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# Jesus uttering his last words and drawing his final breath: reflecting on Luke 23:46

## ABSTRACT

*The last words and final breath of any human being in the wake of death is a moment in time one should not underappreciate. The death of Jesus certainly falls into the category of a human being taking a final breath while uttering last words. If these statements are a fair assessment, then it is reasonable to reflect on the existential value and significance of Jesus' last words and final breath. To state the obvious, his death, as a central figure within Christianity, holds potential theological value and significance for how millions interpret their final moments. His death also possesses existential value for obvious reasons. There is thus a substantial theological burden on what his death means, the impact it has on those "believing" in him, and the consequences for all those who consider their death as dying "in him". This study does not overburden Jesus' last moments with theological concerns but aims to reflect on Luke 23:46 and parallels from an existential-anthropological point of view. It deliberately accentuates the mundane, "human" character of Jesus' "last" moments on this earth. The purpose of this reflection is to come to a deeper appreciation of his death, with the hope that it might mean something to someone struggling to breathe while dying.*

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Reflecting on the existential significance and value of last words and final breaths is introduced by way of two anecdotes. On the 24 July 2009, my father breathed his final breath; he was connected

to a ventilator, due to an acute illness that proved to be fatal. In combination with being on a ventilator, his condition did not allow any opportunity to utter any last words; this most probably remained cognitive constructs that were expressed subconsciously; the firing of millions of neurons within split seconds, accessing memories of his 71 years on this earth. On the 27 May 2015, a day before his first birthday, our son was declared brain dead and, as parents, we had to decide to switch off a “breathing machine” (ventilator); his final breath was, therefore “pre-determined” by an “off” switch on a machine, and he had no vocabulary or opportunity to utter anything. His final thoughts, if one dares to speculate, are characterised by the playful interaction of neurons.

These anecdotes reflect lived experiences that triggered my initial thoughts on uttering last words and breathing final breaths; thoughts that were resuscitated by the COVID-19 pandemic. The COVID-19 pandemic has amplified how vital and vulnerable our respiratory system is. It will be remembered as the pandemic that reminded humankind how existentially decisive the act of breathing is, and how vitally important a final breath is to allow the dying to utter their last words. The sound of last words, even if it is only a whisper, and the moving of a chest for one final breath, is so existentially fundamental that we dare not ignore it.<sup>1</sup> It demands a moment of reflection, the deep, empathic, and patient kind. This study is not primarily concerned about the “final” event described as “death” (but rather the process leading up to the event) nor resurrection. It is, however, an attempt to search for meaning and purpose by way of reflecting upon the last words and the final breath of a man from Nazareth, named Jesus – last words as constructed in Luke 23:46.<sup>2</sup>

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1 Varela *et al.* (1991:25) write that “[b]reathing is of the most simple, basic, ever-present bodily activities”. Edwards (2007:9) reminds the reader that “[i]t is a truism that the consciousness of death is what renders us specifically human”, and that a particular type of death can also “evoke significantly different responses”.

2 Rothhaar & Schimmoeller (2021:95) remark, in relation to patients diagnosed with amyotrophic lateral sclerosis (ALS), muscle fibre fibrillations and motor neuron loss, as well as slow and certain deterioration of mobility unto death, that “[o]ne potentially helpful paradigm, inspired in part by existentialism, is to see patients as fundamentally on a search for meaning”. Scheffler (2007:153-154) seems to suggest that there is a unique character of the meaning of Jesus’ death to be discovered and that the uncovering will possibly reveal a salvific meaning in Luke’s Gospel. He does, however, mention that “the positive or liberative meaning of Lucan Jesus’ suffering is not limited to his final suffering or death on the cross”.

To remain committed to this task, this study reflects, existentially, anthropologically<sup>3</sup> so,<sup>4</sup> on primarily three questions: What were the last words ascribed to Jesus as he drew on his final breath? What was the possible cause of death? What is the existential value and significance of these words? To appreciate the existential significance and value of a man's last words and final breath, who lived during a time foreign to ours, and whose final moments were characterised by "hanging on a cross", something, oddly enough, we have so little evidence of, demands an attitude of attentive reflection. Equally important, and far more complex, is the attempt to distance myself (cognitive perspective distancing)<sup>5</sup> from the constructed theologies that make up the Christian tradition. To be precise, to avoid rushing and brushing over these words and final breaths just to get to a "purposeful death" and "resurrection", as is conventionally constructed within the Christian faith.<sup>6</sup> This study intends to create the necessary cognitive space to acknowledge, appreciate, and affirm the death of Jesus, as reflected in his supposed last words. It is from this cognitive space that the study postulates that the existential value and significance of Jesus' last words and final breath, as captured in Luke 23:46, suffice to construct meaning and purpose post-COVID-19 pandemic in general, but more specifically, to aid human beings when the time arrives to listen to, or to utter last words with a final breath.

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- 3 Premawardhana (2020:40) writes that existential anthropology "plays up the limits of rationalism in the study of the human and the importance of attending to lived experience through detailed, radically empirical work. It accentuates the elusive idiosyncratic, and irreducible nature of life as lived." Zinevych (2018:145) states that, within existential philosophy, there are two ways concerning the human essence: the phenomenological tradition (Heidegger, Sartre, and others) and the non-phenomenological existential tradition (Marcel and Minkowski). The latter feeds into "existential reality", to which this study can relate.
- 4 How Jackson & Piette (2015:214-216) relate existential and anthropological resonates with this study when they state: "Human existence can be regarded as the terra incognita of anthropological thought" and "The theme of existence would appear to belong more to the realm of philosophy than anthropology. And yet existential anthropology cannot be reduced to merely an anthropology that is inspired by philosophical existentialism ... the question of existence in an anthropological manner, i.e. by observing and describing existence, studying man in each one of his instants of life? Existential anthropology is seen as a way of emphasizing the empirical over the theoretical, or an extension of existential philosophy. It is to "say something about human condition".
- 5 Powers & LaBar (2019:155) write that "[d]istancing refers to one of the two main reappraisal tactics for emotion regulation, the other being interpretation. Distancing involves simulating a new perspective to alter the psychological distance and emotional impact of a stimulus."
- 6 It is worth noting that an existential-anthropological approach or perspective is not *per se* "non-religious" or devoid of faith. Predko (2019:35) argues that religious faith is an existential event that "expands the space of personality, changes a person ... its meaningful core is its value-meaning content, which combines moral and ethical, intellectual (cognitive) and aesthetic principles".

