

Salvation Histories in Ancient Israel

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“The salvation of the righteous comes from the LORD; he is their stronghold in time of trouble. The LORD helps them and delivers them; he delivers them from the wicked and saves them, because they take refuge in him.”

Psalms 37:39-40 (NIV)

“Therefore my friends, as you have always obeyed – not only in my presence, but now much more in my absence -- continue to work out your salvation with fear and trembling...”

Philippians 2:12(NIV)

I. Introduction

Modern “western” culture, that is, European and American, often regards certain cultural ideas as immutable, attributing them to a standard “Judeo-Christian” background. While such a background certainly exists and affects much of western life, because this background has changed relatively little in the past few generations, it is easy to see this background as uniform, self-consistent, and stable, reaching back thousands of years without change. This is a dangerous fallacy; it assumes that Judaism and Christianity have held essentially the same core ideas from their respective beginnings. Certainly, this holds on the broadest scale: both systems are uncompromisingly monotheistic, provide for the approach of a transcendent deity by temporal man, and claim a common history, even sharing part of their sacred writings. However, on closer examination, one finds a variety of thought systems within the two traditions. By the beginnings of Christianity in the first century AD, such a plethora of theologies existed that to generalize at all risks over-simplification. This can be seen most clearly through the various concepts of salvation in circulation at the time, for “even if it does not always use a formally salvific terminology, the Bible introduces on practically every page the theme of salvation (or its absence).”¹ In the first century, various groups held very different views of salvation and God’s plan for mankind, which arose from the positions of the various groups within the society of the time and within Israel’s history of over a millenium. These different concepts of salvation demonstrate how groups with the same understanding of God can develop different understandings of the meanings of time and history, which, in turn, can alter one's relation to God.

¹ Anchor Bible Dictionary, The. Freedman, David Noel, et al, Eds. New York: Doubleday, 1992. v. 5, p. 907. (Hereafter ABD).

II. Terminology: What is at Issue?

Before one can discuss concepts of salvation, how it is brought about, and its import for man, one must determine what “salvation” is. Webster’s defines salvation as the “act of saving or state of being saved, as from damnation or destruction.”² The ambiguity of this statement demonstrates the variety of definitions in existence even today; one cannot generally state whom salvation is from, whom it is for, or what it is preventing, and still include all major views. We find a microcosm of this ambiguity even in ancient times; salvation in ancient Israel had corporate and individual, as well as temporal and eternal, aspects. For example, in Psalm 37:39-40,³ quoted above, it is plain that salvation⁴ is from “the wicked,” for “the righteous,” and given by the LORD in “time of trouble.” This is purely individual salvation, and refers to specific settings in earthly life. In contrast, consider Isaiah 51:6-8: “...But my salvation will last forever, my righteousness will never fail...but my righteousness will last forever, my salvation through all generations.” Thus, we see that the same term carried both temporary and eternal connotations. Likewise, Psalm 18:2 declares, “My God is my rock...the horn of my salvation,” here a purely individual expression, while Psalm 85, a prayer for the people of Israel, entreats, “Show us your unfailing love, O LORD, and grant us your salvation.” The Psalmist here requests that deliverance be granted to the community as a

² Webster’s 21st Century Dictionary. Kidney, Walter C., Ed. Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1992.

³ Ryrie Study Bible: Expanded Edition, New International Version. Chicago: Moody Press, 1994. Unless otherwise noted, all English Scripture is taken from this source.

⁴ The Hebrew is וְיִתְּשֶׁצַּח תַּעֲדֶם יִקְיָ , literally “but the salvation of the righteous ones,” a variation here on וְיִשְׁקָע , which is usually translated “salvation,” or “deliverance,” in order to preserve the acrostic nature of the Psalm. See Biblia Hebraica Stuttgartensia (hereafter BHS), in Biblia Sacra: Utriusque Testamenti. Editio Hebraica et Graeca. Germany: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, 1994.

whole. Thus, the same Hebrew word, *יֵשׁוּעַ*, (pronounced *yešū`ah*), was understood in ancient times both individually and corporately, temporally and eternally.

