



# In the shadow of the cross: on Lagerkvist's *Barabbas*

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## Abstract

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*In Lagerkvist's novel, the course of Barabbas' life is shaped by the burden of being linked to Jesus' death. Barabbas is faced with the question of who Jesus was and of how to respond to beliefs about the alleged Saviour of the oppressed, although Jesus is never manifested as such. True to his nature, Barabbas' responses are often violent and impulsive. In contrast to Jesus' seeming absence and powerlessness, Barabbas actively resists oppressive authority. He wants to believe, but this is counterbalanced by his inability to break out of a solitary existence marked by the absence of God. A final act of revolt, inspired by momentary belief in the risen Jesus leads to Barabbas' death by crucifixion. Ultimately, he achieves a kind of redemption by sharing Jesus' fate as a consequence of his own freely chosen actions. At the end of his life, Barabbas reaches out towards an implied presence which remains unnameable and undefined. Jesus is an implicit presence in Barabbas' crucifixion, but He remains elusive and enigmatic. Lagerkvist is concerned with exploring the existential issues confronting Barabbas, without proposing any conclusions.*

## Opsomming

### In die skadu van die kruis: oor Lagerkvist se *Barabbas*

*In Lagerkvist se roman word die verloop van Barabbas se lewe bepaal deur die las van sy verbintenis met Jesus se dood. Barabbas word gekonfronteer met die vraag wie Jesus was en hoe om te reageer op wat ander oor die beweerde Verlosser van die onderdruktes glo, alhoewel Jesus nooit as sodanig*

*geopenbaar word nie. Getrou aan sy aard is Barabbas se reaksies dikwels impulsief en gewelddadig. In teenstelling met Jesus se oënskynlike afwesigheid en onmag, bied Barabbas aktief weerstand teen onderdrukkende gesag. Hy wil glo, maar dit word uitgebalanseer deur sy onvermoë om uit te breek uit 'n eensame bestaan wat die merk van God se afwesigheid dra. 'n Finale daad van opstand, geïnspireer deur momentele geloof in die opgestane Jesus, lei tot Barabbas se dood aan die kruis. Hy bereik uiteindelik 'n soort verlossing deur Jesus se lot te deel as gevolg van daad wat hy vryelik gekies het. Teen die einde van sy lewe reik Barabbas uit na 'n geïmpliseerde teenwoordigheid wat egter onbenoembaar en ongedefinieerd bly. Jesus is implisiet teenwoordig in Barabbas se kruisiging, maar Hy bly ontwykend en enigmaties. Lagerkvist wil die eksistensiële kwesies ondersoek waarmee Barabbas gekonfronteer word, sonder om enige konklusies te bied.*

## 1. Introduction

The Swedish writer Pär Lagerkvist (1891-1974), who received the Nobel prize for literature in 1951, once described himself as “a believer without belief, a religious atheist” (Warme, 1990). The novel *Barabbas* (1950), probably his best known work, has been said to represent a “narrowed focus on man’s relationship with the divine, his search for or escape from God” (Warme, 1990).

The narrative concerns the impact on Barabbas of being released instead of Jesus. This event leads Barabbas to reject his former way of life, without finding a meaningful alternative. While he perceives God as absent, or at best, as remote and disinterested, the enigmatic figure of Jesus, to whom he is inescapably linked, resonates in his life until the end. Lagerkvist develops these themes by presenting a few key events and encounters involving Barabbas. The narrative introduces contrasting points of view concerning Jesus, without privileging any of them, and ends without providing a definite answer to any of the questions raised. Lagerkvist does not present a coherent argument and the narrative does not move towards a particular conclusion. Instead, he is concerned with exploring the existential issues confronting Barabbas in the light of Jesus’ crucifixion (Lund, 1995:152; Polet, 2001:49-50).

The narrative is based on the scene in the Gospel accounts of Jesus’ trial before Pilate which ends in Barabbas being set free, while Jesus is condemned to be crucified (Matt. 27:15-26; Mark 15:6-15; Luke 23:19-25; John 18:38-40). The scene in the Gospels highlights Jesus’ innocence and his opponents’ determination to do

away with him (Aus, 1997:168). In the Gospels, Barabbas makes only a brief appearance and is not mentioned again, but Lagerkvist pursues the course his life might have taken after Jesus' crucifixion.

