

**Critical Essay on the Theme of Salvation
as it Emerges in the Old Testament**

(Maximum 3000 words)

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Introduction

In this paper the theme of salvation will be explored, and how this theme emerges throughout the Old Testament (OT). When one is asked to say what the Bible teaches about this theme, it is likely that one would respond from his or her understanding of the New Testament's (NT) teaching on salvation. Although salvation in the OT is not a regular discussed theme, it is anchored throughout Scripture.

The emphasis of this paper is on three main forms of salvation, namely material salvation, salvation through a kinsman-redeemer, and salvation through ransom. The literal meaning will be explained as well as the way people understood it in the OT. A closer look will be taken at the different methods of salvation, and the line it follows throughout the OT. Although in these examples more biblical references are used, the accent will be on the flood in Genesis 6-9, Isaiah 43:1-4, and Exodus 6:6-7. In addition to this exploration the contemporary relevance will be discussed in the light of Jesus' work.

The word 'salvation' explained

Looking up the word in a dictionary points out that there are several definitions of it. Dictionary.com (2011) states that salvation can be an 'act of saving' or 'protecting from harm, risk, loss, and destruction', and in theology, 'deliverance from the power and penalty of sin; redemption'. Green explains several important Hebrew words which are used in the context of salvation in the OT. Although Green discusses more words, this paper will lift out three of them. Firstly there is the word 'hayah', which means 'to be alive', but in the causative sense it means 'to preserve', 'to keep alive' or 'to give full and prosperous life' to someone. Green says that this word 'hayah' is used seven times in the formula 'God save the king' (e.g. 1 Samuel 10:24). This example shows the underlining message all over Scripture, namely it is God who saves. The second word, *gó-el*, mainly means to act the part of a kinsman. A kinsman justifies his relative; often his duty is to retaliate his blood (eg. Numbers 35:19). Occasionally the kinsman buys a family member out of slavery (eg. Leviticus 25:48). Whenever this word is used in Scripture, it is in the context of a redeemer who is making an effort in the cause of a relative. The last meaning of the word to be considered is 'kôpher', which means a 'ransom price' (Green 1998: 13-15, 32-33). A clear passage, with the word 'kôpher', in the OT is Isaiah 43:1-4, where God says:

'O Israel, Fear not: for I have redeemed thee'

and in verse 3-4,

'for I am the LORD thy God, the Holy One of Israel, thy Saviour: I gave Egypt for thy ransom, Ethiopia and Seba for thee.'

Understanding in the OT

The OT readers understood salvation differently than the contemporary NT readers. Brueggemann states that

'these actions of intervening with the purpose to rescue are nameable, concrete, and decisively transformative, and are termed 'salvation' or 'deliverance' (2002: 184; italics mine).

Several passages in the OT connote that there was an awareness of 'spiritual' salvation as well (eg. Isaiah 43:25; Jeremiah 31:34). The word 'spiritual' is not the word the OT reader would have used, they saw it more as a relational restoration between people and God. Spiritual salvation is a

phraseology used by many contemporary writers, and will be used in this paper when these writers are quoted. Koole (1997: 400) describes that

'the pronouncement of salvation 'to remember iniquity no more' is parallel with the wiping out of sin (Isaiah 43:25) and its forgiveness (Jeremiah 31:34), and the Psalms declare that this is only thanks to God's mercy (Psalm 25; 79:8).'

This awareness of relational salvation was a contemporaneous awareness, which is to say that there was no clear understanding of an afterlife. Boadt (1984: 250) says that there is little evidence that the Israelites held out hope for an afterlife before a quite late time in the post-exilic age. Boadt remarks that this is a strange position held by the Israelites, since almost all ancient nations had elaborate burial customs, illustrating their believes in an afterlife.