## 2. WHAT WERE JESUS' FINAL WORDS?

There is no New Testament text, to my estimation, that encapsulates the potential last words formed from Jesus' final breath, as does Luke 23:46b. Where else are the final struggling moments expressed clearly than in the words καὶ φωνήσας φωνῇ μεγάλῃ ὁ Ἰησοῦς εἶπεν· πατέρα, εἰς χεῖράς σου παρατίθεμαι τὸ πνεῦμά μου. τοῦτο δὲ εἰπὼν ἐξέπνευσεν "In a loud voice, Jesus said: 'Father, in your hands I lay down my spirit', as he said this, he breathed out." The potential issue of "authenticity" is accentuated by the notion that those who were indeed present at Jesus' crucifixion did not write about it, not as far as we can determine. The utterance in Luke 23:46b most likely represents a third- or even a fourth-hand account of what might have been said during Jesus' crucifixion. This being the case, this study offers a close reading of Luke 23:46 for purposes of a more nuanced appropriation and appreciation of the constructed final words.<sup>7</sup> To this end, it is proposed that Luke 23:46 consists of primarily three "mental" units or conceptual nodes:<sup>8</sup>

### *Conceptual node 1 – inhale*

καὶ φωνήσας<sup>9</sup> φωνῇ μεγάλῃ "with a loud voice"

### *Conceptual node 2 – final words*

πατέρα, εἰς χεῖράς σου παρατίθεμαι τὸ πνεῦμά μου "Father, in your hands I place my spirit"

### *Conceptual node 3 – exhale*

τοῦτο δὲ εἰπὼν ἐξέπνευσεν "as he said this he breathed out"

The concept of expressing oneself with a loud voice, particularly relating to the final moments, is not limited to Luke 23:46. Similar expressions are found in other New Testament documents (see Matt. 27:46, 50; Mark 15:34;

7 I agree with Marshall (1978:874) that the peculiarities, differences, and novelties surrounding the closing words of Jesus can plausibly be explained as due to Lucan editing. Moreover, there seems to be consensus among commentators that Luke details only one cry by Jesus, whereas Mark has two. See Marshall (1978:875-876), Bock (1996:1861-1862), Nolland (1993:1158), Fitzmyer (1983:1519). Fitzmyer (1983:1519) postulates that both Mark and Luke 'omit' one way or another, stating that "Luke, having omitted the former, now supplies the content for the latter."

8 I would want to define and explain the reference to a conceptual node as a neurological significant and distinguishable point or event. It is to illuminate and amplify the notion that the "inhale", "final words", and "exhale" are events that register cognitively.

9 Bovon (2009:491) reminds the reader of the unanswered grammatical question as to whether φωνήσας refers to the previous or does it form part of the main section, without ascribing a present value to it.

Acts 7:57, 60).<sup>10</sup> There is no immediate and compelling reason, lexically, linguistically, and semantically speaking, to draw any distinction between these occurrences. The cognitive premise underlying all of them is a desire to express verbally, during one's final moments, at least from an existential point of view. On a narrative level, one could argue that this is an expression limited to a narrative invention and construction. Regardless, it should not discard an existential vantage point on the matter. Returning to the cognitive premise, the mental scope is determined by the concept of "a heightened sense of expression".<sup>11</sup> A type of expression not limited to Jesus, nor confined to the context of dying (see Mark 1:26; Luke 8:28; Acts 8:7; Rev. 5:12). Interestingly, in John 11:43, a heightened sense of expression is used in connection with the "raising" of Lazarus. These references illustrate the diverse and often vital scope of "raising one's voice to express verbally", irrespective of whether it is a narrative construct or not. Given the presumed dire circumstances surrounding crucifixions, any attempt to inhale enough oxygen to raise one's voice one last time is commendable. This in and of itself creates a deep sense of anticipation and expectation for the linguistic sounds that will follow. To this end, the Luke 23:46 account does not disappoint; the blood-fluid-filled oxygen was forced to the brain, with presumed prodigious difficulty, to mentally string a few essential phonemes together with the help of mentally stored "sounds" and "alphabetic characters",<sup>12</sup> to form words and to construct one final "coherent" thought ... *πάτερ, εἰς χεῖράς σου παρατίθεμαι τὸ πνεῦμά μου* "Father, in your hands I place my spirit." This is an appropriate, economical, and efficient way of translating the periodic element O<sub>2</sub> to linguistic values, a breath not wasted so to speak. However, the textual evidence shows that the "handing over of one's spirit" is not restricted to Jesus, and rightfully so. Linguistically, part of the utterance in Luke 23:46b can be traced back to Psalm 30:6, *εἰς χεῖράς σου παραθήσομαι τὸ πνεῦμά μου* "in your hands I lay down my spirit"<sup>13</sup> In the latter instance, the spirit

10 Marshall (1978:875-876) comments that *φωνὴ μεγάλη* is a Lucan invention (see Nolland, 1993:1158), whereas Plummer (2000:538) states that Matthew, Mark, and the Gospel of Peter mention this loud voice, which seems to suggest that he does not agree with Marshall. Fitzmyer (1983), Schweizer (1993), and Bovon (2009) do not explicitly state that this should be regarded as a Lucan invention.

11 A concept not foreign to the Greek version of the Old Testament (Gen. 3:39; Deut. 4:11; 1 Kgdms 4:5; 2 Kgdms 15:23; 3 Kgdms 8:55; 4 Kgdms 18:28; 2 Ch. 15:14; Esd. A 5:59; Esd. B 3:12; Es. 1:1e; Jdt. 7:23; Sus. 24; Bel. 18; 1 Mac. 2:19, and so on), neither to the Apocrypha (Inf. Gos. Thom 6:2; Acts Pil. 6:2; Christ's Descent into Hell 5:1).

12 Marshall (1978:875-876) disagrees that there was any need for an expression, let alone, elevated expression. He states that it was unusual for a man nearly dead by crucifixion to cry out in a loud voice.

