one of the criminals insults Christ, in comparison with the other two synoptic evangelists;
- Ἠλὶ ἡλὶ (“Eli, Eli”) from Matthew is replaced with Ἐλωὶ ἔλωϊ (“Eloi, Eloi”) in the Gospel of Mark;
- Saint Luke is the only one who links the tearing of the curtain of the Temple with the unnatural darkness that came over the entire earth;
- If in the first two Gospels the centurion confesses the divinity of the One crucified, in the Gospel of Luke the stress falls on the innocence of Jesus.

The first two chapters constitute the exegetical part of the thesis, however, the last chapter, named *Theology of Jesus’ “Agonies”*, is focused, as the title indicates, on the theological aspect, within which several elements are emphasized, such as the will of God in the logic of the agony, the role of the Cross in the economy of salvation, prayer as a means of communicating with God.

Objectives and methodology of the research

The general objective of the thesis is to create an exegetic and theological study on the theme of the “agonies” of Jesus as it is narrated by the synoptic Evangelists. Regarding the specific objectives of the doctoral thesis, I would like to mention:

- Explanation of the main differences that exist between the synoptic writings regarding the Passions of the Lord;
- Illustration of the correlation between the promises from the Old Testament and those from the New Testament and their fulfillment in the presentation of the Passions;
- Jesus Christ is the only Savior of the humankind, redeeming with his Sacrifice the entire human race;
- All the events are subordinated to the will of God and so nothing happens without His permission or command.

The main method of research is the historical-critical exegesis, through which the biblical text is perceived in its historical dimension. Moreover, through the use of this method, a critical interpretation of the text is achieved, aiming for the most objective analysis possible of the phrases and expressions analyzed.

The spiritual perspective, characteristic to the patristic writings, is also an important factor based on which I substantiated the interpretation of the texts from the New Testament, together with the writings of the contemporary theologians.

As an instrument of exegetical work for this thesis I used the following editions of the Holy Scripture: *Biblia sau Sfânta Scriptură*, printed with the blessing of the Holy Synod, Editura Institutului Biblic și de Misiune al Bisericii Ortodoxe Române, Bucharest, 1988; *Biblia adică Dumnezeiasca Scriptură a Vechiului și Noului Testament*. Printed for the first time in 1688 in the time of Șerban Vodă Cantacuzino, Domnul Țării Românești. Reprinted 300 years later in facsimile and transcribed with the approval of the Holy Synod, this edition being printed now with the blessing of Teoctist, Patriarch of the Romanian Orthodox Church, Editura Institutului Biblic și de Misiune al Bisericii Ortodoxe Române, Bucharest, 1997; *Biblia adică Dumnezeiasca Scriptură a Legii Vechi și a celei Nouă*. Printed in the days of His Majesty Carol I, king of Romania. Editions of the Holy Synod, Tipografia Cărților Bisericești, Bucharest, 1914; *Biblia sau Sfânta Scriptură*, Edition improved according to the Septuagint, Variorum by Bartolomeu Valeriu Anania Archbishop of Cluj, supported by many other efforts.

Jubilee Edition of the Holy Synod; *Novum Testamentum Graecae: Nestle-Aland (Greek Edition)*, Tyndale House Publishers, Illinois, 2012; *New American Bible. Revised Edition*, American Bible Society, Philadelphia 2019.

Nonetheless, I mention the fact that an important role in the interpretation of the text is played by the linguistic analysis of the key-terms (*πνεῦμα, σάρξ, ἀγαρεύω, βασιλεία, Παράδεισος, etc.*), which requires the use of special lexicons, dictionaries and encyclopaedias: *Arheologia Biblică*², *Dicționar de Teologie Ortodoxă*³, *International Dictionary of New Testament Theology*⁴, *The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*⁵, *Dicționar Biblic*⁶, *The Cyclopaedia of Biblical Literature*⁷, *International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*⁸, *Expository Dictionary of Bible Words: Word Studies for Key English Bible Words Based on the Hebrew and Greek Texts*⁹, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament*¹⁰, *Dictionary of the Bible*¹¹, *The Jewish Encyclopedia: A Descriptive Record of the History, Religion, Literature, and Customs of the Jewish People from the Earliest Times to the Present day*¹².

Current state of research in the academic literature and its analysis

a) National state of the research

With exception of the work *Moartea lui Mesia, din Ghetsimani până la mormânt. Un comentariu asupra relatării pătimirii din cele patru Evanghelii*¹³ written by Raymond Brown, in the Romanian theological literature, the theme of the “Agonies” of Jesus is briefly approached in several volumes and studies without being thoroughly debated.