The understanding of an afterlife began to gradually form after the exile. The prophets of the time, especially Jeremiah and Ezekiel, placed more attention on personal fate. From the exile on, every individual was held responsible for his own life, and thus the question arose what would happen with a good person who died without visible blessings during his life. The passages of Psalm 16:9-11; 49:15; 73:24 and Isaiah 26:19 seem to suggest an afterlife, Daniel 12:1-2 however is the most clear passage about being saved for an afterlife. Boadt thinks that this understanding took shape in Daniel,

'helped by the questions of persecution and martyrdom, and with some outside influence from Persian and Greek ideas on the afterlife and immortality of the human spirit' (Boadt 1984: 252; cf. Nichols 2010: 25).

In contrast to this, one might note that when the Israelites were in slavery in Egypt, they saw the concept of afterlife in the Egyptian culture. In that respect the concept was not new to them. Wright however states that this understanding of an afterlife was always there, but in a latent form. According to Wright humans are innately immortal, and the awareness of an afterlife

'grew directly from the emphasis on the goodness of creation, on YHWH as the god who both kills and makes alive' (Wright 2003: 125).

What Wright states, is that the Israelites believed that God created humans as immortal beings. By sin humans became mortal, but the believe was that God would restore his creation to its original state. The solution of Wright does not need a foreign addition to the Jewish faith and makes it more apprehensible, and plausible.

The method of salvation in the OT

Studying the word 'salvation', and reading through Scripture, people can distinguish different methods by which God saves. Firstly, there is material salvation, that is to say, saved from death, disasters, and sickness. For this method, a closer look is exerted at the famous story of Noah and his family in Genesis 6:5- 9:19. The salvation of man and beast was a deliverance from the flood, thus it was no relational salvation. Lockyer (1973: 277) annotates however that Noah was an inheritor of righteousness, which is by faith (cf. Hebrew 11:7). Lockyer continues to explain that it could well be that Noah's wife and family were brought to a relational deliverance as a result of the physical deliverance they experienced. Lockyer makes a justified assumption, because the physical salvation was accomplished on a supernatural level. According to Phillips, Noah and his family went in the ark voluntarily.

'No one pushed Ham into the ark. God convicts, but He does not coerce. Salvation is a personal choice, and Ham chose to enter the ark' (Phillips 2006 : 54).

Another example can be seen in Genesis 19:19, where Lot is being saved from the disastrous punishment of Sodom and Gomorrah:

'Behold now, thy servant hath found grace in thy sight, and thou hast magnified thy mercy, which thou hast shewed unto me in saving my life.'

In this verse the word 'hayah' is used in the phrase: 'saving my life'. The word 'hayah' is often used in a non-religious way, for example where the life of the harlot Rahab is being saved by Joshua (Joshua 6:25). In the situation of Lot one can see that 'saving my life' refers to a supernatural act of God. The two examples above, Noah and Lot, demonstrate two aspects of salvation in particular; judgement and mercy. Mercy and judgement can be seen continually throughout later salvation.

Secondly there is the salvation of slavery, and exploitation. The principle of the kinsman is a very important concept for the Jews. God is called the 'redeemer' (Hebrew gó-el) of Israel. An act of kinsman-ship can be seen in Exodus 6:6-7, where the word 'gó-el' can be found in the phrase 'I will redeem'. According to Deadmond (2007: 199)

'the two phrases 'I will take you' and 'I will be to you' are biblically and rabbinically connected to marriage and in this case is referring Israel's betrothal at Mt. Sinai.'

Brueggeman (2002: 163) states that God functions as the redeemer to preserve Israel and secure Israel's release from being in hock to Pharaoh. The Psalms testify of this great salvation act, which is imperative for Israel's existence (cf. Psalm 74:2, 77:15, 78:35, 106:10).

The salvation from Egypt demonstrates God as a kinsman in twofold. Firstly, God acknowledged Israel as his wife, a redeeming act that foreshadows the law which is described later in Deuteronomy 25:5-10. Secondly, God saves Israel out of slavery. This act of God is an example for the Israelites as well. An Israelite was not allowed to take one of his own people as his slave, but should an Israelite fall into debt, he could sell himself into servitude unto the year of jubilee (cf. Leviticus 25:39-42). In the meantime a slave could purchase his own freedom, or one who was immediate family could mediate and secure the freedom of a relative (cf. Leviticus 25:47-53).