Historically nothing is known about Barabbas beyond what is stated in the passion narratives. Some commentators have questioned the historicity of the scene where he is introduced, on the grounds that there is no extra-Biblical evidence either of a Jewish riot or insurrection at this time, or of any custom of releasing a prisoner during Passover, as the Gospels suggest (Aus, 1997:136-140). Others accept that the scene probably had a basis in historical events (Brown, 1994:819-820). Lagerkvist takes the Gospel account of Barabbas' part in Jesus' trial as a given. The central question of the narrative, namely, "who was this Jesus?" (Ueberschlag, 1989:128) is not raised in terms of a quest for the *facts* about his life and identity, but the central question is related to the existential problem of how Barabbas should respond to the events he witnesses and to the statements about Jesus with which he is confronted.

This article offers an overview of the narrative, and follows Barabbas through the key events and encounters of his existential struggle. In subsequent sections, it comments on particular aspects of this struggle, and closes with some thoughts on the ending of the novel, as it relates to Barabbas' initial encounters with Jesus.<sup>1</sup>

## 2. Overview of the narrative

The focus of the narrative is announced at the outset. The figure of the crucified Jesus, observed by his mother and a few disciples is contrasted to the peripheral presence of Barabbas. The scene is projected from the perspective of a present in which Jesus has already become a universally known historical figure, highlighting Barabbas' marginality:

Everyone knows how they hung there on the crosses, and who they were that stood gathered around him ... But a little further down the slope, rather to one side, a man was standing ... (p. 1).

Having introduced Barabbas against this background, the narrator states that this peripheral witness, whose presence at the crucifixion

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1 All references in the text are to Lagerkvist (1967).

is not mentioned in the Gospels, is the focus of the narrative: "His name was Barabbas. This book is about him." (p. 1.)

The crucifixion of Jesus at the beginning of the narrative is mirrored by the crucifixion of Barabbas at the end. The body of the narrative follows the course of his life between these events. Jesus' death resonates at every turn in Barabbas' life journey and shapes the course that it takes. This journey is punctuated by two further executions which confront Barabbas with the suffering of believers: first, a harelip, an outcast with whom Barabbas had a brief sexual relationship, is stoned because of her belief in Jesus as Saviour; second, Sahak, a slave to whom Barabbas is chained in the Roman copper mines, is crucified – also because of his faith in Jesus. At the end Barabbas is crucified together with a number of Christians for whose death he is indirectly responsible.

Between these key events, Barabbas is confronted with various comments and statements about Jesus. At first this happens by accident, but thereafter, until he leaves Jerusalem, Barabbas is drawn to Jesus' disciples, and seeks them out. In the second part of the narrative, which takes up the final years of his life when his fate is forcibly linked to Sahak's, he is repeatedly confronted with professions of faith. Finally, when he is incarcerated with a number of Christians, he is confronted by their confessions and prayers.

### **3. Barabbas as a witness to Jesus' crucifixion and resurrection**

In the opening scene, Barabbas cannot understand why he has followed Jesus to the cross (p. 2-3). From the moment when he first sets eyes on Him, he finds Jesus "odd", unlike anybody he has ever seen before (p. 2). Jesus "seemed to be surrounded by a dazzling light", but this soon disappears and Barabbas ascribes it to his eyes being unused to daylight. The figure on the cross seems to him "queer" (p. 2), powerless, unmanly, and Barabbas instinctively dislikes Him. Nevertheless, he feels that Jesus "had forced him up here, he had a strange power over him" (p. 5), and that nobody could be like Him (p. 4). Barabbas witnesses the darkness which envelopes the scene, and hears the despairing words of the dying Jesus: "My God, my God, why hast Thou forsaken me?" (p. 6.) Fear makes way for relief as the light returns. Although he feels that nothing is keeping him there, Barabbas follows the body and watches as it is laid in the tomb.

