

The Crimson Worm

By Rich Jacobs, M.D.

But **I AM a worm** and not a man, a reproach of men and despised by the people. **Psalm 22:6**

Is this another great **I AM** verse in scripture? **Psalm 22**, prophetically reveals the experiences, thoughts, and emotions of Christ on the cross, over a thousand years before His crucifixion. But does this verse reveal something deeper about God, the Great I AM? Does “I AM a worm” describe the everlasting, omnipotent, omnipresent, omniscient, Creator of the Universe through a lowly insect? To understand this more fully, we must exam the original language of the Old Testament.

There are two Hebrew words in the Bible that are translated as “worm”. When Job, in his grief and depression, referred to himself, and to mankind, in general, as a “worm” (**Job 17:14; 24:20; 25:6**), he used the Hebrew word “*rimmah*” (רִמָּה), which refers to a “worm or a maggot” (BDB, Strong’s Concordance).

*If I call to the pit, ‘You are my father’; To the worm (*rimmah*), ‘my mother and my sister’.*
Job 17:14 (NASB)

When using this word, “worm” (*rimmah*), Job was alluding to his miserable condition and to the low estate of mankind, in general. In a similar way, in **Psalm 22:6**, it would appear as though Christ prophetically bemoans his miserable condition on the cross. *My God, My God, why have you forsaken Me?* (**Psalm 22:1**) reveals what He felt as He became sin (**2 Corinthians 5:21**), now rejected by His Father. “*But I am a worm and not a man, a reproach of men and despised by the people. All who see me sneer at me*” (**Psalm 22:6, 7**) describes what Christ experienced from the people He came to save. Rejected by all, Christ felt like “a worm”! Miserable. Of low estate. Of no value. Or does this mean something else?

In **Psalm 22:6**, in the original Hebrew, the word translated “worm” is “*tola’af*” (תּוֹלַעַף), meaning “worm or grub” — often referring to a specific worm called *Coccus ilicis* (BDB). He does not call Himself “*rimmah*”. This “*tola’af*” worm also is called the “Scarlet Worm” or the “Crimson Worm” because of its defining characteristics. Because of the color and peculiar life cycle of *Coccus ilicis*, the Hebrew word “*tola’af*”, came to mean the color “scarlet or crimson” (BDB). In the Bible, the color scarlet symbolizes sin, just as white symbolizes purity or holiness. As the LORD said through Isaiah,

“*Come now, and let us reason together,*”
Says the LORD,
“*Though your sins are as scarlet,*
They will be as white as snow;
*Though they are red like **crimson,***
They will be like wool.” **Isaiah 1:18** (NASB)

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In **Isaiah 1:18**, the word that is translated as the color “*crimson*” is a form of “*tola’at*” - the crimson color of sin.

Jesus also called Himself “*tola’at*”, rather than “*rimmah*”, to prophetically explain the transformation He underwent when He became sin for us (**2 Corinthians 5:21**). Jesus willingly chose death on a “tree”, clad in the scarlet of our sin and covered in the crimson color of His own shed blood. As Jesus hung on the cross, taking on the sin of the world, regarded as a worm by man and God, clad in scarlet from His own shed blood, He died. (**1 Peter 3:18**) Having shed His blood, He also willingly shed His life, for life is in the blood (**Leviticus 17:11**); scarlet also symbolizes blood and the life taken by its loss. And at the time of His crucifixion, Jesus was clothed in a scarlet robe by the Roman soldiers — perhaps prophetically anticipating what He was about to undergo. (**Matthew 27:28**)



The Cocoon of the Crimson Worm

When the LORD declared “I AM *tola’at*”, He was speaking a parable illustrated by the peculiar life cycle of this insect, *Coccus Illicis*. The Crimson Worm contains a carmine-like chemical in its body that is used to create a red dye the people in the Middle East used to color their clothes crimson. The female Crimson Worm only produces offspring once in her lifetime. She does this by firmly fastening herself to an oak tree. Here, she spins a bright scarlet cocoon around herself. Inside this cocoon, the Scarlet Worm lays her brood of baby

worms. These babies have no other source of food but their mother - they literally feed off her live body! When the baby worms reach maturity, their mother dies, but in the process, she releases a crimson substance that irreversibly stains all her children scarlet. About **three days later**, the deceased mother Crimson Worm turns pure white and her waxy corpse falls to the ground.

