

Salvation:

Of the many Hebrew words used to signify salvation, *yasa* (to save, help in distress, rescue, deliver, set free) appears most frequently in the Old Testament.

Commonly, the deliverance of which the Old Testament speaks is material in nature, though there are important exceptions. In contrast, the employment of *soteria* in the New Testament, though it may include material preservation, usually signifies a deliverance with special spiritual significance. In addition to the notion of deliverance the Bible also uses salvation to denote health, well-being, and healing.

Broadly speaking, one might say that salvation is the overriding theme of the entire Bible. But since it is a multidimensional theme with a wide range of meaning, simple definitions are impossible.

The biblical writers speak of salvation as a reality with at once spiritual and physical, individual and communal, objective and subjective, eternal and historical dimensions. Since the biblical writers view salvation as a historical reality, the temporal dimensions of past, present, and future further intensify and deepen the concept.

Salvation is a process with a beginning and an end. Further, salvation involves the paradox of human freedom and divine election. Despite the complexity of these dimensions, the Bible constantly speaks about salvation in the context of some very simple and concrete relationships between humans and God, between human beings, and between human beings and nature. God is the main actor throughout, from the deliverance of Noah's family to the great multitude who shout "Salvation belongs to our God, who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb!" ([Rev 7:10](#)).

The Old Testament.

In general the Old Testament writers see salvation as a reality more physical than spiritual, more social than individual. Where individuals are singled out it seems to be for the good of the community.

For example, the Genesis narrative develops the theme of God's blessing, which though resting on certain individuals, renders them agents for some greater work of God. Joseph's rise to fame in Egypt preserves the lives of his entire family ([Gen 45:4-7](#)).

Through Noah's faithfulness God brings salvation to his family as well as animal life (Gen. 7-9). And the blessing of the promise of nationhood and land for Abraham was not only for his descendants but for all families on the earth ([Gen 12:1-3](#)).

After 430 years in Egypt, an entire people is delivered through Moses (Exod. 1-12). Through Esther's rise to power the Jewish people are spared annihilation ([Esther 7](#)).

Despite the importance of human agency, salvation is attributed above all to God. None but God can save ([Isa 43:14](#) ; [Hosea 1:7](#)). He is the keeper of his flock ([Eze 34](#)) and on him alone one waits for a saving word to penetrate the silence ([Psalm 62](#)). Idolatry is an illusion, for the salvation of Israel is in the Lord ([Jer 3:23](#)).

God is the warrior not Moses who triumphs gloriously over Pharaoh's armies at the sea ([Exod 15](#)).

Salvation is something to stand and watch, for "The Lord will fight for you; and you need only be still" ([Exod 14:13](#)).

"In repentance and rest is your salvation;

in quietness and trust is your strength" summons Isaiah ([30:15](#)). The content of God's salvation includes personal and national deliverance from one's enemies, deliverance from slavery ([Deut 24:18](#)), ongoing protection and preservation from evil (Ps. 121), escape from death ([Psalm 68:19](#)), healing ([Psalm 69:29](#) ; [Jer 17:14](#)), inheritance of land, descendants, and long life.

Salvation from sin,

though not a dominant concern, is by no means absent, especially in the prophets. As much as he is concerned for Israel's national restoration, Ezekiel stresses the need for salvation from uncleanness, iniquity, and idolatry ([36:22-32](#)).

Here salvation involves the gift of a new heart of flesh and new spirit, which will finally empower his people to keep the commandments, after which comes habitation in the land. In this passage, too, we encounter a common refrain: such salvation, when it comes, will be neither for the sake of Israel nor her deeds, but for God and his glory, which has been profaned and which now must be vindicated among the nations.

Isaiah tells of a salvation still on the way, which will be achieved through the vicarious suffering of the Servant (chap. 53) who bears the sin of many. This salvation will last forever ([51:6](#)).