On the third day after the crucifixion, Barabbas waits at the tomb to see “with his own eyes” that Jesus does not rise up from the dead (p. 33). Since he does not believe that it will happen, he cannot explain to himself why he took the trouble to be there (p. 33). The girl with the harelip is also present. As the sun rises, Barabbas thinks he witnesses an occurrence at the tomb which he cannot describe accurately; then, the tomb is empty: “It all happened so quickly that he couldn’t quite follow it ... The sepulchre was empty!” (p. 33.) After a while, he concludes that “Nothing had happened in actual fact” (p. 33), that the tomb had been empty all along, and he presumes that the disciples have removed the body so that they can claim that Jesus has been resurrected, as He had predicted.

Barabbas’ observations are simply recorded by the narrator, without any comment or elucidation. As a result, although Barabbas persuades himself that there is “no truth at all” in the expected resurrection (p. 35), and that there is a natural explanation for the empty tomb, some ambiguity remains. The possibility that an extraordinary and inexplicable event has in fact occurred is not excluded by the narration. Barabbas’ scepticism is simply juxtaposed with the belief of the girl with the harelip. As in the Gospels, the resurrection itself is not narrated, and there are no eyewitnesses that confirm its occurrence (Ridderbos, 1987:545; Luz, 1989:595-596). The girl with the harelip claims to have seen Jesus being raised, but this is an ecstatic vision inspired by her faith. Thus, the resurrection remains a silence, a gap in the text. Lagerkvist makes no reference to the stories about the appearances of the risen Jesus, as reported in the Gospels, nor does he mention the presence at the tomb of Mary of Magdala and others. Thus, while the resurrection is not excluded from the range of possibility, it is not confirmed as an event. The implication of Lagerkvist’s narration at this point is that it is impossible to know exactly what happened at the tomb. In this regard, the novel shares the critical view of the historicity of the resurrection put forward by Wedderburn (1999:66-67, 97-98).

Barabbas is relieved that he has not witnessed a resurrection, “that he no longer saw any visions but only reality itself” (p. 86). He reaffirms that Jesus “had no power over him any more” (p. 36). The nature and basis of this power are not clarified. In any event, Barabbas seems intent on resisting this mysterious fascination with the strange man from Galilee. He tries to persuade himself that, for him, Jesus is merely another “dead man” (p. 36), yet the next key event confronts him with the strange power of Jesus in the life of someone else.

#### **4. Barabbas as a witness to the suffering of believers**

The girl with the harelip, reported to the Sanhedrin because of her faith in Jesus, is sentenced to be stoned to death. By coincidence, Barabbas stands next to one of the executioners. This man, who is a scribe, a "true believer" is the first to hit her, hurling a "large sharp stone" (p. 62). Swiftly and unnoticed, Barabbas kills him, "with a deft movement that spoke of long practice" (p. 62), and then watches as the dying girl reaffirms her faith. The motive for the murder is not indicated, but it reflects a violent nature in revolt against established authority. Afterwards, Barabbas carries the girl's body to a place in the desert, where he buries her. He cannot explain why he becomes involved. Perhaps he wanted to save her body from the indignity of being thrown to the dogs (p. 66), even though he feels that his action is pointless. He rejects the notion of Jesus as Saviour of the oppressed, because He did not intervene on behalf of the girl; and hates Him, because He seems to like suffering, and led the girl to sacrifice herself (p. 66-67). In Barabbas' view, even though his action "meant nothing" and there "was absolutely no point in it" (p. 67), at least he has done something on behalf of the girl. His actions offer an ironic comment on the Saviour whose apparent absence and powerlessness throughout the girl's suffering seem to negate the love she believed He had for her. Barabbas is haunted by what the girl has said to be the doctrine propagated by Jesus: "Love one another ..." (p. 65, 67), even though the notion of neighbourly love is foreign to him.