13 Rahlfs (1979:Ps. 30:6a).

is laid down in the hands of κύριε ὁ θεὸς τῆς ἀληθείας “Kyrios, the *Theos* of truth”.<sup>14</sup> Cognitively, the concept of “handing over one’s spirit” without referencing the body parts (in this instance, hands) as recipients of such a “spirit” is found in Acts 7:59 (κύριε Ἰησοῦ, δέξαι τὸ πνεῦμά μου “Kyrios Jesus, receive my spirit”)<sup>15</sup> and *Vita Adam et Evae*, line 42.19 (Θεὲ τῶν ἀπάντων, δέξαι τὸ πνεῦμά μου “*Theos* of all, receive my spirit”).<sup>16</sup> In essence and principle, these utterances convey a similar concept, that of “handing over one’s spirit”. They do, however, reveal slight variations such as:<sup>17</sup>

Recipients of the spirit:

- Πάτερ “Father” and εἰς χεῖράς “hands” (Luke 23:46).
- κύριε ὁ θεὸς τῆς ἀληθείας “Kyrios, the *Theos* of truth” (Ps. 30:6).
- κύριε Ἰησοῦ “Kyrios, Jesus” (Acts 7:59).
- Θεὲ τῶν ἀπάντων “*Theos* of all” (*Vita Adam et Evae*).

Subjects handing over their spirit:

- ὁ Ἰησοῦς (Luke 23:46).
- Psalmist (Ps. 30:6).
- Στέφανος (Acts 7:59).
- Εὔα (*Vita Adam et Evae*).

In Luke 23:46, Jesus places his spirit in the hands of his “father”, while the Psalmist places his in the hands of Kyrios the *Theos* of truth. Eve, on the one hand, requests the *Theos* of all to receive her spirit, whereas Stephen directs his request to Kyrios Jesus, on the other hand. The earliest of these accounts is found in Psalm 30:1,<sup>18</sup> followed by *Vita Adam et Evae* (section 42, line 19). If the Psalm 30:1 and *Vita Adam et Evae* accounts are indeed accepted as revealing an earlier stratum of this concept, then a reasonable inference is that Luke-Acts follows through on both conceptual trends; one is the “placing of a spirit in the hands” of either the “father” (Luke 23:46) or Kyrios as the “true” *Theos* (Ps. 30:6; see *Vita Adam et Evae*), and the other is a request to receive a spirit directed at Kyrios as in Jesus (Acts 7:59). Fundamentally, these occurrences agree on the subject matter, that of the “handing over

14 In Luke 23:46b, the word παρατίθημι is used in its present, indicative, middle form, while Psalm 30:6a reads παραθήσομαι (the future, indicative, middle form of παρατίθημι).

15 The aorist, imperative, middle form of δέχομαι “replaces” the term “παρατίθημι”.

16 The same expression is found in *Narratio Adam et Evae* (line 42.28).

17 On this matter, see the views of Nolland (1993:1158) and Marshall (1978:875-876).

18 Supported by text witnesses such as Codex Alexandrinus, Sinaiticus, and Vaticanus, among many others.

of a spirit", but they offer three possibilities when it comes to the recipient of a spirit. The one possibility is a more abstract, transcendental recipient referred to as Θεὸς τῶν ἀπάντων "*Theos* over all" or κύριε ὁ θεὸς τῆς ἀληθείας "*Kyrios* the *Theos* of truth". A second possibility is the elevated, authoritarian *Kyrios* Jesus, and finally, the most "familial" one of the three, *πάτερ*. These variations are significant and should not simply be discarded as meaningless, inconsequential, and artificial. Dissimilar addressees are to be expected if they all represent supposed utterances during the final moments of human life. It does reveal a sense of authenticity, which inherently has the potential to produce "creative" variety. The question is whether *πάτερ, εἰς χεῖράς σου παρατίθεται τὸ πνεῦμά μου* consists of enough distinguishing cognitive elements to argue for the "actuality" of this utterance. This prompts the question: What is considered to be "adequate" criteria to determine if and when an utterance is to be considered authentic or not? One argument is that, if a similar or same utterance pre-dates, in this case, Luke 23:46b, it cannot be classified as authentic and should be ascribed to either an oral or written tradition. The plausibility of such, in this instance, is annexed by the fact that both Luke 23:46 and Acts 7:59 can be traced back to an earlier tradition, as is shown above. A counterargument is that repetition does not necessarily attest to something being inauthentic; to the contrary, the value placed on its meaning and significance might be the cause of a subject replicating a particular idea, concept, or words.<sup>19</sup> Be it as it may, whether Jesus "genuinely" uttered these words, or whether it was borrowed from mental spaces shaped and informed by texts and traditions is arbitrary. To attribute an event of the distant past as "real" is a futile exercise and flawed by design; futile because the perception of reality is always subjective, thus determined by the fluid state of existential contexts and experiences; it is, therefore, always subjectively constructed and subsequently, ever evolving. Flawed, in this sense that subjectively that which it aims to define is objectified, which simultaneously subverts its subjective state. The point is that "reality" is layered, four-dimensional, concurrently fluid and static, both subjective and objective. The utterance *πάτερ, εἰς χεῖράς σου παρατίθεται τὸ πνεῦμά μου* is as real as the words imprinted on papyri 75, codex

19 The origin and or "originality" of supposed last words does not determine their value; the value lies in the assertion that it is considered "last" words. I agree with Plummer's (2000:538) assertion that "[i]t is unnecessary to suppose that Lk. has here taken the words of Ps. xxxi. 6 and attributed them to Jesus, in order to express His submissive trust in God at the moment of death". It is quite possible that Jesus knew the Psalm and that such a thought could occur to him. I also concur with Schweizer (1993:240) when he writes that "und es ist nicht der Ruf der Verlassenheit, sondern des glaubenden Vertrauens"; see Grundmann (1961:435) and Fitzmyer (1983:1519). This being stated, nearly all commentators recognise that the words uttered by Jesus can be ascribed to Psalm 30:6<sup>LXX</sup>. See Witherington III (2019:636), Marshall (1978:875-876), Bovon (2009:491), Plummer (2000:538), Nolland (1993:1158), Fitzmyer (1983:1519), Bock (1996:1861-1862), and Schweizer (1993:240).