The anticipated salvation of the prophetic writings manifests a tension similar to that which pervades the New Testament. While salvation is a fait accompli God saved Israel from slavery in Egypt unto a covenant relationship with himself Israel still awaits God's salvation. God had saved Israel in the past, and therefore God can be expected to deliver in the future.

Whatever else salvation may be from a biblical perspective, its dimensions of "settled past" and "anticipated future" show it in its widest scope to be an elongated reality covering the entire trajectory of history.

This recognition has helped recent biblical scholarship to avoid the earlier pitfall of relegating the role of the Old Testament to that of mere preparation or precursor for the gospel. One cannot escape the fact that for the Jews of the Old Testament salvation was not an abstract concept, but a real and present experience.

The psalms are replete with praise for God's salvation, which is experienced as joy ([51:12](#)). It is a cup of thanksgiving lifted to God ([116:13](#)) and a horn ([18:2](#)). Elsewhere salvation is depicted as a torch ([Isa 62:1](#)), a well ([Isa 12:3](#)), and a shield ([2 Sam 22:36](#)).

The New Testament.

The advent name "Immanuel, " "God with us, " signifies momentous progress in the history of salvation. In Matthew's Gospel the angel tells Joseph that Mary's child is conceived of the Holy Spirit, and that he is "to give him the name Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins" ([1:21-23](#)).

The name "Jesus" (derived from the Hebrew Joshua, itself means salvation.

The purpose for the Son of Man's coming is to seek out and save the lost ([Luke 19:10](#)). The New Testament continues the Old Testament affirmation that salvation belongs to God alone, but with greater specificity. Now it is God's presence in and to the man Jesus that proves decisive.

Peter's certainty of this relation between "Jesus Christ of Nazareth, whom you crucified" and the "God [who raised him] from the dead" moves him to the exclusive confession that salvation belongs only to the name of Jesus Christ ([Acts 4:10-12](#)).

In Jesus' teaching salvation is linked to the advance of God's kingdom, which is in turn linked to Jesus' himself. By using God's kingdom as a circumlocution for salvation, Jesus deepens the Old Testament conviction that salvation belongs to God, for the kingdom signifies a sphere of reality in which God reigns sovereign.

The disciples themselves responded to Jesus' teaching about the kingdom with the question "Who then can be saved?" ([Mark 10:23-26](#)). That Jesus understood himself to be that bringer of God's kingdom is evident in the claim following his synagogue reading, "Today this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing" ([Luke 4:21](#)). Salvation belongs to those who follow Jesus, bringer and embodiment of God's kingdom.

Salvation is described:

Salvation is described as the mystery of God that is now revealed ([Eph 3:9](#) ; [6:19](#)),

(a) a plan conceived before the foundations of the world ([Eph 1:3-14](#)),

(b) a light for revelation to the Gentiles ([Luke 2:30-32](#)),

(c) a transition from death to life ([John 5:24](#)),

(d) a message especially for sinners ([Mark 2:17](#)),

(e) a gift of grace through faith not of works ([Eph 2:8-9](#)),

That for which the whole creation groans ([Rom 8:22](#)),

Revelation of God's righteousness to faith and for faith ([Rom 1:16-17](#)),

Justification that comes through faith ([Rom 4:22-25](#)),

Reconciliation ([2 Cor 5:18-19](#)),

Redemption ([Rom 8:23](#)).

In response to Nicodemus's statement, salvation is said to be a spiritual birth, a birth from above without which one cannot enter the kingdom ([John 3:1-11](#)).

Salvation means death to and freedom from sin ([Rom 6](#)),

a new perspective that transcends the human point of view and participation in a new creation ([Rom 5:16-17](#)),

Peace with God ([Rom 5:1](#)),

Life as adopted children of God's ([Gal 4:4](#)),

Baptism into Christ's death ([Rom 6:4](#)),

The reception of the Holy Spirit ([Rom 5](#) , [8](#)).