Barabbas watches the next key event, Sahak's crucifixion, unable and unwilling to tear himself away (p. 109). Again, he witnesses the death of an innocent man whose fate he might have shared (p. 110). He notes every detail, curiously moved, identifying himself with Sahak's suffering (p. 110). It is as if he and Sahak are again united by an iron chain (p. 111). When Sahak dies, "quietly and unobtrusively", Barabbas sinks "down on his knees as though in prayer" (p. 111), yet "he was not in fact praying. He had no one to pray to" (p. 113). On the one hand, this recalls the scene in the mines where he prays with Sahak after a brief conversion; on the other, the absence of someone to pray to recalls his refusal to pray at Jesus' tomb, because "his prayer would not have been accepted ..." (p. 7). As at the stoning of the girl with the harelip, his actions suggest solidarity with the believer's suffering, yet he remains outside faith, with no hope of redemption. At this point, whether or not God exists is immaterial, because He remains absent and unconcerned. The narrator hints that the burden of Barabbas' connection with Jesus

continues to pursue him by contrasting the crucified Sahak with “Barabbas the acquitted” (p. 112), a parallel with the contrast between the crucified Jesus and Barabbas, set free in Jesus’ stead.

## 5. Barabbas’ final revolt and death

The sequence of events which culminates in Barabbas’ death re-introduces a motif encountered in the scene of Jesus’ trial: a light which Barabbas at first takes for real (p. 119). It appears and disappears while Barabbas is searching for one of the Christians’ secret meeting places in Rome, having overheard that a meeting has been arranged for that night. As before in Jerusalem, he compulsively seeks the Christians’ company, ever haunted by their strange doctrine of neighbourly love (p. 132). When the light disappears, Barabbas dismisses it as an illusion. He is left with utter darkness, “in heaven and on earth” (p. 121). Here, darkness is associated with the absence of God, with Barabbas’ inability to move beyond his own limited reality and to make contact with God. It is associated with his being trapped “in his own realm of death” (p. 121), alone and gripped by fear of mortality (Claes, 1993:16, 18; Kehl, 1969:244-245). This is contrasted with the Christians’ lack of fear for death, based on their faith in the resurrection – a resurrection that Barabbas may have witnessed without believing.

At this point, Barabbas learns that part of Rome is on fire. This refers to the fire which occurred in 64 A.D. during the reign of Nero, for which the Emperor himself might have been responsible, and which led to the persecution of Christians, who were blamed for the disaster (Mommson, 1992:177). However, Lagerkvist only briefly hints at the historical setting, since the narrative is primarily concerned with Barabbas as a type, not as a historical person (Claes, 1993:11; Lund, 1995:147). Barabbas views this event in apocalyptic terms, as a sign that Jesus has returned to judge the world, as He predicted. Fire is often associated in the Bible with divine judgement (Bromley *et al.*, 1988:305). Barabbas’ instinctive response to this event is a deliberate, albeit confused decision that he, Jesus’ “reprobate brother from Golgotha” (p. 123) will not fail Him. Spreading the fire, Barabbas is driven by the desire not to “fail the Lord”, convinced that “his kingdom is here!” (p. 124). The image of Jesus that emerges from Barabbas’ confused thoughts is far removed from the suffering figure on the cross and the teacher of neighbourly love and forgiveness. Barabbas seems to believe that he is finally witnessing a manifestation of the resurrected Jesus’ presence on earth, come to liberate the oppressed. True to his

nature, this upsurge of belief in Jesus as Lord and Saviour translates into violence and revolt, rather than worship and submission (Scobbie, 1983:63).

Up to the end of his life, Barabbas does not manifest any consistent beliefs about Jesus. He remains true to himself, and identifies with Jesus on his own terms and according to his own peculiar impulses, far removed from the doctrinaire faith and submissiveness of Jesus' disciples. As at the crucifixion of Jesus, so at his own execution, Barabbas remains an outsider, separate from the Christians with whom he is crucified, both because he does not share their faith and because he remains a violent criminal, while they suffer innocently. He even survives after the others have died. At the point of death there is no way back to his earlier, short-lived conversion: "When he felt death approaching, he said out into the darkness, as though he were speaking to it: – To thee I deliver up my soul" (p. 133).

This echoes one of the utterances attributed to the crucified Jesus in the Gospels (Luke 23:46). In Luke's account, Jesus' words are intended to convey trust, resignation and an intimate relationship with God. Barabbas, by contrast, using the same words, speaks out into the darkness which he associates with death and solitude, without any explicit indication of belief in a divine presence in or beyond this darkness.