Sinaiticus and Vaticanus. The “authenticity” of the words is not in question; it does not determine the depth of their value and the height of their significance. This study accepts that the relatable nature of the utterance in Luke 23:46b offers sufficient credibility as the last, uttered words of a dying Jesus. It is, therefore, if nothing else, a textual and conceptual reality.<sup>20</sup>

The third and final part of Luke 23:46, τοῦτο δὲ εἰπὼν ἐξέπνευσεν “as he said this he breathed out” is a unique, and one might add, appropriate addition to the “raising one’s voice”, “handing over one’s spirit” sequence. The final sequence is a logical one; the act of inhaling, drawing one’s final breath to construct and utter the last words, subsequently results in exhaling as the final words are breathed. There is thus no pertinent, compelling reason why *πάτερ, εἰς χεῖράς σου παρατίθεμαι τὸ πνεῦμά* should not be considered a reasonable answer to the question: What were the last words spoken by Jesus?

### 3. POSSIBLE CAUSE OF DEATH

Death being what death is, there is no reason to go into any detail, other than to say that Edwards (2007:7) makes a helpful remark that “death itself functions as a metaphor – for religious initiations, for instance, or poetic inspiration”. It is an existential event with universal applicability and varying in its cases. Ancient Rome is no different. Carrol (2006:151-178) categorises the causes of death as “death about women in particular”, “murder and suicide”, “accidental deaths”, “casualties of war”, “capital punishment”, among others. As for death by crucifixion, an English term expressing a very gruesome form of capital punishment.<sup>21</sup> Cook (2019:1-48, 418-419) states in no uncertain terms that crucifixion was a miserable death. He refers to Cicero calling it a *crudelissim taeterrimumque supplicium* (cruel and terrifying penalty).<sup>22</sup> Scholars specialising in crucifixion in antiquity disagree on the specifics when it comes to the crucifixion of Jesus, but none would dispute the fact that Jesus was crucified.<sup>23</sup> One such disputed point is the suspension of Jesus *post-* and/

20 In the words of Klein (2006:713), “Lk hat den Abschnitt sprachlich weitgehend selbst gestaltet”.

21 He, Chapman (2008:2-32) and Samuelsson (2013) have acknowledged the complexity when it comes to the Greek, Latin, Aramaic, and Hebrew terminology of “crucifixion” or “things suspended”, and defining crucifixion. Both Samuelsson (2013) and Cook (2019:51-416) regard the σταυρος so important that they devoted nearly their entire respective studies to terms used when reference is made to this concept.

22 Kyle (1998:53) confirms that Rome punished criminals of low status with aggravated or ultimate punishments (*summa supplicia*), which included crucifixion.

23 In the words of Cook (2019:452), “The visual evidence, the literary and historical texts, and the inscriptions provide the reader with essential resources for understanding the scandal of the cross”.



or *ante-mortem*.<sup>24</sup> Samuelsson (2013:250) remarks that, when it comes to the expiration of Jesus, he was alive while suspended and, therefore, it would have been possible for Jesus to speak while being on the σταυρός “cross”. Samuelsson points out that, for the gospel accounts, there is no doubt that Jesus was suspended *ante-mortem*, and by implication, it was an execution. He, however, goes on to say that no parallel for a death cry at the point of death, while suspended, has been found in his extensive investigation. Samuelsson (2013:258) concludes that, according to the gospels, Jesus is executed by a suspension punishment (crucifixion) and that a σταυρός was carried and that Jesus was attached to a σταυρός, but it is uncertain how. Chapman (2008:33), in turn, remarks that *post-mortem* suspension is endorsed in the Masoretic Text, but that such suspension is limited to a single day (see Deut. 21:22-23). He goes on to argue that, for the New Testament texts accounting for this type of punishment (suspension on a cross) to have been read favourably by contemporaries, it is doubtful that these descriptions could be significantly at odds with the general practice of crucifixion (Chapman 2008:258). Cook (2019:473-474) remains undecided and reserves any final judgement on whether Jesus was suspended *post-* or *ante-mortem*. This study stands with the gospel accounts that Jesus was suspended on a σταυρός *ante-mortem* where he took his final breath and uttered his last words.

Leading up to his crucifixion, Jesus appeared before a Jewish council, consisting of high priests, chief priests, elders, and scribes, who found him guilty of blasphemy deserving of death (Mark 14:64; Matt. 26:65-66; implied in Luke 22:71). The issue they had with Jesus is that he claimed to be the *ὁ υἱὸς τοῦ θεοῦ, ὁ χριστὸς* “the son of *Theos*, the Christ” (Luke 22:66-71), *ὁ χριστὸς ὁ υἱὸς τοῦ εὐλογητοῦ* “the Christ, the son of the blessed one” (Mark 14:53-65), *ὁ χριστὸς ὁ υἱὸς τοῦ θεοῦ* “the Christ, the son of *Theos*” (Matt. 26:57-68). This infuriated the high priests, with some claiming that this is punishable by death. The Jewish council did not have the necessary authority to put someone to death and required authorisation from the Roman government (John 18:31). This is where the narrative of the fourth gospel plays a key role; it is narrated that neither Annas nor Caiaphas wanted to rule on the matter and that this is the reason why the case appeared before Roman rulers, by name Pontius Pilate and Herod. The accusation against Jesus is inferred from the question posed by Pontius Pilate, *σὺ εἶ ὁ βασιλεὺς τῶν Ἰουδαίων* “Are you the king of the Judeans?” (John 19:33; Matt. 26:11; Mark 15:2; Luke 23:2-3), even though it is written that Pilate did not find a case against Jesus; even Herod, it is claimed, did not think Jesus deserved the death penalty (Luke 23:15). It is extrapolated that this accusation stuck, which ultimately got Jesus crucified;

24 Both Cook (2019) and Samuelsson (2013) are cognisant of the *post-mortem*, *ante-mortem* issues throughout their respective investigations.

he claimed to be ὁ βασιλεὺς τῶν Ἰουδαίων (John 19:3). This posed a threat to the rule of the Roman emperor, and if it is found to be the case, one would be guilty of high treason. To conjure up such an indictment that Jesus subverted Roman rule is clearly expressed in the words τοῦτον εὗραμεν διαστρέφοντα τὸ ἔθνος ἡμῶν καὶ κωλύοντα φόρους Καίσαρι διδόναι καὶ λέγοντα ἑαυτὸν χριστὸν βασιλέα εἶναι “we (the Jewish council) found that he perverted our nation and hinder them to pay taxes to the emperor and said himself he is the Messiah, a king.” (Luke 23:2). There is no mention of “son of God”, “destroying the temple and rebuilding it in three days”. They had to convince the Roman authorities that Jesus presented a significant threat to the empire, by conjuring “false” allegations against him, claiming to be a king of the Jews.

