

THE MEANING OF SALVATION

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SALVATION IS AND has long been a key word in popular christian belief and speech. The unhappy phrase 'saving one's soul' is for many the very compendium of success in the whole christian endeavour. The phrase is unhappy on several counts. First, it is one's self that is saved; man is a self, not a 'soul' (and the hebrew and greek words mean the self). It is platonism, not biblical faith, to identify man with a soul. Secondly, the salvation of one's soul suggests a highly individualized personal achievement; the phrase says nothing of the social character of salvation, by which is meant at least this, that no one is saved alone. Any one who is saved, whatever that means – and it is the purpose of this article to discuss the meaning of salvation – is saved in, with and through a group. His relations with the group are an essential element in the process of salvation.

The use of the word salvation in popular belief and language is well supported by the bible. Any treatment of biblical theology will show how frequently the word is used in both Old Testament and New Testament of the acts of God. The same books will disclose that there is some semantic difference between the hebrew and the greek word groups which are both rendered in english by save, saviour, salvation etc. In hebrew any threat to life, limb or welfare was often described in a metaphor of military or personal combat: 'I am in straits', 'I am in a tight place'. Deliverance from this claustrophobic threat was giving one room, or space; and this seems to be the etymology of the hebrew verb which is translated 'save'. The greek word does not have the same etymology, and originally it means deliver from danger; but it also means save in the sense of preserve or maintain, or save by doing a good deed – surely an extension of the idea of deliver from danger. Two uses of the word in hellenistic-roman times, one quasi-religious and the other religious, had some effect on the New Testament use of word. 'Saviour' (*sōtēr*) was often applied to kings and to the roman emperor as an honorific title. Sometimes it did refer to military defence; more

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frequently it referred to some gift or munificence (such as building an aqueduct) or to no particular act or gift at all, in which case it was hardly distinct from titles like 'benefactor' (*euergetēs*). The rhetoric of honorific titles in the hellenistic-roman world sometimes approaches the amusing. This use I call quasi-religious because such titles belong to the king and caesar cults of the time. The religious use is the title of saviour applied to healing gods, in particular the most venerated healer of roman times, Asklepios, whose shrine at Epidaurus was decorated with *ex voto* tablets and testimonials and symbols of healing not unlike Lourdes. The biblical echo of this use is found in the gospels; most uses of the word 'save' in the gospels refer to a healing done by Jesus. Possibly it was the religious and political use of the word *sōtēr* which is responsible for the reticence with which the title is given to Jesus – twenty-four times, but only seven of these occur outside the pastoral and the catholic epistles. This means that the title was given only in the later period of the New Testament, in contrast with another title, 'Lord' (*kyrios*), which also had political and religious overtones.

It was an article of israelite faith that Yahweh indeed saves and that no one else saves. In particular other gods cannot save.¹ Men and human means cannot save.² Yahweh first revealed himself as saviour in the exodus from Egypt, and the exodus is the paradigm saving act to which other acts are likened. Second Isaiah likened the restoration of Jerusalem to a new exodus; indeed, this was a greater saving act than the exodus. In the exodus Yahweh created a people, but in the restoration he raised a people from the dead.

That Yahweh alone saves does not imply that he uses no human means through which he accomplishes his purpose. Thus the king is a saving figure, and those who are in distress can invoke the king directly.³ In the second of those passages the king, whose kingdom and capital city were experiencing a military crisis of siege, expressed in anger his sense of powerlessness to save in personal need when the national need hung in the balance. But when the personal need was laid before him, his anger burst out at the prophet whose threats, he believed, had put the kingdom in dire need. The passage well illustrates the belief in the saving power of the king, who could be invoked by a private citizen even in a critical moment for the nation. The judges of Israel were sent by Yahweh as saviours. In

¹ Isai 45, 20; 46, 7; Jer 2, 28.

² Isai 26, 18; Ps 44, 7; Ps 33, 17.

³ 2 Sam 14,4; 2 Kg 6, 26.

both the judges and the kings we see the type of leadership called charismatic, which means inspired by the spirit of Yahweh to act beyond one's expected capacity. When Yahweh saved through human persons he empowered the person to save with certainty and completeness.

Yet Yahweh could also save through unwitting instruments. Second Isaiah clearly identified Cyrus of Persia as the saviour of Israel; he gave Cyrus the titles which previously had belonged to the davidic king, and this implied rather clearly that the saving power which had once belonged to that dynasty had passed from it.