## **6. Barabbas' responses to statements about Jesus**

Between the first and the final crucifixion scenes, Barabbas is confronted by other people's perceptions of Jesus. The companions to whom he returns after his release vaguely recall Jesus' reputation as a rabbi and worker of miracles, as well as rumours about his prophecies and teachings (p. 10). One of them even suggests that Jesus "must have been one of those who believed themselves to be the Messiah" (p. 12), an idea which Barabbas dismisses as irreconcilable with Jesus' crucifixion. In turn, the companions dismiss the darkness which he claims to have seen during Jesus' crucifixion as an optical illusion (p. 14). Though they are not wholly unbelieving, they are neither religious, nor particularly interested in Jesus or the conflict between Him and the Jewish authorities. They do not attach a great deal of significance to his suffering and crucifixion. Their responses challenge neither Barabbas' unbelief nor his fascination with this strange person with whom his fate has been linked (p. 17).

A chance encounter with the apostle Peter confronts Barabbas with a belief in Jesus as the One whose redemptive suffering was preor-



dained, as the Saviour who would rise from the dead and return in glory, as the Son of Man, even believed to be Son of God (p. 21-24). Peter's confession of belief is humble, even hesitant, and it leaves Barabbas unmoved (p. 24). The other disciples present at this time recognise Barabbas, and reject him violently (p. 27). For them, he is forever tainted as the criminal who was unrightfully released instead of Jesus. This resentment is anticipated by the "helpless and reproachful look" cast in Barabbas' direction by Mary at the cross (p. 7).

At the empty tomb, the girl with the harelip claims that "The son of God is risen" (p. 35); that the tomb had been opened by an angel. Barabbas is ambivalent at first, because of the strange and undefined occurrence he briefly believes he has witnessed at the tomb. While Barabbas does not share the girl's faith, he does not contradict her either. Instead, "though actually it was no concern of his", he inquires after the doctrine allegedly preached by Jesus, "love one another" (p. 36), again reflecting contrasting impulses of attraction to and detachment from Jesus.

This "queer doctrine" is repeated by other disciples he meets in Jerusalem, whose "peculiar ideas" also include belief in the resurrection of Jesus, even though they do not all necessarily accept Him as the Son of God (p. 38). Barabbas does not accept their beliefs and does not want to be tied either to them, or to anybody else (p. 39). He especially rejects the idea of voluntary suffering (p. 41). Yet, paradoxically, he sees himself as closer to Jesus "than anyone else" (p. 41), in that he has been chosen to escape suffering – he "was the real chosen one, acquitted instead of the son of God himself" (p. 41). This acceptance of Jesus' divine status is never stated openly, nor does it lead to a consistent position of faith. Unlike the disciples, Barabbas refuses to submit himself to Jesus (p. 41), who died, or so he believes, so that he could be saved from suffering and death (p. 42). This suggests a contingent and almost opportunistic view of Jesus' suffering. From this perspective, the link between Barabbas and Jesus is purely coincidental, the chance result of a confluence of circumstances, without any particular significance beyond its immediate benefit to Barabbas. Even though Barabbas entertains the idea that he was chosen by God to be acquitted, there is no indication that he views this event as part of some providential design, or that he generally accepts divine intervention as a possibility.

On an occasion when he happens to find himself among believers engaged in prayer and mental preparation for expected perse-

cutions, Barabbas remains a passive spectator. He experiences a feeling of revulsion when the girl with the harelip also insists on witnessing. He finds this self-debasing and embarrassing. The disciples' fervent belief in their "Lord" and "shepherd" (p. 57) repels him, which reflects both his sense of exclusion and detachment and an instinctive rejection of a faith which involves the divinification of the man from Galilee, and reliance and dependence on his transcendental presence and intervention in human affairs.