From a purely medical point of view, the evidence for crucifixion is scarce, not to mention the specific crucifixion of Jesus. The shortage of archaeological evidence<sup>25</sup> did not hinder medical professionals from speculating as to what caused the death of someone crucified. In a study conducted by Maslen and Mitchell (2006:186),<sup>26</sup> a range of possible causes of death are suggested: from “cardiac rapture”, “acidosis”, and “pulmonary embolism” to “voluntary surrender of life”.<sup>27</sup> Byard (2016:202-208) formulates it as follows:

After days on the cross, the most likely cause of death probably involves a combination of most of the above disturbances with multiorgan failure from respiratory compromise, acute renal failure with hyperkalemia, blood loss, hypotension, and metabolic acidosis. This may also be exacerbated by sepsis ... Trauma may also have contributed to the outcome if scourging had fractured ribs and the displaced ends had torn the pleura and lungs resulting in a pneumothorax.

Byard (2016:208) adds that different techniques have been reported as a “*coup de grace*” to hasten death. These included:

fracturing the lower leg bones (crurifragium) to interfere with lifting of the body to breathe, thrusting a javelin into the right side of the chest toward the right atrium, blows to the front of the chest, and lighting a fire

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- 25 Samuelsson (2013:297) problematises the discovery of a pierced heel-bone in Giv'at Ha-Mivtar. He makes a compelling case that the picture is blurred because the heel-bone pierced only confirms a traditional view of the execution of Jesus. He writes: “but there was no punishment called ‘crucifixion’ until the time when the owner of the heel-bone died, but a whole spectrum of various forms of spontaneously occurring suspension punishments, which all shared the basic terminology”, and that “[t]he heel-bone is only evidence that *one* male in the mid- to late-20s somehow had *one* of his heels pierced by a nail during the first century C.E.”
- 26 A table of medical professionals and their hypothesis for the cause of Jesus’ death, or crucifixion, in general, is listed.
- 27 See also Cook (2019:430-435).

beneath the cross to cause the victim to inhale carbon monoxide. Sharp blows to the chest causing death may represent one of the earliest descriptions of commotio cordis.

It is reasonable to surmise that Jesus was crucified because the Jewish council found it to be blasphemous that Jesus presumably claimed to be the “Messiah, the son of God”. This compelled them to convince Roman authorities to find him guilty of “high treason”, punishable by death, crucifixion to be precise. The presumed “crime” was inscribed as INRI (Iēsus Nazarēnus, Rēx Iūdaeōrum) at his crucifixion, which caused acute renal failure, hyperkalaemia, metabolic acidosis, and ultimately his death. The “accuracy” and “preciseness” of the cause of death do not have a direct impact on the valuing of his final words with his last breath. It does at worst create a credible scenario of the excruciating suffering accompanied by crucifixion.

#### 4. THE VALUE AND SIGNIFICANCE OF JESUS’ LAST WORDS

To reiterate, this study aims to reflect on the existential value of Jesus’ last words from an existential-anthropological point of view, irrespective of the value type, for example, theological, religious, spiritual, ethical, and so on. The study cautions against overburdening “last words” with overtly transcendence. The theory is that human beings, especially those who are literally struggling to breathe, can easily relate to, and identify with the essence of what is expressed in Luke 23:46, purely because of the universal act of breathing and the necessity for oxygen; death is always accompanied by a final breath, and the plausibility of expressing (inward or outward) if and when one takes a final breath. Such an identification does not require complex hermeneutical processes to reach an “appropriate” theological sound interpretation, nor does it demand for anyone to have experienced crucifixion. To be clear, a theological frame of reference is not a prerequisite for a reader of Luke 23:46 to identify with, and to be consoled by the words uttered. Instinctively, the most obvious value and significance of Jesus’ last words when he drew his final breath is the fact that human beings, notwithstanding their religious convictions, if at all, can relate to Jesus struggling to find enough oxygen to utter his final words. The existential nature of such an event, in my opinion, is the determining factor: the intersection of uttering last words while drawing one final breath.

##### 4.1 Inhaling

If there was a concept that reverberated throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, it was “isolation”. Whether it was due to the onset of COVID-19 symptoms or because of lockdown regulations. The term “isolation” has become

synonymous with the COVID-19 pandemic, among many other illnesses, be it physical or mental. One possible spin-off of being isolated is that it encourages one to reflect inward, but equally so, it creates a desire to express outwardly, especially when the outcome of such isolation results in taking one's final breath. To this end, crucifixion can be classified as paradoxical in nature. As it is a public spectacle of suffocating until death,<sup>28</sup> it stirs the urgency of the individual self to inhale and express. In addition to this, hanging from a cross in public, irrespective of being in the company of other "cross hangers", is an isolating experience. The adverse effect of crucifixion as a type of public execution is isolation. The "public" spectacle of human beings struggling to breathe is subverted by the very nature of crucifixion, as it inspires the individual to reflect inwards, focus on breathing, and maximise oxygen intake with every single breath. As a public performance to showcase "power over" human bodies, crucifixion does not account for the consequences when depriving human beings of something as essential as oxygen.<sup>29</sup> It fails to calculate the extent to which such a human being will go to mobilise all living cells and molecules to obtain oxygen. This human reality relativises the shameful "public" effect of crucifixion,<sup>30</sup> as the body harnesses all possible energy to isolate, reflect, focus, and breathe.<sup>31</sup> To this end, the adverse effect of the COVID-19 pandemic, especially the act of isolation, is that of "holding one's breath" as a symptom of uncertainty, anticipation, and anxiety. Plainly speaking, it is a matter of "struggling to breathe", "exercising the lungs", "monitoring blood-oxygen levels", and for many drawing that final breath and dying. As "victims" of the COVID-19 pandemic, we most certainly cannot identify with crucifixion, but our universal, common need and desire for oxygen create the potential to make certain cognitive connections. It is, therefore, reasonable and credible for anyone who suffered from COVID-19, but not limited to, to inhale with Jesus, for the purpose of uttering their last words. The expression *φωνήσας φωνῇ μεγάλῃ* "he uttered with a loud voice" reveals a desire to form, formulate, and grumble a few last words. It is the harnessing of enough oxygen (inhaling) to express and to do so explicitly.

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28 Kyle (1998:53, 169) writes that "[t]he victim's lasting agony and death provided a terrifying and exemplary public spectacle".

