

"Salvation" in the Old Testament: A Study of "yasha" (יָשָׁא)

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Introduction

"Are you saved?" bellowed the long-haired street preacher from a sidewalk outside Wrigley Field one warm day thirty years ago. It was my first encounter with this type of evangelism. I wondered how many passing Cub fans knew what it meant to be saved. I wondered how many cared. Storefront church signs and roadside billboards proclaim "Jesus Saves". Again, how many viewers understand – or care? Or do they think it's an ad about a Banco Popular customer pitching the bank's passbook accounts?

Surely our members grasp the concept of salvation. We preach it. We teach it. We sing it. Yet the very familiarity can lead to a ho-hum reaction to that word. While no one will say, "God gives me salvation. So, what else is new?" the word "salvation" doesn't usually fire the emotions and elicit loud cheers.

Why not? Has salvation become merely a theological concept, divorced from flesh-and-blood, real world meaning? Have people blinded themselves from seeing a need for any kind of rescue? Or have people convinced themselves that the only one they can rely on for rescue is themselves?

The New Testament (NT) certainly lays out clearly God's plan of salvation through the work of Jesus. But let's not ignore the crucial role the Old Testament (OT) plays in helping us understand the richness of the concept of salvation. The OT blesses us with a deeper appreciation of what salvation means for people living in this real-life sin-filled world.

This paper will attempt to help us value all the more the many OT references to salvation that derive from the Hebrew root "yasha" (יָשָׁא). May God bless our study!

What does "yasha" mean?

The principal Hebrew term translated 'salvation' is "yasha" and its cognates, used 353 times in the OT. Its basic meaning is 'bring into a spacious environment', but it carries from the beginning the metaphorical sense of 'freedom from limitation' and the means to that; *i.e.* deliverance from factors which constrain and confine.¹ A stronger being brings deliverance to the weak or oppressed by superior intervention.² So in the Niphal it can be translated, "**be saved, be delivered, be rescued**". In the Hiphil it can mean "**save, deliver, give victory, help, be safe, take vengeance, preserve**". "Yesha" (יֵשָׁא) can be translated "**salvation, deliverance, Savior, victory**".

In the Septuagint the verb "sozo" (σώζω) and the noun "soteria" (σωτηρία) are most often used to translate the different forms of "yasha". These words are frequently used in the NT to mean "save" and "salvation".

¹ Douglas, J. (1982; Published in electronic form by Logos Research Systems, 1996). *New Bible Dictionary*. Includes index. (electronic ed. of 2nd ed.) (page 1057). Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House.

² Kittel, G. (1985; Published in electronic form by Logos Research Systems, 1996). *Theological dictionary of the New Testament* (electronic ed.) (Page 1132). Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans.

In what contexts is "yasha" used?

Who does the saving, rescuing, or delivering? Let's start out with the obvious. The deliverance comes from somewhere outside the party in need. One does not save or rescue himself. In the NT Jesus is mocked for not saving himself while on the cross. I found no OT references where "yasha" is used for saving oneself. The deceptiveness of Satan and the wicked heart may fool many into thinking they can save themselves. But no support for this lie can be found in Scripture.

So where does deliverance come from? In some instances it may come about through men. In some of those cases there seems to be no particular theological significance. David and his men went and fought the Philistines and *saved* the people of Keilah. (1 Sa 23:5)³ The elders of Jabesh were waiting for someone to *rescue* the besieged city. (1 Sa 11:3) Jephthah, when engaged in a great struggle with the Ammonites, told the men of Ephraim, "You didn't *save* me out of their hands." (Jdg 12:2) Judges, Nazirites, and especially kings had the task of delivering Israel. The Israelites told Gideon, "You have *saved* us out of the hand of Midian." (Jdg 8:22)

However, human agency does not necessarily exclude God's ultimate agency. The LORD promised David, "By my servant David I will *rescue* my people Israel from the hand of the Philistines and from the hand of all their enemies." (2 Sa 3:18) Even when the Scriptures don't spell that out as clearly as they do in David's words concerning Goliath, ("All those gathered here will know that it is not by sword or spear that the LORD *saves*; for the battle is the LORD's") (1 Sa 17:47), it is God who ultimately enables the deliverance. In addition, we see Christ as the fulfillment of the victorious king type, especially King David.