Unaware of who Barabbas is, Sahak is fascinated by the fact that Barabbas was an eyewitness to Jesus' trial and crucifixion. Barabbas pretends to believe that he saw a light surrounding Jesus during his trial, and even claims that he witnessed the resurrection, or, at least, saw an angel descending to the grave, and thereafter found the tomb to be empty (p. 82). He does this merely in order to make Sahak happy. Eventually, however, he asks that Sahak should engrave Jesus' name on his slave disk as well. After this, Barabbas joins Sahak "in fervent prayer to their Lord, the Saviour and God of all oppressed" (p. 84). This leads to their being flogged by the overseer; thus, for the first time, Barabbas suffers "for the crucified man's sake, for that pale-skinned rabbi with no hair on his chest who had been crucified in his stead" (p. 84-85). However, he only prays once or twice after this, even though he seems to want to help Sahak find opportunities for prayer (p. 85). He also never again speaks of what he claims to have witnessed, leaving Sahak completely mystified, since he offers no explanation for this silence.

When Sahak and Barabbas are ordered to appear before the Roman governor, Sahak refuses to renounce his faith, while Barabbas, confronted by a direct question from the governor, confirms, "I have no god", and states that the name of Jesus is engraved on his slave's disk, not as a sign that he belongs to Him, but because he wants to believe (p. 106). This suggests that his apparent conversion should be seen primarily as a reaching out in the direction of faith by performing the words and gestures of worship and surrender. The Roman scratches out the words "Christos Iesus" on his disk, "as you don't believe in him in any case" (p. 108). Thus, Barabbas' unbelief saves him from being crucified together with Sahak. This is incidental, since Barabbas does not state his lack of faith in order to save himself.

Barabbas' desire to believe is left unexplained, since it is part of the almost Biblical economy and simplicity of Lagerkvist's style, that he provides very little information on the inner life of his characters (Claes, 1993:8-9; Polet, 2001:49). This desire is balanced out by the

sense of a detached and distant God and by a lack of commitment to a Saviour of the oppressed who does not manifest Himself as such. Barabbas witnesses the power of faith in the lives of believers, but this remains foreign and extraneous to his nature, and fails to break down his resistance and sense of alienation.

## 7. Barabbas as outsider

Throughout the narrative, Barabbas remains a rootless outsider figure (Kehl, 1969:246; Malmström, 1971:62). The random product of a series of violent couplings, cast away at birth, he knows neither father nor mother nor any other relatives. He even kills his father, whom he only knows as the hated leader of the gang of criminals to which he also belongs. Thrust into existence by accident, he is born an outcast and drawn into a life as criminal, which by coincidence intersects with the passion of Jesus. There is no particular reason why it is Barabbas who is set free, rather than any other criminal; he is merely an accidental, if convenient pawn in a conflict between parties with whom he has no other connection (Riesenfeld, 1964: 105).

In the opening scene, at Jesus' crucifixion, he is presented as a peripheral witness, detached from the others present. He does not even seem to have a particular reason for being there. He views Jesus' suffering from the outside, as an uninvolved bystander.

The events on Golgotha and at the tomb remain strange and inexplicable to him, even though he tries to reconcile them with rational explanations for what he believes to have seen. He intervenes at the execution of the girl with the harelip, without understanding why he does this. Burying the girl suggests respect and solidarity with her suffering, yet Barabbas views this action as pointless and of no consequence. Thus, he even seems detached from his own actions. His solitary acts of revolt against oppressors have no specific purpose other than to demonstrate active engagement with the situation of the moment.

Although he is a Jew, he is not part of the Jewish community, and seems completely indifferent to their religious practices. Even among his fellow criminals and their companions, he remains a lonely, enigmatic figure, who does not form any emotional attachment: "Once and once only had he been united to another, but that was only with an iron chain. Never with anything else but an iron chain." (p. 121.)

After Jesus' crucifixion, he is rejected and ostracised by all the disciples (except Peter) who recognise him. Even though his actions are sometimes forceful and violent, his place is among the powerless and the outcasts. He carries the signs of being cut off from, and distancing himself from fatherly love and divine compassion, "the scar from the blow his father had dealt him ... his slave's disk with God's crossed-out name" (p. 121). These signs are also associated with the revolt against authority which is a fundamental trait of his personality (Ueberschlag, 1989:138). Barabbas is indelibly marked as a parricide and apostate.