29 Inferred from Joseph and Seneca's observation, the purpose of crucifixion was to humiliate through sublime torture.

30 Edwards (2007:144) writes that, for Roman writers, dying is not a private act, but should take place in front of an audience.

31 The severity of the torture and the various methods of crucifixion can be interpreted as a way of subverting attempts to stay alive.

## 4.2 The final words

Final words from any human being, irrespective of origin, orientation, or conviction, are by virtue significant and of value for fellow human beings. They produce an existential event with relatable potential and “meaning-forming” components that can only be characterised as credible. Their existential nature and universal appeal allow for the cognition of memory-forming to take effect with hardly any effort. The question as to whether Jesus’ final words at his crucifixion in a Graeco-Roman context are of existential value for human beings, in general, remains relevant. An equally important question is whether the value of Jesus’ crucifixion should by default be limited to the Christian tradition. I accept that it is artificial not to account for the religious and/or theological relevance of what clearly reveals elements of such. I am not discarding it, nor am I ignoring it. My appeal, however, is not to overreach, overburden, and overshadow what I would want to refer to as a sacred moment with projected theological explicit interpretations and prescribed Christian doctrine. I would also want to caution against the evaluation of this utterance in light of a resurrection account, as is commonplace in the Christian tradition. The objective of the reflections contained in this article is to acknowledge, appreciate, and evaluate the last words of a dying man, in an attempt to expand on its “market relevance” and increase its “market value” beyond a Christian tradition. My conviction is obvious: people, in general, can benefit from Jesus’ last words as he draws his final breath.<sup>32</sup>

As the study embarks on a deeper reflection of Jesus’ final words (*πάτερ, εἰς χεῖράς σου παρατίθειμαι τὸ πνευμά μου*), it identifies and focuses on three cognitive nodes (referent, indirect-referent, and substance). The first is the referent, *πάτερ*; of all the possible recipients and terms to reference such, Luke’s Jesus prefers the more personal, familial reference *πάτερ*, a reference not at all uncommon, but compared to similar utterances, this reference is unique.<sup>33</sup> It does reveal how the Lucan Jesus wants to frame his last words.<sup>34</sup> The Lucan

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32 Scheffler’s (2014:1-8) “positive psychological” approach to Luke’s Gospel is insightful. His assertion that Luke’s Gospel can be regarded as providing rudimentary notions for this approach is compelling. The compassion and “altruistic” empathy of Jesus give it its universal appeal. I agree with Scheffler (2014:7) when he writes that “Luke’s Gospel can be regarded as a religious text which, if properly reflected upon – also with the aid of positive psychology – has much to contribute to the motivation and fostering of thoughts, virtues and feelings that make for worthwhile living, as it has indeed to some extent done through 2000 years of Christianity”.

33 According to Bovon (2009:491), the author prefers the vocative form of *πατήρ* to accentuate the relationship between the one praying and his God.

34 Drawing a distinction between the Lucan Jesus and the historical one is immaterial insofar as it pertains to the aim of this investigation, to determine and appreciate the existential value and significance of his supposed last words. The “true” final words of a historical Jesus are impossible to determine, but even if one could, it will not necessarily diminish the value of a

Jesus could have called upon his *Theos*, by explicitly using the term θεός; he could have referred to him as the *Kyrios*, among many other possibilities, but he kept it close, familial, and personal. It does reveal the Lucan preference for a more “intimate” relational character of Jesus’ connection with his *Theos*.<sup>35</sup> It is fair to state that not all individuals who experience “last words and final breaths” do so in relation to, or in connection with a divine entity of any kind. This also applies to calling to mind a father and/or mother, for various and diverse reasons. But irrespective of this being the case, the use of the term πᾶτερ, and its potential association with a divine entity, does not suffice to alienate a human subject to lend an ear and allow the words that will follow to create cognitive existential possibilities. Intuitively, it is the centripetal force of the intimate, vulnerable state of the crucified one that draws one close. It allows a reader or listener to conceptually entertain the idea that, during the utterance of last words, as one draws a final breath, human beings call to mind what to them is dear, personal, and intimate, which in some instance, as it is here, might include a divine referent.

The second node, the indirect reference, εἰς χεῖράς σου “in your hands”,<sup>36</sup> assures a much wider existential reach, for primarily two reasons: the collective human memory of what these extraordinary limbs have done over millennia is called to mind, and the rich symbolism that hands have to offer. It is no surprise that hands have become such a powerful symbol of the COVID-19 pandemic, among many other uses, for what not to do and for the things that should be done. It encapsulates a dichotomy. On the one hand, it could potentially be the carrier of all kinds of viruses and spreaders of a terrible disease; therefore, it should be sanitised regularly. On the other hand, it nurtures, cares, and is most probably the only body part that will comfort someone during the final moments of being alive. There are undoubtedly, with obvious exceptions, many who will be able to relate to the safety, caring,

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version of Jesus, aka the Lucan Jesus, claiming last words with a final breath. The question Fowl (2021:106) poses as he considers the perspectives of N.T. Wright in his treatment of gospels in relation to the historical Jesus, is helpful in this instance. He writes that Wright reconstructs a 1<sup>st</sup>-century mindset as a plausible account of how the allusive, interpretative invocations of Old Testament prophetic themes in relation to Jesus’ death can be held together as an intelligible force to an account of Jesus’ death. He goes on to say that Wright further asserts that this was Jesus’ own mindset. Fowl poses the question: What historical reasons are there for locating this mindset within Jesus rather than, for example, Matthew?

35 Cilliers & Retief (2006:35) confirm that the concept that disease was caused and controlled by the gods was generally accepted.

36 It is accepted that the use of χεῖράς “hands” in the literary context of Luke, especially with reference to Luke 23:46, is metaphorical. This being said, one cannot rule out and neglect the fact that the multiple experiences of literal “hands”, both ancient and modern, create the basis for “hands” in the metaphorical sense.

nurturing, loving, and embracing abilities that are hands. This emphasis is in no way intended to subvert the devastating and brutal acts committed by the same hands, but in the context of Jesus' last words, the trust in capable and comforting hands is not only amplified but also justified. For hands to find their way into the last words of Jesus, is hardly surprising; it speaks of honour, respect, ability, and caring, among many other things. Where else would Jesus want to lay down his spirit, than in the fine-motor capabilities of hands, and by implication divine hands.