Allusions to salvation lead to a definition of salvation as deliverance from a threat to life or limb caused by some external danger. This last element distinguishes the hebrew salvation from the greek salvation, for the hebrew bible does not speak of healing as a saving act. This salvation is in the first instance collective; it is sought and received by a group, Israel or some smaller group. It is in the second instance personal. By a transfer of meaning salvation also means deliverance from the threat posed by an adversary at law. The israelite always thought of his own cause as the righteous cause, and was he so different from us in this respect? Hence the legal adversary was an aggressor as much and as surely as the hostile soldier or the bandit who threatened life, limb or property. Against the adversary the israelite petitioned God for a saving act. This type of salvation is common to those Psalms which express the 'piety of the poor'. It is a sad reflection on the ancient town and village communities that the poor so often regarded the processes of law as a threat from which they could ask Yahweh to save them; one can make the same sad reflection about many more recent communities. When the very channels of salvation which law and society establish become the threats, then truly there is no salvation in man, but only in God.

The common idea of salvation reflected in most Old Testament passages appears to be somewhat naive, and indeed it is; for what kind of salvation is it that gives only temporary escape with no assurance that one will not fall into the same or another peril? Amos knew this kind of false security;⁴ he spoke of the man who escaped a lion to encounter a bear, and entered the security of his house to be bitten by a serpent when he leaned against a wall. In this passage Amos speaks of the day of Yahweh as a day of judgment; when Yahweh has decided to judge, he has determined not to save.

⁴ Amos 5, 19.

In such a time Hosea puts in the mouth of Yahweh the declaration that he is the destruction of Israel.⁵ The destruction which Yahweh decrees is sure and total; should not the saving act of Yahweh also be full and total?

The answer to this question, we have said, is somewhat naive; at times biblical writers seem to take a childlike attitude towards Yahweh. When the child returns home, the child feels absolutely secure, unless the child happens to live in a place like Viet Nam. Children in such places lose any sense of security and any hope of salvation early in life. The israelite at times could think of security as sitting in the shade of his vine and his fig tree with none to terrify.⁶ Such delightfully simple desires, it seems, should have been easy to satisfy; and such passages manifest an essential element of the subjective sense of security, which is the ability to forget about possible or even certain future dangers and to enjoy the security of the present. For such a sense to maintain itself a reasonably stable social and political order must be postulated, the sure and firm ground which always returns to stability even if it is shaken. The course of israelite history did not permit the israelites to retain their simple sense of security. When national and personal conditions make the nation or the person look like the sure loser described by Amos, then what was the israelite to think of the power of Yahweh to save – or granting the power, did Yahweh have the will to save?

The answer to this question is ultimately eschatological; and the use of this word leads us into an area of faith and theology which challenges both faith and understanding. The israelite after the collapse of the religious and political systems of Israel and Judah could no longer look to the land and the people of Yahweh as the child looks to the home to which he can always return; the home had been burned out and abandoned. Not improbably the first element in an exilic and post-exilic theology of salvation was the restoration of the home; and this is the theme of Second Isaiah, who uses the words save and salvation more in a given number of lines than any other biblical writer. What is suggested but not explicit in Second Isaiah is the element which would give this salvation the permanence which pre-exilic Judah and Israel did not furnish. It is suggested with sufficient clarity; the new Israel will be a morally regenerate nation, and it will not be threatened by its own wickedness, the thing which finally brought the judgment of

⁵ Hos 13, 9.

⁶ Mic 4, 4.

Yahweh upon the kingdoms. To call this new Israel eschatological is somewhat inexact when it is compared with some refinements added by other writers; but some would say that it is impossible to use the word eschatological exactly.

Even such a refined idea of the salvation of Israel says nothing of the salvation of others; and in much of the writings of the Old Testament the salvation of other nations is not a matter of interest or concern. At a time which cannot be set exactly but which surely can be no later than the exilic period, it was seen that the idea of a God who saved only his own people was intolerably narrow. This must be put as early as the exilic period because the theme is clear in Second Isaiah; the great poem⁷ invites the nations to turn from gods who cannot save to the only God who can save. This poem, like most other poems in which the theme is expressed, sees the salvation of the nations as communicated to them through accepting the israelite faith. Israel alone knew the true God, and it was not God's intention to reveal himself through any other channel. Salvation for the nations lay in submission to the reign of Yahweh; there are implications in this statement which the Old Testament writers did not make explicit.