## **8. Alienation and the burden of existence**

Barabbas dies with Jesus, in that he experiences a loss of self after Jesus' crucifixion, but this is presented negatively, contrary to the Christian notion of rebirth as a new person. In Christian terms, identification with Jesus' death and resurrection corresponds to a process of self-denial and spiritual renewal (Rom. 6:1-11). Barabbas is forcibly linked to Jesus' death. This leads to alienation from his former identity and his previous way of life (Ueberschlag, 1989:132), while he is also repulsed by Jesus' perceived weakness and voluntary suffering.

Set free instead of Jesus, Barabbas is condemned to taking up the freedom that is thrust upon him. The question remains, how should he use this freedom? For Barabbas, the link between him and Jesus is an inescapable burden (Ueberschlag, 1989:124), which inevitably shapes the further course of his life, yet he distances himself from the Christian "brotherhood" and refuses to become a "serf" under Him: "In his relationship to that crucified man they called the son of God he was also himself, as always." (p. 41). The Christians' strange doctrine of neighbourly love is persistently set against his own solitary and negative existence. At times, this doctrine acquires the mysterious fascination of a kind of mantra to which he cannot relate, although he becomes aware of its power. The disciples' unforgiving attitude towards Barabbas turns it into a formula of exclusion. Only Peter seems to think that the doctrine does not only apply within the circle of believers.

Unable to return to his former way of life, and unwilling to become a follower of Jesus, Barabbas is caught in a freedom with no apparent meaning or purpose. This is a negative freedom, that offers no way out of his unbearable burden of solitude and awareness of mortality. He remains caught in the margins.

## 9. Freedom without God

Marginalised and alienated, Barabbas is not bound by the expectations or customs of any particular group. His actions are neither determined from the outside, by laws and rules, nor shaped by moral considerations based on particular values and beliefs. There is no stable reference point for the choices that he makes. His actions are impulsive responses to particular situations. As such, they are not underpinned by any particular agenda, and do not consistently move in a certain direction. In the context of the key events, Barabbas' actions seem strangely disconnected from what happens around him, in that they are primarily driven by his own impulses, and not by a rational understanding of the situation itself. As an outsider who does not serve any particular body of interests but only remains true to himself, Barabbas does not have to justify his choices in terms of any considerations imposed on him from the outside.

Barabbas' actions contrast sharply with the passivity of Jesus' disciples. While their submissiveness and acceptance of suffering reflect an otherworldly mentality, the horizon of Barabbas' actions is the here and now. Through his interventions, Barabbas implicitly rejects the disciples' reliance and dependence on the alleged Son of God. Such reliance and dependence do not correspond to Jesus' seeming absence from and powerlessness in the world He left behind. Twice, Barabbas accepts Jesus as Saviour of the oppressed, but neither his own experiences nor the events he witnesses provide a basis for translating such moments of belief into sustainable faith.

For Barabbas, God is at best a remote and disinterested figure who plays no role in his life. He neither expects nor asks divine forgiveness for his actions, and he does not seem to fear divine retribution. He lives in a world marked by the absence of God. In this world, the only alternative to surrender and passive resignation is self-reliantly and independently to claim and exercise the freedom that he is allowed. His solitary revolt against oppressive authority is futile, in that it does not achieve positive results, yet it confirms the freedom to say no to oppression. This leads him to commit cold-blooded murder and to cause the persecution of innocent Christians. Barabbas' revolt is explained in terms of his own subjective impulses, but never presented as a morally justifiable response to oppression. He is an immoralist who operates outside the framework of a value system or belief in an ultimate Lawgiver and Judge.

## 10. The absence of God

Barabbas views neither the crucified Jesus nor the absent Saviour as representative of repressive authority. Instead, he senses a unique relationship between himself and Jesus, a relationship which sets him apart from the disciples. At times, he sees himself as closer to Jesus than anybody else, while his need to identify with Jesus as his brother is quite unlike his relationship with any other person. However, the Jesus with whom he identifies in his final revolt is an apocalyptic figure, one who manifests his power and intervenes, one far removed from the powerless figure on the cross, and one quite unlike the absent Saviour for whom the girl with the harelip sacrifices her life. This Jesus is also an illusion born from Barabbas' solitude and despair. There is no suggestion in the narrative that Jesus ever reaches out to Barabbas in any way or even acknowledges him. Even though his influence shapes Barabbas' destiny, He remains distant and elusive both in life and after his death.