The third and final node is the substance of what constitutes a human life; the *πνεῦμα*, as a concept, mentally stimulates the transcendent nature of the human self. Such a cognition of the "spiritual" self by someone often referred to as the "son of a human being" does have a universal appeal to it; it possesses the potential to extend beyond the Christian frame of conceptual reference. Notwithstanding, this concept is introduced as the last words of the essential self.

#### 4.2.1 The *πνεῦμα* as concept in Luke<sup>37</sup>

The concept *πνεῦμα* incorporates a sense of identity and expresses something essential to what constitutes life. To place one's spirit in the hands of someone or something does offer a great deal of meaning and comfort; it is a *πνεῦμα* of the human self, placed in the hands of what the Lucan Jesus refers to as *πατήρ*. The introduction of the *πνεῦμα* concept raises the question as to whether the "placing" of one's spirit signifies the fulfilment of a "divine" task, or if it denotes a human life that has come to an end. To state it differently, does a more nuanced understanding of the *πνεῦμα* concept in Luke reveal different cognitions of the concept? To this end, it seems reasonable to infer that the author draws a distinction between the *πνεύματος ἁγίου*<sup>38</sup> and *πνεῦμα* of the evil or demonic kind.<sup>39</sup> What follows under 4.2.1.1 and 4.2.1.2 is a deeper reflection on the *πνεύματος ἁγίου*.

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37 Friedrich & Kittel (1969:401-402) postulate and argue that Luke presents a new understanding of the *pneuma* and that the notion of "des göttlichen Geistes" is used three times more in Luke compared to Mark. Jesus is, therefore, not the *Pneumatiker*, but the lord of the *pneuma*. Kittel & Friedrich (1969:403) further assert that, for Luke, the *πνευμα* is a testimony to the creative power of God, and that "als Geistgeborene ist Jesus von Anfang an Besitzer des Geistes, nicht nur sein Objekt wie der Pneumatiker". According to Arndt *et al.* (2000:832-833), *πνευμα* is that which animates or gives life to the body, *breath*, (*life*-)spirit and that it is a source and seat of insight, feeling, and will, as the representative part of a human inner life. Louw & Nida (1996:140-141) make a case that *πνεύματα, τος* is a title for the third person of the Trinity, literally "spirit" – Spirit, Spirit of God, Holy Spirit. See Liddell (1996:649).

38 See Luke 1:15, 17, 35, 41, 67; 2:25, 26; 3:16, 22; 10:21; 11:13; 12:10, 12.

39 See Luke 4:33, 36; 6:18; 7:21; 8:3, 29; 9:39, 42; 10:20; 11:24, 26; 13:11.

#### 4.2.1.1 πνεῦμα constituting ζωή

The reference to πνεῦμα in Luke 8:55 is part of the “bringing back to life” narrative of a young girl. The question is whether the cognition of the πνεῦμα concept in this context is repeated in Luke 23:46. Such a comparison does, however, produce a possible conundrum. If one would argue that οὐ γὰρ ἀπέθανεν ἀλλὰ καθεύδει “she is not dead but sleeping” (Luke 8:52) as that the little girl was merely in an unconscious state (the spirit leaving her; a near-death experience if you will), and that ἐπέστρεψεν τὸ πνεῦμα αὐτῆς “he returned her spirit” (Luke 8:55) was her regaining consciousness, then the same can be said for Jesus in Luke 23:46. There is, however, a significant difference in that, in the case of Jesus, the tradition constructed the narrative in such a way as to ensure that Jesus was in a state of death for at least three days, for the purpose of declaring him *mortuus*. Without the unequivocal certainty of his death, a resurrection narrative would have been futile. Be it as it may, it does not alter the concept that the πνεῦμα is understood to contain elements that constitute life, a cognitive mixture of the concepts ζωή (Luke 10:25; 12:15; 16:25; 18:18; 18:30) and ψυχή (Luke 10:27; 12:19, 20, 22, 23; 14:26; 17:33; 21:19), as illustrated in Genesis 2:7<sup>lx</sup>. This postulation confirms the interchangeable cognitive possibilities of ζωή and ψυχή, the conceptual blending between these “realities” is made possible by the idea of a πνεῦμα. It does remain uncertain whether the term πνεῦμα holds conceptual characteristics that can be blended with ζωή and ψυχή. To put it plainly, is the πνεῦμα concept merely a cognitive bridge between ζωή and ψυχή or does it possess independent qualities that can be blended with ζωή and ψυχή? Do ζωή and ψυχή constitute the πνεῦμα concept or is there more to it?

#### 4.2.1.2 πνεῦμα filled and led

The “womb” narratives significantly contribute to a more nuanced understanding of the πνεῦμα concept within Lucan thought. These narratives suggest that John the Baptist will be filled with the πνεύματος ἁγίου even before his birth (Luke 1:15). Not only would he have been filled with the spirit, but he was also equipped with the spirit and power of Elijah (Luke 1:18). In the case of Jesus’ foetus, the πνεῦμα ἁγίον will come upon Mary, and the power of the “most high” will overshadow her. It is because of the presence of the “most high” that this foetus will be called υἱὸς θεοῦ (Luke 1:35). In Luke 2:25-27, we are introduced to Simeon, who lived in Jerusalem, and who also had the πνεῦμα ἁγίον rested upon him. The same πνεῦμα ἁγίον which revealed to him that he will see the χριστὸν κυρίου “the Messiah of *Kyrios*” before he dies. He was then led into the temple by the same spirit before he blessed the two children, Jesus and John. It is, therefore, no surprise that Jesus will be the one who baptised ἐν πνεύματι ἁγίῳ καὶ πυρὶ “with the spirit and fire”. The ability to be filled by a πνεῦμα does not end here, even after Jesus’ baptism, τὸ πνεῦμα τὸ ἁγίον “came upon him in