It is rather difficult to synthesize the Old Testament ideas of salvation. It includes freedom from enemies, especially freedom from conquerors, freedom from poverty – although this does not mean universal wealth – freedom from the dangers of nature such as drought, earthquake and other perils native to Palestine, and, as we have seen, freedom from the wickedness of man to man. This condition can be thought of either within the traditional social and political framework of Israel or, as in Second Isaiah, without it. The reign of Yahweh does not of itself imply the re-establishment of the reign of the dynasty of David. Yahweh can save through human means; he can also save without them. As the historical and geographical horizons of post-exilic jews broadened, more and more they came to think of the saving act of Yahweh as something which was not to be accomplished through human means. Belief in salvation could in this period perhaps be summarized in the conviction that a credible God could not forever tolerate the world which man had made.

In the New Testament, of course, salvation is synthesized completely in the person and the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

⁷ Isai 45, 14-25.

Radicated as the person and the act of Jesus are in the Old Testament, they nevertheless shatter the horizons of the Old Testament. This writer has said elsewhere that Jesus is intelligible only as the saviour of Israel, the messiah of Israel; the apostolic Church proclaimed him as messiah both to jews and to gentiles. Only as the messiah of Israel can Jesus be distinguished from political, military, philosophical, scientific and other secular messiahs, just the saviour types in which men have always put their faith, as they put their faith now. Only Jesus claims to save man from his sin; he does not claim to save him from war, oppression, disease, poverty – and now from the threat of extinction in his own garbage. Deliverance from sin will accomplish lesser salvations; deliverance from lesser evils is unreal without salvation from sin. The gospel proclamation of salvation is a very simple message, framed for very simple people. It takes only an average IQ and an elementary education to grasp the proposition that sin is the radical evil of mankind. It takes a charismatic faith to accept the proposition as true. It is the secular messiahs who furnish the modern competition to Jesus the saviour.

Salvation from sin means, of course, that God forgives the repentant sinner; that is, I believe, the first idea which comes to the mind of most christians when salvation is preached or explained to them. They are comforted by a doctrine which tells them that they need not bear the full consequences of the evil which they are sure they will do. Perhaps this is not exactly what the doctrine of salvation means. Certainly it means not only that God forgives sin; it means also that he has in Jesus given man the resources by which man can overcome sin. This means the resources to cease committing sin, to abandon sin as a way of life. We do not often enough reflect that the doctrine of forgiveness by itself offers very little of a programme for changing the world. By itself the doctrine is taken to mean that God is resigned to taking us as we are, whereas the doctrine of salvation, if it means anything, means that God is entirely dissatisfied with us as we are. To accept man in his confirmed sinfulness is not the import of such themes as deliverance from the slavery of sin,⁸ a new creation,⁹ rebirth and regeneration,¹⁰ and the indwelling of the Spirit.¹¹ God offers man a new life and a new world, not merely forgiveness for the mess man has made of the old world. It has often been noticed that an excess of eschatology relieves the faithful of any real sense of obligation in the present world.

⁸ Rom 6, 6, 17, 20.

¹⁰ Jn 1, 13; 3, 3-8.

⁹ 2 Cor 5, 17; Gal 6, 15; Col 1, 15.

¹¹ Rom 8, 9; 1 Cor 3, 16; 6, 19; 8, 11.

Yet it is true that the New Testament presents man's salvation as accomplished in principle, not in fact. Nothing can be added to the saving act of Jesus, and no other human system besides the community of love which he founded has the resources by which salvation can be converted from principle to act. It was the delay of the Parousia which moved the author of the second epistle of Peter to say that a thousand years are as one day with the Lord.¹² The salvation of mankind, as contrasted with the salvation of the individual person, seems no nearer than it was in the first century of our era. A mass fear of apocalyptic destruction has been felt before in history, but never so widely and so deeply. That faith in the salvation of mankind is not easy to maintain in a century when serious men say that even total extermination is a real possibility or even a near probability needs no explanation. The apocalyptic christian has less difficulty adjusting to this, or ought to have; but when the threat of God's judgment begins to take form and shape in his mind he too finds it difficult. Can there really be an end of the world? And is it to such an apocalyptic end that the saving act of God in Jesus moves? I happened to read lately about the eruption of Mont Pelée in the island of Martinique in 1902. The chronicler tells us, with remarkable exactness, that 29,933 people were killed in three minutes. More than this, however, were killed at Hiroshima in less than three minutes. If one thinks of such catastrophes occurring globally, one nearly gives human life the same value as the life of the fruit fly; I believe the phrase belongs to Paul Ehrlich.