Thus, even on the occasions when Barabbas reaches out to Jesus in prayer, there is no sense of reciprocity, no affirmation of a presence beyond the gestures of prayer. Each movement in the direction of faith is followed by silence, while the object of his faith remains absent. Each outward manifestation of faith is followed by a contrary movement, towards a denial of God and a confirmation of unbelief. This is set against Shahak's persistent faith, which in turn is relativised when Barabbas' momentary belief in Jesus' intervention against oppression turns out to be based on a delusion. The narrative concentrates on visible events, austerely distilled to essentials, thereby highlighting that the events in themselves neither suggest the possibility of a transcendental presence, nor provide objective evidence of divine intervention at work.

However, negative affirmation is not presented as a final answer. Although Barabbas fails to find a basis for sustainable belief, the final sequence of events culminates in a scene that provides a sense both of closure and of unresolved ambiguity. Barabbas' final words express resignation and surrender to an enigmatic addressee. Unlike his prayer with Sahak, this is not contextualised as a mere gesture produced by a momentary impulse. These words provide an inconclusive ending to the narrative, which implicitly opens up the possibility of a divine presence. Barabbas' addressee is an implied presence who cannot be named or defined and who does not manifest itself. It resembles the hidden God, who also is unknowable, ineffable, beyond the grasp of language (Nikolaus, 1964:300-309). Perhaps Barabbas reaches out towards an en-

counter with the sacred, by pointing towards a mysterious Other which remains unnamed and unknowable, beyond circumscription within the directly experienced here and now (Otto, 1959:10, 31, 76). This Other might be identified with the Power that Lagerkvist, the “religious atheist” viewed as the indefinable source of the transcendental dimension in man, a Power which he saw as beyond religion (Ueberschlag, 1989:127-128). The narrative allows all these conjectures, but provides no basis for a definite answer (Riesenfeld, 1964:106).

Throughout, the narrator maintains the point of view of an objective spectator and records only what can be perceived from the outside, offering no hint about the addressee, nor any direct insight into Barabbas’ final thoughts and emotions. There is no indication as to whether Barabbas’ words are directed towards a specific person, or speculatively reach out towards a mere possibility, or simply express resignation to his fate. Even if his words indicate certainty that he will be heard by an unknowable Other, this possibility is relativised by prior events, which suggest that such certainty too might be based on a delusion. Through the ironical transposition of words which in the Gospels are attributed to the dying Jesus, the ending suggests that unresolved ambivalence, rather than outright unbelief is the obverse of faith, and presents the crucified Barabbas as a kind of reverse image of Jesus. Thus, Jesus, the powerless figure on the cross also becomes an implicit presence in Barabbas’ dying moments; as the Saviour of the oppressed, He remains absent, as in the suffering of Sahak and the girl with the harelip.

## **11. By way of conclusion**

The journey which was set in motion when Jesus died instead of Barabbas ends here. Barabbas does not acknowledge Him, yet there is an implicit possibility that he is at last reconciled with his brother Jesus, through being killed after trying to serve Him. For Barabbas, reconciliation does not come through acceptance of the redemptive power of Jesus’ suffering, but by sharing his fate. As such, it is the outcome of choices made on his own terms, albeit shaped by the resonance of his encounters with Jesus. Barabbas’ redemption, such as it is, is of his own making, achieved within the freedom thrust upon him when he was released instead of Jesus. He is redeemed from the burden of that freedom by losing it through his own freely chosen actions. In the beginning of the narrative, the connection with Jesus’ suffering is imposed on him from the outside; in the end, it is a consequence of his own choices.

If Barabbas' dying words hint at the presence of a hidden and unnameable Other, the events he witnesses, viewed from the outside, suggest that God is simply absent. Perhaps, his Otherness is such that He inevitably appears to be absent from this world; perhaps, hiddenness and absence are twin aspects of an elusive presence. Barabbas never finds an answer to the question of who Jesus was and of what his suffering meant. His final words, and the darkness which surrounds him at the end suggest that he finds peace by embracing these impenetrable mysteries.

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