²Dumitru ABRUDANȘI și Emilian CORNÎȚESCU, *Arheologia Biblică*, E.I.B.M.B.O.R, Sibiu, 2002.

³Ștefan BUCHIUȘI și Ioan TULCAN, *Dicționar de Teologie Ortodoxă*, Basilica, București, 2019.

⁴Colin BROWN, *The New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology (v. 1)*. Zondervan Pub. House, Grand Rapids, 1975.

⁵Geoffrey William BROMILEY și Edgar W. SMITH, *The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*, Cross America Books, Garden City, New York, 1979.

⁶J. D. DOUGLAS, *Dicționar Biblic*, Cartea Creștină, Oradea, 1995.

⁷John, KITTO, *The Cyclopaedia of Biblical Literature*, vol. I, Ivison & Phinney, New York, 1854.

⁸James, ORR, *International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*, The Howard-Severance Company, Chicago, 2016.

⁹Stephen D. RENN, *Expository Dictionary of Bible Words: Word Studies for Key English Bible Words Based on the Hebrew and Greek Texts*, Hendrickson Publishers, Peabody, 2005.

¹⁰Joseph Henry THAYER, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament*, American Book Company, New York, 1889.

¹¹William SMITH, *Dictionary of the Bible*, vol. IV, The Riverside Press, Cambridge, 1990.

¹²Isidore SINGER, *The Jewish Encyclopedia: A Descriptive Record of the History, Religion, Literature, and Customs of the Jewish People from the Earliest Times to the Present day*, Funk and Wagnalls Company, New York, 1905.

¹³Raymond E. BROWN, translated by Marius Bitiușcă, *Moartea lui Mesia, din Ghetsemani până la mormânt: un comentariu asupra relatării pătimirii din cele patru Evanghelii*, Sapiența, Iași, 2012.

The book mentioned previously is structured in two volumes and approaches in an ample manner both the agony from Gethsemane, to which it consecrates more than one hundred pages, and the agony on the Cross, to which it dedicates some three hundred pages. The purpose of this commentary is “to explain in detail what the evangelists intended and transmitted to their addressees through their narrations on the passions and death of Jesus”¹⁴. But the form of the presentation contravenes with this purpose. The tendency of the author to approach the Gospels of Matthew and Mark together (Mark/Matthew)¹⁵ is disconcerting despite the similarities between the two presentations.

A study which constituted the starting point for the writing of the subchapter *The presence of the angel and the sweat “like drops of blood” (Luke 22:43-44)*, is named *IisusHristospeCruceși <<medicina>> ultimelorclipe*¹⁶ written by Rev. Prof. PhD. StelianTofană. In this study the author offers a different perspective on the “Agonies” of our Savior: regarding the agony from Gethsemane Garden, Rev. S. Tofană offers detailed information on the physiological phenomenon known under the name of *hematidrosis*, a phenomenon characterized by the appearance of blood drops in the sweat of a person which experiences intensely the pains and torments of a “shattering tragedy”. Concerning the agony on the Cross, the author emphasizes the Savior’s attitude toward the drink that He was offered in the last moments of His life, an attitude from which one may conclude that “to die in a Christian manner is something that must be learned (...) to die consciously is to carry your cross up to the end”¹⁷.

Another study which approaches the phrase *ἄββᾶ (ὁ πατήρ)*, a characteristic of the Gospel of Mark, is *Dificultățiîntraducereasintagmeineotestamentare ἄββᾶ (ὁ πατήρ)* written by MihaiValentinVladimirescu. As one may observe from the title of the study, the author wishes to emphasize the difficulties in the translation of the phrase *ἄββᾶ ὁ πατήρ*, which he synthesizes in three questions:

1. What is the meaning of the term *ἄββᾶ*? 2. How did this phrase appear? 3. What is the meaning and the role of the phrase in the Epistle to Romans (Romans 8:15) and Galatians (4:6)¹⁸?. This

¹⁴ Raymond E, BROWN, *Moartea lui Mesia: din Ghetsemanipână la mormânt.....*, p.29.

¹⁵ The author refers to Mark/Matthew when the presentations of the two evangelists are so similar that, according to the author, they present the same information or points of view.

¹⁶ Stelian TOFANĂ, „IisusHristospeCruceși <<medicina>> ultimelorclipe”. *MediciișiBiserica*. Vol.10/2012.

¹⁷ Stelian TOFANĂ, „IisusHristospeCruceși <<medicina>> ultimelorclipe”, pp.31-42.