'In all these ways, the actions of the kinsman-redeemer reflect what God has done for His larger human family' (Hale and Thorson 2007: 513-514).

God functions through his actions as the perfect example for his people. Knowing the history, and thus what the Lord has done for the Israelites, is important to understand his laws. Knowledge of the OT is also of significance in understanding the contemporary relevance of Jesus' sacrifice.

The last method to be discussed in this paper, is that of atonement. The Hebrew word 'kôpher', which means 'ransom', is closely related to atonement. The word 'ransom' can be found in Exodus 30:12-15. Here it is an act of the people to make an atonement for their souls. Atonement often relates to the ransom price, which people needed to pay, for sin. In Isaiah 43:1-4 it is God himself who promises to pay the ransom for his people. Several scholars state that these verses demonstrate God's love for his people. Because of this love, God is prepared to pay a high ransom for the deliverance of Israel from Babylon (cf. Koole 1997: 283; Wiersbe 2008: 52). The Persian empire gave the Israelites back their (relative) freedom, but in exchange for this act received large additions in Africa (cf. Andreasen 2001: 163).

The line of salvation throughout the OT

'And God saw everything that he had made, and, behold, it was very good' (Genesis 1:31). God created everything and everything was without falsity. Salvation was not needed until the fall of humankind. Genesis 3 narrates a dramatic change in this situation. Adam and Eve were banned

from the garden of Eden, but not without a promise of salvation:

'And I will put enmity between thee and the woman, and between thy seed and her seed; it shall bruise thy head, and thou shalt bruise his heel' (Genesis 3:15).

This is the promise of salvation that echoes throughout Scripture, as will become clear in the following part of this paper.

Salvation in the Old Testament is not discussed primarily in terms of 'going to heaven', but in terms of belonging to God as his people. The flood story underlines God's intention. God want to restore and salvage humankind. As mentioned earlier, this was a material salvation, but one of significant value. After the flood God made a covenant with Noah (cf. Genesis 9). Sánchez (1989: 153) makes the following note on this event:

'...the covenant made with Noah (unlike the subsequent covenants with Abraham, Moses, Israel, etc.) was made with *all creation*. Standing as a memorial and a sign of that cosmic covenant, the rainbow was to be forever a witness to God's fidelity'.

After Noah the story proceeds with Abraham, who was called out of Ur in to the land Canaan.

'Salvation comes because God calls in grace and sinners respond by faith (Ephesians 2:8-9; 2 Thessalonian 2:13-14)... Abraham did not know the true God, and had done nothing to deserve knowing him, but God graciously called him' (Wiersbe 2007: 57).

One might say that God called Abraham out of boundage to relational salvation.

In Genesis 15:13-14 God makes a remarkable promise. God told Abraham that his offspring will be in another country (Egypt) as slaves, but that he will finally salvage them. Johnson (2001) explains that after the covenant (Genesis 15) God made with Abraham, God even passed between the dismembered halves of animals in a self-maledictory oath. By doing this God illustrates: 'If I ever leave you, may I myself be torn apart'. Exodus narrates the promise, which God made to Abraham, and even presenting himself as a real kinsman-redeemer (Exodus 6:6-7). God saves the Israelites from Pharaoh, who wore a headdress with a serpent attached to it. According to Howey (1955: 22) this

'was not only regarded as the badge of royalty, but was also a protector, and credited with power to destroy any who might lay sacrilegious hands on the Pharaoh.'

The reader might call attention to the first promise of salvation given in Genesis 3:15. Now Israel encounters a visual serpent on Pharaohs head. Pharaoh bruised the people in slavery, but he is crushed by the wondrous salvation of God.

As the story unfolds through the OT, it is God who saves individuals as well as the people of Israel time and again from oppression, diseases, and separation from God. Prophets were used by God to call the people back to live a holy life, with the promises of Deuteronomy 28 always present in the back of their minds.