The concept of salvation in ancient Israel was profoundly complicated by the various concepts of a Messiah, literally God's "anointed one," the Davidic king who would establish a permanent kingdom, promised in 2 Samuel 7:16. It must be mentioned here, since it is a branching point for most second temple period concepts of salvation. For example, many ancient views held that the long-awaited Davidic Messiah would deliver Israel as a nation from foreign oppression, i.e., Rome. This idea extends at least as far back as Isaiah's time, for we read "For to us a child is born, to us a son is given, and the government will be on his shoulders...Of the increase of his government and peace there will be no end. He will reign on David's throne and over his kingdom...from that time on and forever" (Isaiah 9:6-7). Even then, the future Davidic king was seen as a man of peace and ruler of an eternal mighty kingdom, which, of course, begins with David's kingdom, Israel. In contrast, early Christians saw the same Messiah as one who had redeemed believing individuals from individual sins and held a kingdom in heaven rather than on earth. This is explicit in Pilate's interrogation of Jesus:

Jesus said, "My kingdom is not of this world. If it were, my servants would fight to prevent my arrest by the Jews. But now my kingdom is from another place."

"You are a king, then!" said Pilate.

Jesus answered, “You are right in saying I am a king. In fact for this reason I was born, and for this I came into the world, to testify to the truth.

Everyone on the side of truth listens to me.”⁵

This passage gives a definite otherworldly character to the kingdom Jesus claimed to be bringing and which the early Christians hoped to see established. Thus, we have two communities expecting the arrival of one individual,⁶ but with completely different concepts of why he was coming or how he would act when he arrived.

The above examples necessitate the notion of “salvation history,” for that is what we have been discussing. Volumes have been written on this topic, but for present purposes we will define salvation history as a culture’s understanding of the history (past, present, and future) and development of its own salvation.⁷ Because the groups described above held such radically different concepts of salvation’s origin and purpose, it is clear that they saw their common history, as recorded in the Hebrew Bible, very differently. Indeed, they had to; if both groups had tried to understand their history the same way, they would be contradicting themselves. The salvation history of a culture is therefore linked intimately to the culture’s notion of historiography, the recording and re-recording of history within a cultural context. For example, a culture anticipating eternal paradise will look for promises of eternal paradise in its recorded history, and vice versa. This link is the focus of the present investigation; the interplay between ancient Israel’s

⁵ John 18:36-37.

⁶ For the most part. Certain groups anticipated two such figures: one a king, the other a priest; some groups anticipated a prophet in addition. The Qumran scrolls refer, for example, to “the prophet and the anointed ones of Aaron and Israel” (1 QS 9:11), which is usually interpreted this way. See John 1:19-24 and ABD, v. 4, p. 782.

⁷This is primarily to avoid confusing normal, secular history with salvation history. Only the events perceived by a culture to be relevant to salvation are meant here.

understanding of its own history, specifically in reference to salvation, and its understanding of God.

III. Corporate Salvation Concepts

The most prevalent concept of salvation in ancient Israel appears to have been that of cultural or corporate salvation, the liberation of the Israelite people en masse from oppression and suffering. This concept of God's plan takes its roots at least as far back as the Babylonian captivity, and even extended into early Christian thought. For example, even after the crucifixion and resurrection of Christ, the eleven remaining apostles asked, "Lord, are you at this time going to restore the kingdom to Israel?"⁸ After all Jesus had tried to explain to them during his public ministry and between Easter Sunday and Pentecost, the disciples still wanted to know when the Messianic kingdom would be established. The foundation for this expectation of corporate redemption lies in God's covenant with Abraham, made in Genesis 15, and even to the flood narrative in Genesis 6:5-9:19, in which God delivers Noah and his family as a group from death, as opposed to all other humans. Such corporate salvific events dominate the narrative of the Hebrew Bible,⁹ yet suddenly, in 587-6 BC, Israel had found herself captured by the barbaric Babylonians, and returned to soon find herself under the yoke of pagan Rome. Where, one might ask, was God? For the faithful, every day that God remained silent must have

⁸ Acts 1:6.