The life cycle of the Scarlet Worm, whom Jesus said He was, symbolizes much of what He accomplished on the cross and our relationship with Him. Christ willingly chose death on a tree for the benefit of the new life this death would bring, just like the mother Crimson Worm. Jesus allows us to “eat His flesh and drink His blood” (**John 6:55**),

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which sustains us until the time of maturity, just as the offspring of the Crimson Worm eats her body until the time of their maturity. We become transformed by Christ's shed blood, even as the offspring are transformed by the blood-red stain of their dying mother. Finally, though Christ became "*tola'at*" on a tree, in His resurrection on the third day, He became pure white in glorified holiness. The Crimson Worm leaves its tree in death to return to and becomes white as snow on about the third day. In time, each offspring of the Crimson Worm becomes like her and follows her. The LORD God became "*tola'at*" so that our crimson sins can be washed away by His shed blood so that we, like Him, may become "white as snow" and follow Him.

I AM "*tola'at*" says much more than first meets the eye. Like much in God's Word, there are many layers of meaning that the Holy Spirit makes averable to those who seek to know more. The prophetic Crimson *tola'at* Worm parable shows us in scripture in surprising places, revealing more to us about God and man. Consider this passage from the book of **Job**.

*How much less man, that is a **worm**,
And the son of man, that is a **worm!** Job 25:6 (ASV)*

In **Job 25:6**, Bildad tells his suffering friend, Job, that compared to God, man is merely a "worm" (*rimmah*) - referring to our relative lowly insignificance. But Bildad did not use this Hebrew word when referring to the son of man. Instead, prophetically perhaps, he said the **son of man is a "worm" (*tola'at*)** - a Crimson Worm! Perhaps it is no coincidence that Christ called Himself the Son of Man - but also, "*tola'at*". But there is more hidden in this simple "worm symbolism"

In many ways, the Crimson Worm represents the priestly role. The *tola'at* lays down its life sacrificially for the benefits of others. It fulfills its God-given calling faithfully, without regard to the personal cost or consequences. Christ, as a priest according to the order of Melchizedek (**Psalm 110:4; Hebrew 5:10; 6:20; 7:11, 20**), did the same thing. As a royal High Priest, Christ interceded with God and sacrificed on behalf of the people. But Israel also was supposed to be a kingdom of priests, a holy nation, for the benefit of the lost world. Consider what God says about Israel's calling.

" . . . and you shall be to Me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation. . ." Exodus 19:6 (NASB)

While calling Israel a kingdom of priests, God also calls Israel "a worm"!

*Do not fear, you **worm** Jacob, you men of Israel; I will help you," declares the LORD, "and your Redeemer is the Holy One of Israel. Isaiah 41:14 (NASB)*

At first it may seem strange that while God is prophetically speaking to Israel in kindly terms, He calls Jacob "a worm" — hardly a term of endearment! Until one realizes that God calls Jacob ***tola'at*** - a Crimson Worm - perhaps, the "Priest Worm". The Lord refers

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to Israel as “you *tola’at*”, just as He calls Himself “I AM *tola’at*”! In fact, the Crimson Worm is part of the garments of the Levitical priests.

The priestly sash was made of finely twisted linen of blue, purple and **scarlet (*tola’at*)** yarn—the work of an embroiderer—as the LORD commanded Moses. **Exodus 39:29** This 16 meter long belt contained scarlet yard that was colored by the dye extracted from the Crimson Worm. Perhaps the Apostle Paul had this *tola’at*-stained belt in mind when, while referring to it, he exhorted the Ephesians to “gird themselves with **truth**” (**Ephesians 6:14**), for I AM, Jesus, is also The Truth! (**John 14:6**) I wonder if Christians to are to be *tola’at*?

Other parts of the Levitical garments were also stained with *tola’at* and Jewish tradition says a *tola’at*-scarlet thread was attached to the scapegoat before it was released into the wilderness to atone for the sins of the people. No doubt God’s mysterious message to us through the Crimson Worm has much more to tell us, should we have eyes to see it. These layers of mystery hidden in God’s Word provide a powerful testimony to us that He is who He says He is. He is I AM and He is *tola’at* - the Crimson Priest Worm. The One who shed His blood and died so that we may live.

EYE HAS NOT SEEN AND EAR HAS NOT HEARD,
AND WHICH HAVE NOT ENTERED THE HEART OF MAN,
ALL THAT GOD HAS PREPARED FOR THOSE WHO LOVE HIM
1 Corinthians 2:9