And since in no hypothesis can I make human life and the life of the fruit fly of equal value, I cannot believe that apocalyptic catastrophe is the terminal phase of the saving acts of God. I must believe that the power against sin which is incarnate in Jesus Christ and enduring in his Church is stronger than that with which it struggles, and that it will prevail. At this moment in history I could get favourable odds in the betting market, especially since the pessimists are convinced that I would not live to enjoy my winnings as they would not live to feel the pain of their losses. One can ask, as the disciples asked about the eighteen on whom the tower fell: were all those who lived in St Pierre in Martinique sinners? Jesus answered: Unless you repent, you will all perish much the same way. If Jesus had not seen much future in repentance, he would have had to recognize the saving act as a failure. Now back to St Pierre,

¹² 2 Pet 3, 8.

briefly. The point of the book is that the town should have been evacuated a week earlier. The local authorities, afraid that they would strengthen the opposition party by yielding to the pressure for evacuation, refused to permit any one to leave. The local authorities too were in St Pierre at eight on easter sunday morning. Somehow or other the catastrophe becomes rational – that is to say, human. Our misfortune is not to live under a volcano but to live with people like those who governed St Pierre, or like those who dropped the bomb on Hiroshima. It is from this human failure that Jesus promises salvation, and a salvation which is not purely eschatological. God has enabled us to do something about those who do value human life and the life of the fruit fly on the same scale, such as the government of the town of St Pierre and, on occasions, the government of the United States of America.

I may seem to have turned from the saving act of God to the saving act of man; and this is incompatible with the biblical faith that man cannot save himself. I have no intention of abandoning this biblical faith; but it is also biblical faith that man is not a passive object of salvation. Man is saved by being changed; he must accept the change and make his decisions in terms of the change which he has experienced. He can no longer deal with his fellow men as if the incarnation had never happened. In every social exchange on every level, he must remember that the saving power of God has entered the world, and at the moment that saving power resides in him. If he inhibits the power it will be ineffective in this context; and it is possible for man to inhibit the power. It may even be ineffective if he does all he can; and if it is ineffective as far as he can see, it is little comfort that one day is with the Lord as a thousand years. He has no comfort except that, although he must die now, the saving power has not been extinguished in him.

A mysterious element of the mystery of salvation is man's part in the saving act. Jesus the saviour lives in the Church, we love to say, that Church which is the extension of the incarnation in time and space. We are satisfied if he lives in the Pope and the hierarchy as king saviour. But he lives as saviour in each of the baptized, through whom the saving act must be mediated if it is to reach the whole world. We profess liturgically in the creed that we believe that Jesus saved us by his death. Apparently we believe in the sufficiency of his saving act to this extent, that the death of no one else has any saving value, and certainly not our own. Our share in the saving act, we think, is by doing something, or at least by saying

something; it is not credible that our portion in the history of salvation should be chronicled as suffered, died and was buried – even though we believe that the chronicle will be followed by the notation ‘rose from the dead’.

Yet if there were a better way for the christian to share the saving act, one might expect some other recommendation than the gospel sayings that one must take up one’s cross and deny oneself and follow Jesus; the context makes it reasonably clear where one is to follow him. There ought to be something more active than the saying that one must lose oneself to find oneself, and that one who loses his life for the gospel will find it. And Jesus need not have said that the disciple is not above the master. I do not wish to enter into any quarrel about the ‘very words’ of Jesus in these contexts; nor will I entertain the discussion that a modern interpreter is better qualified to give us the ‘real mind’ of Jesus than the primitive Church which presented us with these sayings. The nature of the saving act has not changed in the extension of the incarnation in time and space; and the lack of force in the words of the Church can be easily connected with the success of the Church in avoiding the suffering saving act. Maybe we have not been changed enough.

Ultimately, salvation is God, and we are saved by reaching a permanent union with God. Orthodox belief imposes upon us a degree of uncertainty concerning the permanence of our personal union with him; we are saved, as I have noticed, in principle and not in effect. But we may not doubt the permanence of the principle, which means that we may not doubt the power and will of God to save. And since he has willed to save us in a human society and not as scattered fragments, we may not doubt his ability to preserve that society which incarnates the resources of salvation. We have attained God in the sense that he has entered the world in Jesus Christ in a new way, a way which does not admit a departure or another dispensation of salvation. If we are not equal to our own share in the saving act, God can produce people who are equal. The saving act does not depend on us, nor does it end with us. It is just a bit arrogant, when we look at the failure of the Church, which is our failure, to say that God has no alternative left except a world catastrophe. He might just possibly come up with about a dozen men who could take his mandate to proclaim the gospel to all nations seriously. They will not do this from thrones, and they will probably not die of old age; but the gospel will be proclaimed.