⁹ For example, Joseph's family is saved from starvation and family division in Gen. 37-50. The entire book of Exodus is the story of the salvation of the Israelites from Egyptian slavery, especially at the Red Sea (Exodus 14-15). Even the negative prophecies against other nations carry salvific overtones, as in Jonah's last warning to Nineveh. See ABD, v. 5, p. 908.

meant that salvation was one day closer. Like a growing drop of water that has yet to fall, one has every expectation that the course of events will be the same as always, but the anticipation grows ever greater.

The salvation history of Old Testament Israel plays itself out in three major ways: deliverance from evil, deliverance from sin and its consequences, and the formation of a new relationship with God.¹⁰ We will examine each in turn. First, there is the deliverance from evil, most often manifested by the enemies of the Israelite people or by Israelites who themselves deliberately sin. The first and most obvious example of this deliverance is the entire Exodus account, in which God, through the agency of Moses, fulfills his promise of Genesis 15:14 by bringing the Israelites out of bondage in Egypt. Thus begins a period in which Israel's primary need for salvation is from evil elements within herself. God repeatedly threatens to destroy her entirely for her sins,¹¹ but always an individual such as Moses intervenes on behalf of the community, and the mass of the people are spared destruction. Likewise, through the decree of Cyrus in Ezra 1:1-4, God delivers Israel from the Babylonian captivity, though less dramatically and less completely. The Israelite nation did not regain complete national sovereignty this time, remaining under the power of the Persians, Alexander the Great, the Ptolemies, and the Seleucids, before finally being delivered briefly under the Maccabees in 165 BC. In 63 BC, however, Israel fell under the rule of Rome, and did not recover until 1948 AD.¹² By 63 BC, however, there had not been a legitimate Davidic king on the throne in five hundred years; it

¹⁰ ABD says "there are three major approaches to salvation which are interconnected but distinct: salvation as (a) deliverance from evil, (b) ritual purification from sin, and (c) the formation of a new relationship with God" (v.5, p. 914). I have chosen to roughly follow this scheme, with broadening of the second point, in order to show the degree of the division in thought within ancient Israel.

¹¹ See, for example, Exodus 32, Numbers 14:11-35, 16:20-50, 25:1-9, Joshua 7:10-26, etc.

¹² Ryrie Study Bible, 1429-1432.

seemed only logical that God would soon deliver Israel once more and fulfill the promise of II Samuel 7:16 that David's throne would be established forever. Thus, expectation of deliverance was particularly high by the time of Christ, with members of the Israelite community old enough to remember independence, but with the Davidic promise beyond memory.

The second form of deliverance given to Israel is deliverance from her sins and their consequences. This is interrelated, obviously, with deliverance from evil, discussed above. The major form of deliverance from sin in the Hebrew Bible is, of course, the sacrificial system. Although sacrifices to YHWH, the God of Israel, are recorded as far back as Genesis 4:3, and commanded by God as early as Genesis 15:9, the regular sacrificial system for the Israelites is not established until Israel is in the desert after Sinai, primarily in the book of Leviticus. It is only then, after the construction of the Tabernacle, that this form of salvation becomes a principle part of the lives of the Israelites. While sacrifices purified the Israelites from their sins in a spiritual sense, however, they did not always free the Israelites individually or collectively from the consequences of sin. Moses, for example, was forbidden entry to the Promised Land (Exodus 20:9-12), David loses his son (2 Samuel 12:13-14), and the Israelites go en masse into exile for neglecting the Sabbath years (Leviticus 26:33-35). Thus, we see that deliverance from sin is two-fold: deliverance from guilt is conditional upon repentance, whereas deliverance from punishment is entirely up to God.

Finally, salvation is given to Israel in terms of a new relationship to God. This is accomplished repeatedly: in the initial covenant with Abraham (Genesis 15:12-16),¹³ at

¹³ Hence with all of the then-living Hebrews, since they all trace their lineage through Abraham.

Sinai (specifically Exodus 19:5-8, 24:1-8), and in the rededication of the people in 2 Kings 23:1-3, to name a few examples. This type of salvation is also granted to smaller groups through the establishment of the Aaronic priesthood and the Levitical order of service.¹⁴ The main idea behind calling this a type of salvation is given by Isaiah 12:2, “Surely God is my salvation; I will trust and not be afraid. The LORD, the LORD, is my strength and my song; he has become my salvation.” That is, God Himself represents a kind of salvation, from evil, from enemies, from oneself, and even from the state of not knowing God, itself a kind of suffering, if God is what He is made to be in the Hebrew Bible. Thus, one experiences a type of salvation when one can redefine one’s relationship to God in any way which draws the two parties closer together.