Sometimes men are unable to save, "like a warrior powerless to *save*" (Je 14:9) The OT gives repeated reminders about human limitations. Gideon's band was reduced to 300 men, for the LORD said to Gideon, "You have too many men for me to deliver Midian into their hands. In order that Israel may not boast against me that her own strength has *saved* her, . . . (Jgd 7:2) Astrologers are powerless to save. Isaiah writes, "Let your astrologers come forward, those stargazers who make predictions month by month, let them *save* you from what is coming upon you. Surely they are like stubble; the fire will burn them up. They cannot even *save* themselves." (Is 47:13-14) Idols are powerless to save. Isaiah writes, "Ignorant are those who carry about idols of wood, who pray to gods that cannot *save*." (Is 45:20)

So who does the saving? Though God may use human agents, ultimately deliverance comes from the Lord. The sweet psalmist of Israel writes, "Praise be to the Lord, to God our *Savior*, who daily bears our burdens. Our God is a God who *saves*" (Ps 68:19-20) "Thus to know God at all is to know him as a saving God (Ho. 13:4 You shall acknowledge no God but me, no *Savior* except me) so that the words 'God' and 'Saviour' are virtually identical terms in the OT."⁴ When the OT speaks of salvation, typically God is the one who provides it.

Modern man often fails to view God in this light. People may look to themselves for help, rescue, and deliverance, as well as look to mankind in general, to technology, or to vague notions of everything working out alright. Seeing God as the agent of salvation or deliverance demands a belief in a very personal God, a God who acts in history. This is an ill fit for the popular notion of God as an idea or a belief, who is real only because you believe. They contend all religions and gods are equally real and valid because people believe they are real. Such fuzzy notions do little to engender trust in God to deliver. Vague spirituality does not equate God with Savior.

Salvation implies being saved or rescued from something. What are some of the difficulties or perils from which people need saving? In the NT salvation primarily involves forgiveness and the defeat of Satan. Although the OT points in this direction, most references speak of salvation from flesh-and-blood enemies and temporal catastrophes. God told Hezekiah he would soon die. In response to Hezekiah's prayer God added fifteen years to his life. Writing about this healing, Hezekiah said, "The LORD will *save* me, and we will sing with stringed instruments

³ All biblical citations are taken from *The Holy Bible: New International Version*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1984.

⁴ Douglas, p. 1057.

all the days of our lives in the temple of the LORD." (Is 38:20) Physical healing is a common picture of the spiritual healing Jesus provides. He fulfilled Isaiah's prophecy, "Then will the eyes of the blind be opened and the ears of the deaf unstopped. Then will the lame leap like a deer, and the mute tongue shout for joy (Is 35:5-6), not only to show compassion, and not only to identify himself as the Messiah, but also to picture the spiritual healing he came to provide for sin-sick souls through the forgiveness of sins.

Frequently the saving spoken of in the OT was from the hand of enemies. After Israel passed safely through the Red Sea, we read, "That day the LORD *saved* Israel from the hands of the Egyptians." (Ex 14:30) "The great normative instance of God's saving deliverance was the exodus (Ex. 12:40-14:31). The redemption from Egyptian bondage through the intervention of God at the Red Sea was determinative of all Israel's subsequent reflection on God's nature and activity. The exodus was the mould into which all the subsequent interpretation of the drama of Israel's history was poured. It was sung in worship (Ps. 66:1-7), retold in story (Dt. 6:20-24), re-enacted in ritual (Ex. 13:3-16). Thus the notion of salvation emerged from the exodus indelibly stamped with the dimension of God's mighty acts of deliverance in history."⁵

There are numerous other references to deliverance from enemies. For instance, Abner says, "For the LORD promised David, 'By my servant David I will *rescue* my people Israel from the hand of the Philistines and from the hand of all their enemies.'" (2 Sa 3:18) The psalmist writes about God, "You give us *victory* over our enemies, you put our adversaries to shame." (Ps 44:7) Certainly a parallel can be drawn between the enemies of OT Israel and the enemies of the NT Church. God's power to save Israel from the Pharaoh and his army, from the Philistines, or from any other enemy is predictive of his power over sin, death, the devil and all his hosts.

Jeremiah speaks of God's people being saved from a time of trouble and the land of exile, the just judgment of God for their sin. "It will be a time of trouble for Jacob, but he will be *saved* out of it. 'In that day,' declares the LORD Almighty, 'I will break the yoke off their necks and will tear off their bonds; no longer will foreigners enslave them. Instead, they will serve the LORD their God and David their king, whom I will raise up for them.' 'So do not fear, O Jacob my servant; do not be dismayed, O Israel,' declares the LORD. 'I will surely *save* you out of a distant place, your descendants from the land of their exile. Jacob will again have peace and security, and no one will make him afraid.'" (Je 30:7-10) Not only did this foretell the return from the Babylonian exile, but also our return from the exile of God's punishment for our sin. For we serve great David's greater son, the Messiah, as our King. We have been saved from a time of trouble, the eternal wrath of God.