The exile to Babylon awoke the desire to re-establish the Davidic dynasty. After the salvation from exile, foretold in Isaiah 43:1-4, Israel tried to rebuild this kingdom. Israel considered this not only to be a national restoration (Ezekiel 36:24, 37:12), but also a prelude to the expected messianic advent that would usher in religious restoration (Malachi 4:5-6 cf. Ezekiel 36:25-27, 37:14; Strauss 1995: 37-40). However, despite the efforts, the post-exilic community came to realize that the prophetic ideals of restoration had not been met, and that religious restoration, and the promised 'Anointed'

still lay in the future (Price 2005). Israel held its expectation of salvation, which had to be accomplished through the promised messiah, and they had 'common themes to the expectation. Based on *what they knew from* the Torah and writings, those common themes would include kinship, priesthood, and warfare' (Porter 2007: 30; italics mine).

Salvation in contemporary time

Knowing how God saves throughout the OT makes it easier to understand what Jesus did. During his ministry he healed people from diseases, and other shortcomings. By doing this, he did what God did in the OT. Being saved from death or sickness does not automatically mean that one wants to be restored in the relationship with God. In Luke 17:12-19 Jesus healed ten lepers, only one came back to thank him. Just as God did not force Noah's family into the ark, so did Jesus not force the lepers to thank him.

Herzog compares the ministry of Jesus with that of a kinsman-redeemer. In the OT it was Yahweh who became the gó-el, who rescued

'the people from slavery, and now, once again, a new redeemer, acting on Yahweh's behalf had done the same thing... Wherever God's people were in bondage to Satan (eg. Luke 13:10-17) or his demonic minions (eg. Mark 1:21-28; 5:1-20), Jesus searched them out to liberate them' (Herzog 2000: 208).

It was God who rescued his people from Pharaoh with an outstretched arm (Exodus 6:6-7 cf. Deuteronomy 26:8). Likewise Jesus salvaged with a mighty hand (that hand was pierced), and an outstretched arm (his arm was outstretched on the cross).

The likeness with that of a kinsman is revealed when Jesus takes his church as his bride. God took Israel as his wife and in 2 Corinthians 11:2 it is Paul who makes this comparison with the church and Jesus (cf. Revelations 19:7).

Finally a closer look is exerted to salvation through a ransom. God saved his people through a ransom (Isaiah 43:1-4) and now it was Jesus who gave his own life as a ransom (cf. 1 Timothy 2:5-6) In the OT sin or defilement needed to be covered with the blood of an innocent animal—this was the ransom. Eurales (2004: 24) remarks that this is a parallel with that which

'the NT teaches about Christ, the Lamb of God. He was the innocent sacrifice who bore our sins—those of us who received His gift of salvation' (eg. Revelations 5:9).

Jesus is called the second Adam (1 Corinthians 15:45) and this reminds the reader of what happened in Genesis. The first Adam brought sin into the world, but God did not leave him without a promise (Genesis 3:15). By crucifying Jesus the enemy bruised his heel, which was not lethal in the end. Jesus however will return and bruise the head of the enemy, which will put an end to all misery (cf. Revelations 20:10).

Conclusion

In the beginning everything was very good. There was no need for salvation in what ever way. But with the fall of man the necessity of salvation was imperative. The initiative came from God, who

made the first promise, straight after the condemnation of Adam and Eve.

Salvation emerges through the OT in several ways. There are the non-religious and the supernatural salvations. In the supernatural deliverances God shows himself as a loving God. He is the one who becomes the perfect Kinsman, and is even prepared to pay high ransoms for his people.

Up to the exile the Israelites saw salvation in the 'here and now' setting. It was to be prosperous, to stay alive, to be released from sin, and to have their own land. The concept of being saved for an afterlife and the resurrection became more substantial in later Judaism, and finally in Christianity.

In salvation God's character can be recognized. He is the God of great power, who humbled himself and became human in order to be the greatest kinsman-redeemer of all times.

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