Although there are individualized aspects to each of these salvation concepts, the dominant aspect is God’s salvation of his people as a group: from evil, from their sins, and through covenant relationships. Israel, or a portion thereof, waits for God to deliver her from these issues as a corpus, and celebrates as a corpus upon experiencing that salvation. These ideas are also primarily temporal and earthly; although corporate salvation sometimes contains elements unfulfilled in the lives of the recipients, the salvation contained therein still is eventually found within the context of this world and its history, thus such concepts profoundly influenced the recording of history.

Here we have focused exclusively on the Israelite community before the time of Christ. However, the early Christian community saw Christ as bringing salvation of a group, and not solely of individuals, but generally in a very different way. That is, there existed the concept of the “body of Christ,” as in Paul’s first epistle to the Corinthians:

¹⁴ Exodus 28:1 and Numbers 3:5-10, respectively.

“The body is a unit, though it is made up of many parts; and though all its parts are many, they form one body. So it is with Christ. For we were all baptized by one Spirit into one body – whether Jews or Greeks, slave or free – and we were all given the one Spirit to drink.” (12:12-13). The difference is that this refers to a community that has already experienced salvation individually and has come together for that reason, rather than a group of individuals collectively awaiting salvation. Although, as Paul states, in Christian theology “all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and are justified freely by his grace” (Romans 3:23-24), the acceptance of that justification remains an individual decision, as in John 3:18. The entire world is seen to need salvation, but it can only be experienced individually, as we will see below. One can find salvific promises to groups, as in the Beatitudes (Matthew 5:3-12), but they are always made within the context of Jesus’ believing followers; that is, those who have already experienced salvation in the Christian sense of salvation from sin and death into holiness and eternal life.

IV. Individual Salvation Concepts

In contrast to the concept of salvation as a cultural or corporate phenomenon is the more Christian interpretation of salvation as primarily an individual issue. Moreover, the balance of salvific terminology in the New Testament shifts radically from the “salvation from evil” which is so prevalent in the Old Testament towards “salvation from sin.” For example, Matthew 1:21 says, “you are to give him the name Jesus [Greek for Joshua, “the LORD saves”], because he will save the people from their sins.” While, again, all three types of salvation listed above appear in the New Testament, they are in

different proportions. This is made obvious by statements such as “for whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for me will find it” (Matthew 16:25), which implies a radically different understanding of saved versus lost. In addition, the giver of salvation is unquestionably God, incarnate in Jesus. The Anchor Bible Dictionary notes that the word “Savior” is found twenty-four times in the New Testament: eight in reference to God, and sixteen times in reference to Jesus.¹⁵ Though salvation is mediated by other individuals through evangelism,¹⁶ through healing, raising the dead, casting out demons,¹⁷ and so on, salvation from sins is seen to come only through Jesus. Indeed, as Luke quotes the apostle Peter, “It is by the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth ... Salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to men by which we must be saved.”¹⁸ Again, we will look at three different forms this salvation takes.

Salvation from evil takes on a quite different role in the New Testament. No longer is the primary expectation deliverance from evil men; indeed, Christ promises sufferings to his followers, and even calls them blessings, as does Paul.¹⁹ In contrast, evil in its pure, spiritual form becomes the foe, “For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms.”²⁰ While Jesus taught his followers to pray for deliverance from evil or “the evil one,” he equated this to deliverance from temptation (Matthew 6:13). Thus, the concept of salvation from evil is

¹⁵ ABD, v. 5, p. 910.

¹⁶ See Romans 10:14-15, for example.

¹⁷ See Matthew 10:5-8.

¹⁸ Acts 4:10,12.

¹⁹ See Matthew 5:10-12, 43-45 for the former and Romans 8:17, 2 Timothy 1:8 and 2:3 for the latter.

²⁰ Ephesians 6:12.

largely merged with salvation from sin; it is not earthly evil that is the concern, but spiritualized evil, manifested through sin, both internal and external to the individual.