¹⁸ MihaiValentinVLADIMIRESCU, “Dificultățiîntraducereasintagmeineotestamentare ἄββᾶ ὁ πατήρ,” in the volume *ReceptareaSfinteiScripturiîntrefilologie, hermeneuticășitraductologie*, EdituraUniversității „AlexandruIoanCuza”, Iași, 2011, pp.400-414.

study in particular helped me write the subchapter *The meaning of the phrase “ἄββᾶ (ὁ πατήρ)”* from Mark 14:36.

Consequently, having a very reduced bibliographical context, I turned to the resources from the international environment, and a part of these resources will be mentioned hereinafter.

b) International state of the research

There are two main works that I used in writing my thesis, namely: *Passion Narratives and Gospel Theologies: Interpreting the Synoptics Through Their Passion Stories*¹⁹ written by Frank Matera and, the second work, *The Synoptic Gethsemane. A critical Study*²⁰ by Warren Holleran.

The first work I mentioned is structured in nine chapters, and the author dedicates three chapters to each synoptic Gospel: one chapter contains a general presentation of the narration of the Passions (the problem of the sources that the Evangelist used as an inspiration, the main themes that Frank Matera identified in the narration of the Passions and which he intends to develop in his work²¹), the second chapter represents a commentary on the narration of the Passions and the third chapter, the theological structure of the Gospel in which the author presents the main themes which he identified in the narration of the passions and which he mentions in the general presentation.

The work, as F. Matera himself mentions in the introductory part, is not a historical one; rather, the author wishes to present the Passions from the theological perspective of each Evangelist.

The second work I mentioned previously, that is *The Synoptic Gethsemane. A Critical Study*, focuses on only one of the “agonies” of our Savior, namely the Agony from Gethsemane, as one may observe from the title of the work. Conceived as an exegetical study on the Agony from Gethsemane, starting with the prayer of Jesus from the Last Supper and ending with the arrest of our Savior, the work is structured in three main parts. The first part focuses on the problems of the textual critic, exegesis and literary analysis. The second part is a theory of the

¹⁹Frank J. MATERA, *Passion Narratives and Gospel Theologies: Interpreting the Synoptics Through Their Passion Stories*, Wipf and Stock Publishers, Eugene, 2001.

²⁰J. Warren HOLLERAN, *The Synoptic Gethsemane. A Critical Study*, Universita Gregoriana Editrice, Roma, 1973.

²¹ For example, in the narration of the Passions from the Gospel of Mark, the author identified the following main themes: the divine filiation of the Savior, Jesus' abandonment by the disciples, the destruction of the Temple, the Son of Man and the future persecutions.

sources and redactions, and the third part is a theological synthesis of the synoptic presentations and of their sources.

Other studies which approach the given theme, but only partially, not exhaustively, are: *Jesus on the Mount of Olives (Luke 22:39-46): Tradition and Theology*²², *The Transfiguration and the Agony in the Garden*²³, *Certainly this Man was Righteous': Highlighting a Messianic Reading of the Centurion's Confession in Luke 23:47*²⁴.

A complex study on the theme of the darkness during the crucifixion is published in the work *Studies in Matthew: Interpretation Past and Present*, by Dale C. Allison²⁵. In this study, the author focuses on three objectives: to take into consideration the fragments from the Old Testament which are connected to the darkness described by the Gospels, to emphasize the manner in which the fragment from 27:45 is connected with other fragments from the Gospel according to Matthew, to present several accounts on the main theological and literary significances that the exegetes discovered.

²²Green, JOEL B., "Jesus on the Mount of Olives (Luke 22.39-46): Tradition and Theology," in: *JSNT*, 8.(1986). In this study, the author Joel B. Green wishes to present the sources used by Evangelist Luke in writing the narration of the passions of the Lord and the main theme that stands at the basis of this narrations.

²³Kenny, ANTHONY "The Transfiguration and the Agony in the Garden," in: *The Catholic Biblical Quarterly*, vol 19, nr.4 (1957). In this study Anthony Kenny presents a close relationship between the Transfiguration and the Agony from Gethsemane, both episodes being considered the most significant for the revelation of the glory of God before the apostles.

²⁴Matthew C., EASTER "Certainly this Man was Righteous': Highlighting a Messianic Reading of the Centurion's Confession in Luke 23:47," in: *TynBul*, 63 (2012). This study emphasizes the idea that the centurion is one of the first people who acknowledged the crucified Jesus as Messiah.

²⁵Dale C. ALLISON, *Studies in Matthew: Interpretation Past and Present*, Baker Academic, Michigan, 2012.