Salvation may be not only offensive, but also defensive. In the face of danger or opposition, one may retreat to God as his refuge for safety. "My *salvation* and my honor depend on God; he is my mighty rock, my refuge." (Ps 62:7) God's people need not be tormented by worry. Yes, we will face danger and endure opposition. But God is on our side to protect and deliver us. This protective nature of salvation is seen in other concepts, such as the "shield of *victory*" (Ps 18:35), "the helmet of *salvation*" (Is 59:17), and the "garments of *salvation*" (Is 61:10). Salvation is not merely a momentary victory on the battlefield. It is also the safety and security needed to live life unafraid.

Lest we think OT believers had little understanding of salvation in a spiritual sense, we need to consider David's 51st Psalm. "Restore to me the joy of your *salvation*" (Ps 51:12), David prays. David had confessed his guilt in regard to his adulterous affair with Bathsheba. He pleaded for God's mercy and forgiveness. Now he prays for God's gift of joy that comes from knowing the incredible gift of God's salvation. He trusted that God had indeed rescued him, not from an earthly foe, but from the guilt and punishment of his own wretched deeds.

We should also note that the Hebrew root "yasha" and God's name are combined in certain proper names that celebrate the LORD as the deliverer. *Isaiah*, *Joshua*, and *Hosea* are examples. We remember that the name "Jesus" derives from "Joshua". "She will give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins." (Mt 1:21)

How does "yasha" help us understand what God has done for us in Christ?

⁵ Douglas, p. 1057.

Salvation through Christ seems merely an abstract concept to many. People can usually identify better with the concrete. Jesus told the Emmaus disciples – and us – that the OT points us to himself: "And beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, he explained to them what was said in all the Scriptures concerning himself." (Lk 24:27) So let's use the rich imagery surrounding the OT concept of salvation to make Christ's salvation seem more concrete.

Imagine you were diagnosed with inoperable cancer and given only weeks to live. Then you hear of a new treatment. You try it. Soon you are pronounced cancer-free! Imagine the relief, the joy, the new-found zest for living. Isn't this the picture God paints for us by saving Hezekiah from his imminent death? So Christ has removed the fatal cancer of sin and given us relief, joy, and a new zest for life.

Imagine you had lived in Iraq under the brutal regime of Saddam Hussein. To oppose him meant certain death. You felt like a slave, totally under his control. Life was unbearably hard, horrible, hopeless. You felt helpless. One day you hear a distant drone slowly turning into an ear-splitting roar as you watch an army coming to topple the dread tyrant and set you free. You are dancing in the streets! Is that what salvation meant to the Hebrews who watched Pharaoh and his army swamped by the returning walls of water in the Red Sea? Has not our mighty God rescued us from brutal Satan and given us freedom from his oppressive regime? Is not the Christ our victorious Conqueror, Deliverer, Savior?

Imagine you cheated on your wife and were found out. You were disowned by your family, banished from your congregation, and ordered to move far away from everyone you knew and loved. After years of loneliness, guilt, and despair, word comes that all has been forgiven. You can move back home. You cry tears of joy! Is that the emotion felt by the remnant returning from the Babylonian captivity? Has not Jesus pardoned our unfaithfulness and welcomed us back into his fellowship and family?

Imagine you were a serf in the Middle Ages. Bands of marauders returning from one of the Crusades are pillaging the countryside and small villages. Death and destruction is everywhere. But you have been invited by the king to live inside his impregnable castle. What comfort and security is yours! Isn't that the picture the OT uses for God, the Rock of our salvation? Has not the Christ promised his little flock that no one can snatch us out of his hand, that the gates of hell cannot prevail against his Church?

How does this motivate us for evangelism?

The vivid imagery connected with "yasha" cannot but deepen our understanding and appreciation for Christ's work of saving us. Such appreciation has energized saints to spread the Good News throughout history. After David prayed, "Restore to me the joy of your *salvation*" (Ps 51:12), in the very next verse he exclaims, "Then I will teach transgressors your ways, and sinners will turn back to you." (Ps 51:13)

It is valuable to explore evangelism methods and programs. It is certainly helpful to organize around the Great Commission. But let's never lose sight of where evangelism begins. It begins with understanding and appreciating what God has done for us in Christ. It begins with seeing ourselves as helpless sinners in need of rescue by someone outside ourselves. It begins with the discovery that Christ, and Christ alone, has removed our terminal cancer of sin. It begins with trusting that the Mighty Christ has defeated Satan, sin and death. It begins with finding the overwhelming relief that Jesus has pardoned our unfaithfulness and brought us back into his family. It begins with the priceless comfort and security of knowing we are safe in Jesus' arms, no matter the circumstances around us.

I don't expect that street preacher to still be outside Wrigley Field, calling out, "Are you saved?" But I pray that such a question will unleash in us a torrent of joy and enthusiasm for all God has done for us in Christ. For then "we cannot help speaking about what we have seen and heard." (Ac 4:20)

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