Needless to say, salvation from sin also takes new meaning in the New Testament. This form of salvation for individuals in the Old Testament was seen as contingent upon constant adherence to the Law of Moses and dependent on repentance, signified by sacrifice. Indeed, an individual deliberately sinning would be cut off entirely from his people and could not be forgiven (Numbers 15:30-31). In contrast, salvation from sin is offered in the New Testament to those unfamiliar with the Law (Romans 1:16), is contingent on repentance, signified by faith in Jesus, but does not, cannot, depend on sacrifices made by humans as a method of atonement. The author of Hebrews expressed it in these words: “By one sacrifice he has made perfect forever those who are being made holy. The Holy Spirit... adds: ‘Their sins and lawless acts I will remember no more.’ And where these have been forgiven, there is no longer any sacrifice for sin” (10:14,15,18). That is, Jesus is seen as the perfect and complete sin offering, making the system of temple sacrifices entirely obsolete; he becomes the only way to forgiveness (John 8:24). Clearly, this is not entirely divorced from other Jewish thought on the forgiveness of sins, since it still revolves around repentance and sacrifice. Luomanen has noted that “In Matthew’s view the inevitable and clear prerequisite of getting in [to the kingdom of heaven] is *repentance* [italics original]” in contrast to baptism or any other rite.²¹ This is only sufficient, of course, within the context of Jesus’ atoning death, just as walking to Nebraska only gets one to Nebraska if one is on the correct road. However,

²¹ Luomanen, Petri. Entering the Kingdom of Heaven: A Study of the Structure of Matthew’s View of Salvation. Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1998. p. 215.

the difference from other Jewish thought is that sacrifice by humans is insufficient; God himself became the only acceptable sacrifice for sins.

The complete and unmerited forgiveness of sins described above clearly alters one's relation to God. John saw this forgiveness as giving the believer the status of a son of God (John 1:12-13), and simultaneously saw a marriage-like relation between Christ and the body of believers (Revelation 19:7), as did Paul (2 Corinthians 11:2). Early Christian leaders, especially Paul, saw salvation as a form of slavery. Paul calls himself a "servant," "prisoner," and "slave" of God.²² This is not entirely unique to Pauline thought, as Job, Moses, David, the prophets, and all of Israel²³ are called servants of God. What is new is the concept of slavery. Dale Martin notes that "slavery was commonly defined as living for the benefit or profit of another... this assumption was part of the patronal ideology of Greco-Roman society."²⁴ Hence, this metaphor is used extensively of the Christian leaders such as Paul, Luke, and John, which may stem from the Lukan use of the Greek word *doulos* in reference to managerial slaves as opposed to laborers (Luke 12:41-46).²⁵ Moreover, the followers of Christ are no longer merely his slaves, but also friends (*philoï*), according to John 15:14-15. In any case, what we have is a broad redefinition of the relationship between God and man, the establishment of a new covenant through Christ's death (Luke 22:20). Just as Old Testament history focused on the Mosaic covenant's fulfillment and the people's faithfulness to it, the New Testament writings revolve around this new covenant: the promise of eternal life and forgiveness of

²² Romans 6:16-19, 7:25; Philippians 1:1; Titus 1:1; Philemon 1; to name a few instances.

²³ Job: Job 1:8. Moses: Ex. 14:31. David: Ps. 89:3. Prophets: 2 Kings 17:13. Israel: Lev. 25:55, Is. 41:8.

²⁴ Martin, Dale B. *Slavery as Salvation: The Metaphor of Slavery in Pauline Christianity*. New Haven: Yale UP, 1990. p. 51.

²⁵ Martin devotes much of a chapter to this topic, pp. 51-60, and gives many references there. See p. 53 for the Lukan reference.

sins given through Christ. Moreover, the final point on the Christian time-line is the absolute fulfillment of the covenant as described in Revelation. Hence, all Christian historiography depends on this view of salvation, which comes through faith in Christ.