bodily form like a dove” (Luke 3:22). He was again filled with the *πνεῦμα ἅγιον* and moved from the Jordan into the desert accompanied *ἐν τῷ πνεύματι* (Luke 4:1). This “fulfilment quality” of the *πνεῦμα ἅγιον* gave Jesus the ability to return to Galilee (Luke 4:14). As he arrived in Nazareth, he went into the Synagogue, where an Isaiah scroll was handed to him, and he read from Isaiah 61. What is of particular interest is Isaiah 61:1, *πνεῦμα κυρίου ἐπ’ ἐμέ* “the spirit of *kyrios* is upon me”; the author of Luke-Acts has Jesus read and interpret Isaiah 61:1 as a reference to himself. This is to “authenticate” and “legitimise” the event reported in Luke 4:1; a prophecy foretold by none other than the great prophet Isaiah, and read by Jesus, who would become the Messiah. One possible postulation inferred from these narratives is that the “fulfilment” quality of the *πνεῦμα ἅγιον* signifies something of identity, ability, role, function, and vocation for both John and Jesus. In the case of John, it happened before his birth, while with Jesus it was publicised at his baptism when the *πνεῦμα ἅγιον* came upon him in the form of a dove. The spirit “coming upon” Jesus publicly constitutes Jesus’ association with the divine and the role he had to fulfil. This is a perfect illustration of the rich diversity, reach, and complexity of the *πνεῦμα* concept with a renewed appeal to ask the question as to whether the “placing of one’s spirit” should be interpreted as the finalisation of a “divine” role, tasks, and/or function; the essence of that which constitutes life,<sup>40</sup> or both of these possibilities, as they can and should not be separated. To be realistic, it is almost impossible to determine with absolute certainty what the author of Luke conceptualised by the terms *πνεῦμα* or *πνεῦμα ἅγιον*, and whether he used these terms interchangeably and consistently throughout the narrative. I would want to postulate that the author drew a distinction between *πνεῦμα ἅγιον* (“divine” authority and ability), *πνεῦμα* (a term encapsulating the essence of life), and Jesus as the son of man. In addition to this postulation, I further propose that *πνεῦμα* encapsulates the essence of Jesus’ personhood, the Lucan DNA of what constituted Jesus of Nazareth, the son of Mary and Joseph. To this end, the *πνεῦμα* place in the hands of the *πάτερ* in Luke 23:46, from the perspective of the Lucan Jesus, is the term that captures the culmination of Jesus as a living and working person, who is about to die.

### 4.3 Exhale

The words *τοῦτο δὲ εἰπὼν ἐξέπνευσεν* “with this being said, he breathed out” is the linguistic remnants of the moment when, for one last time, Jesus’ lungs transformed  $O_2$  into carbon dioxide,  $CO_2$ ; it captures the final moments of a dying man. One could rightfully argue that the phonemes of this phrase are merely linguistic representations of a chemical process of someone who once was, but it is so much more than that. It is the downward movement of organs

40 For Bovon (2009:491), the *πνευμα* does not only designate a part of a person, but it is the breath of life that makes up the entire person.

that harnessed all the possibilities and potentialities oxygen had to offer; it forced oxygen pockets of blood to the mind of a dying man to produce the grand finale of billions of neurons firing while gathering each phoneme to express and to do it meaningfully. Exhaling should, therefore, never be isolated from inhaling and the forming of final words. It is the intersection of inhaling and exhaling while formulating phonemes that has value for the self and the other. Inhaling and exhaling form a coherent whole that constitutes the act of breathing, living, and dying. The inhaling, forming and uttering words, and then exhaling is the universal appeal of Luke 23:46. It requires split seconds for any human being to affirm that which we take for granted every second of every day; inhaling and exhaling as accentuated by the COVID-19 pandemic – in short, breathing. To be more precise, anyone who has borne witness to a final chest movement, with or without any coherent linguistic sounds, will not find it difficult to relate to Jesus' lungs bowing out one last time.

## 5. CONCLUSION

This article set out to offer a close reading of Luke 23:46 from an existential-anthropological perspective, for purposes of a more nuanced appropriation and appreciation of Jesus' supposed last words as he drew his final breath. The article also committed itself to reflect on primarily two questions: What were the last words spoken by Jesus as he drew his final breath? What is the existential value and significance of these words and events? It is an attempt to search for meaning by way of reflecting upon the last words and the final breath of a man from Nazareth, namely Jesus insofar as the Lucan version of Jesus can be defined as such. The article deliberately avoided any reflection on a possible resurrection, as this would weaken the existential value and significance of Jesus' final act. I deliberately distanced myself (cognitive perspective distancing) from the constructed theologies and dogmas that make up the Christian tradition. This article purposefully avoided overburdening these final moments with things "supernatural"; it refused to rush and brush over the final words of Jesus just to get to resurrection, as a single meaning-making act. The intent is decisive and apparent: to accentuate the potential "universal" appeal of Jesus' supposed last words as he drew his final breath, confined and limited to Christian traditions. The article appealed to Jesus as a 1<sup>st</sup>-century man who uttered words with his final breath at his crucifixion. It is further postulated that the *πνεῦμα* concept should not be limited to the "divine" or the "supernatural self", but that it also encapsulates the essence of what constitutes life. In addition, the value and significance of Jesus' last words as he drew his final breath, as captured in Luke 23:46 suffices to construct meaning for any human being when s/he is also confronted with listening to final words, or when s/he is forced to take one final breath.

It should be reiterated that there is no sufficient evidence to deny or reject that the words captured in Luke 23:46b are, in fact, the final words of Jesus. The argument that the utterance of Jesus in Luke 23:46b is borrowed from tradition and can therefore not be considered as “authentically” Jesus, and by implication potentially “meaningless” to others not privy to its renewed theological interpretation, should be rejected, as it falsely presupposes that repetition of concepts is a determining criterion to classify an utterance as unauthentic and subsequently worthless. Notwithstanding the logic that, if something is considered inauthentic, it is “meaningless” is flawed. Such an appropriation and accusation levelled at what Jesus might have uttered should be rejected on the basis that it is guilty of circular logic, a subject-object/object-subject rationale; the subject determines something authentic and meaningful or worthless and simultaneously lacks the necessary external referents and measures to verify its credibility. The words *πάτερ, εἰς χεῖράς σου παρατίθεμαι τὸ πνεῦμά μου*, as presented in Luke 23:46b, is for all *literary* constructed purposes the last words spoken by Jesus when he drew his final breath. The existential value and significance of Jesus’ last words as he drew his final breath are not determined by a theology of any kind; the mere fact that it is embedded in the inhaling of oxygen and the exhaling of carbon dioxide determines its appeal and potentiality to form meaning. The concepts of “father”, “hands”, and “spirit” introduced as the last words spoken by Jesus allow human beings to relate, identify, reflect, and find meaning and purpose if and when the final act of breathing and uttering presents itself.

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