Salvation encompasses both the physical and spiritual dimensions of life, having relevance for the whole person.

On the physical side, entrance into the kingdom requires attention to earthly needs, especially those of the poor. Jesus demands that a wealthy man give his riches to the poor ([Mark 10:17-22](#)).

The salvation that comes to Zacchaeus's house inspires him to give half his possessions to the poor ([Luke 19:8-10](#)).

Care for the poor was a regular function of the earliest Christian communities ([Acts 9:36](#) ; [Acts 10:4](#) [Acts 10:31](#) ; [24:17](#) ; [Gal 2:10](#) ; [James 2:1-7](#)).

But for Jesus the physical and spiritual dimensions are held very close together. Forgiveness of sins and physical healing frequently coexist, as in the healing of the paralytic ([Mark 2:1-12](#)). Other healings done in Jesus' name call attention to the intimate connection ([Acts 3:16](#) ; [4:7-12](#)) among spirit, mind, and body. In these examples salvation means not only forgiveness of sin but mitigation of its effects.

Salvation also extends beyond the parameters of national Jewish identity. On at least two occasions Jesus corrects (or at least sidesteps) national expectations concerning the kingdom once in response to the disciples' question ([Acts 1:6-8](#)) and once on the Emmaus road ([Luke 24:25-26](#)).

Since Jesus' death was for all people ([John 11:51](#)), repentance and forgiveness of sins were to be proclaimed to all nations ([Luke 24:47](#)). This gospel, says Paul, was given in advance in the form of God's promise to bless all the nations through Abraham ([Gal 3:8](#)).

The objective basis and means of salvation is God's sovereign and gracious choice to be "God with us" in the person of Jesus Christ, who is described as both author and mediator of salvation ([Heb 2:10](#) ; [7:25](#)).

But the movement of Jesus' life goes through the cross and resurrection. It is therefore "Christ crucified" that is of central importance for salvation ([1 Cor 1:23](#)), for "Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures" ([1 Cor 15:3](#)) and was handed to death for our trespasses ([Rom 4:25](#)). What Jesus did in our name he also did in our place, giving "his life as a ransom for many" ([Matt 20:28](#)).

And if Christ demonstrated his love by dying when we were still sinners, how much more shall we now be saved by his life? ([Rom 5:8-10](#)). So critical is the resurrection to the future hope of salvation that "If Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile; you are still in your sins" ([1 Cor 15:17](#)).

The subjective basis of salvation is personal repentance and faith, often associated closely with water baptism. John the Baptist preached a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins ([Matt 3:2](#) ; [Mark 1:4](#)), a message echoed by Peter ([Acts 2:38](#)) and Paul ([Acts 20:21](#)). Jesus said salvation required belief in him ([Mark 16:15](#) ; [John 6:47](#)). Paul enjoined confession with the mouth that "Jesus is Lord" and belief that God raised him from the dead ([Rom 10:8-9](#)). The writer of Hebrews suggests that the hearing of the gospel is of no value unless combined with faith ([4:1](#)).

The New Testament articulates salvation in terms of past, present, and future time.

In Christ we were elected before the foundation of the world ([Eph 1:4](#)).

In hope we were saved ([Rom 8:24](#)). Yet the cross is the power of God for those who are being saved ([1 Cor 1:18](#)). Likewise Paul's readers are admonished to work out their salvation with fear and trembling ([Php 2:12](#)).

And there is yet a salvation that lies waiting to be revealed in the last time ([1 Peter 1:5](#)), a redemption for which we groan inwardly ([Rom 8:23](#)).

For Paul, the past dimension of salvation is generally conceived as justification, redemption, and reconciliation, while its present dimension is depicted in terms of the Spirit's sanctifying work. Its future dimension is said to be glorification, the culmination of the saving process wherein believers will experience Christ's presence in new and resurrected bodies no longer burdened by the vestiges of sin.