Again, we have here focused primarily on New Testament writings in opposition to Old Testament writings, only because here the division in question is most clear. The view of salvation as a personal rather than corporate or cultural concern by definition impacts all three areas of salvation we are discussing: from evil, from sin, and through a new relationship to God. Each of these issues must be defined differently on the individual level. This same general principle holds in the Old Testament, as well: Job, Abraham, Moses, and David, for example, each held special relationships with God and were given personal promises by God. Consequently, each went through a period of reinterpreting his relation to God, the consequence of sin in his own life, and the implications of his relationship with God in his daily struggle against evil and temptation all around. In both the Old and New Testament settings, then, there is a focus on interpreting salvation and consequently history in these various forms, the primary difference being that the Old Testament focuses primarily on the corporate aspects of salvation, but the New Testament focuses almost entirely on the individual level.

V. Conclusions

Cultures define their basic beliefs in a self-consistent manner. Beliefs contradictory to other, more central, less disposable, beliefs are reevaluated or discarded. Thus, historiography, the writing and rewriting of a culture's history, by definition is a

process of continual reevaluation. A major historical upheaval leads to reflection on the divine and one's current status with the divine, while major religious upheavals, such as theophanies, do the reverse. This becomes especially clear through the Holy Bible, which was written over a span of more than one thousand years, and thus reflects a single nation's views of history and the divine at many junctions. The very existence of a New Testament and a Christian church today testify to the degree to which those views developed differently: springing from the same core tradition, the core Christian belief that God became man is blasphemous to many devout Jews. Thus, from a single concept of deity, the belief that the only true God is YHWH, the God of Israel, arise a variety of interpretations of history and time's role in God's interaction with humans. These interpretations, as we have seen, are limited neither by this earth nor in the number of humans involved. Still, they developed along two major fronts: eternal versus temporal, and individual versus corporate interpretations. Because of the overwhelming focus on salvation in the Bible, particularly in the New Testament, it has been our exemplar of this phenomenon.

Salvation plays a critical role in any theological system of thought; by definition it answers the question: does my god care, and, if so, how does he/she/it show that concern? Without a salvation concept, one worships merely for the sake of worshipping, without any expectation of reward, avoidance of punishment, or even a reaction. Thus, any practical theological system must build itself a salvation history, which is a culture's understanding of the history (past, present, and future) and development of its own salvation. Without such a framework, salvation is meaningless; one cannot tell whether it has already been obtained/granted or is still forthcoming, if it is even to be expected,

what it is from, etc. Therefore, the salvation history of an individual culture must be linked to his/her/its understanding of time and the deity(ies). Within ancient Israel, four such bonds existed, which defined salvation as (a) temporal, and thus fleeting or (b) eternal, as in the Christian view, and (c) individual in nature or (d) to be anticipated and received by a community. The actions and philosophical surroundings of individuals conditioned these viewpoints. That is, for a man who participated regularly in the temple system of sacrifices, for example, the salvation thereby obtained was fleeting; he would certainly be back the next time he violated the Mosaic Law. In contrast, one incapable of participating in this system, such as those who by profession or by natural factors were ritually unclean, had to seek salvation by another means; he could not sacrifice for himself, so any sacrifice made for him must be made by another. Hence his current status as unforgiven is a permanent (i.e., eternal) problem until a permanent solution is found.

Concepts of salvation, as we have seen, fall into three major categories: salvation (a) from evil, internal and external to the individual or community, (b) from sin and its consequences, and (c) through redefined relationships with God. The decisions one reaches on the two questions above (who is salvation for and how long does it last) color one's understanding of these three types of salvation. In turn, as an individual or community incorporates these concepts more deeply into daily life, they become transcendent; it becomes a single legitimate historical and theological exercise to reevaluate salvation in terms of God, God in terms of history, and history in terms of salvation. Hence, the earliest Christians, primarily Jewish individuals as exemplified in Paul, were able to alter core traditional beliefs of Judaism: to reevaluate God and see Him in a man, to rethink Israel's history in terms of the Messianic promise, and to see the

Mosaic covenant in light of a new, more intimate relationship. Still, these early followers of Jesus were in every respect Jewish; they were merely continuing a process of historiography begun in Genesis 1 and which continues today. What they had done was to follow the advice of one of their leaders and to “continue to work out [their] salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who works ... to will and to act according to his good purpose.”²⁶

²⁶ Philippians 2:12-13.

VII. Bibliography

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