'Salvation' in the Old Testament

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Salvation is the most important word throughout the Biblical revelation. 'The history of revelation in reality is also history of salvation.'[1] So much so that the whole history of Israel is termed salvation-history (Heilsgeschichte). It is understood as deliverance from national disaster and physical perils[2] and later in the New Testament as deliverance from evil and sin.[3]

The word for salvation yēshû'āh is derived from the root [יָשַׁע] yāsh'a ('The Arabic word وَسِعَ (wasi'a) means to be capacious, II to make wide, spacious, IV. make sufficient, V. VIII. be or live in abundance'.)[4] It occurs normally in the Hiph'il, the transitive form of the verb meaning 'to save'. Its Qal form must have borne originally the meaning of being wide or spacious.[5] The Niph'al is used in the passive sense. The noun forms are yesh'a, yeshû'āh, teshu'ah, moshi'a, mosha'oth. The word is very frequent in the historical and prophetical books (especially in Isaiah and Jeremiah) and in the book of Psalms. In the Pentateuch it is found once in Genesis, once in Numbers, four times in Exodus and six times in Deuteronomy.[6] In Exodus it is used at the point where the Egyptians were drowned in the Red Sea, 14: 13, 30; 15: 20. The LXX renders different Hebrew words for 'save' by σώζειν (sozein), a verb found more than a hundred times in the New Testament.[7] In the RSV the verb is translated as 'to save', 'give victory, help, rescue, deliver' and the noun as 'salvation' and 'victory'.

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[1] Mowinckel, Sigmund, *The Old Testament as the Word of God.* New York, Abingdon Press, 1959, p. 40 (Word of God).

[2] Richardson, Alan, *An Introd. to the Theology of the* N.T., London, SCM Press, c. 1958, p. 180 (Theology).

[3] Estborn, Sigfrid, *The Christian Doctrine of Salvation.* Madras, Christian Literature Society, 1954, pp. 10 and 22.

[4] Gesenius, William, *Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament:* tr. by Brown Driver Briggs. Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1959, p. 446 (Hebrew Lexicon).

[5] Knight, G.A.F., *A Christian Theology of the O.T.* London, SCM Press Ltd., c. 1959, p. 247.

[6] *See* Appendix.

[7] Richardson, Alan, *Theology.* London, SCM Press, c. 1958, p. 83 n.

Salvation has a comprehensive meaning in the Old Testament. The English word 'save' has the meaning of deliverance and rescuing from peril, so the popular understanding of salvation tends to be negative and passive; but a study of the word יְשׁוּעָה (yeshû'āh) through the Old Testament reveals a positive and dynamic meaning for it. It is the intention of this paper to study this positive aspect over against the usual negative and passive conception of salvation.

1. Salvation is Victory

Salvation has a special meaning of 'gaining victory over' the power of the enemy. It is not so much a rescuing from but a victory over the power of the enemy, so that the enemy is defeated and safety and peace are assured for the people of God. The Hiph'il is often followed by מִיַּד (miyyad) 'from the hand (or power) of' the enemy. This gives the idea of 'rescuing from', but מִן (min) could be translated as *over*[8] the power of the enemy. It is not an escape but an overcoming, not deliverance but daring in the battle, not cowardice but conquering the enemy. It is not negative[9] in the sense of being taken out of trials and troubles but positive to mean 'to overcome' and 'gain victory'. It is in the struggle that Yahweh gives power to his people to be victorious over the enemy.

The saviours are not so much deliverers as daring leaders who give the people victory over the enemy and assure 'freedom' from limitations.[10] In most places 'save' and 'deliver' could be translated as 'to gain victory'. The most important example of national deliverance often quoted is the deliverance from Egypt. But interestingly enough the word used to express deliverance from Egypt is פָּדָה (Pādāh) (As. Padu Ar. فَدَى)[11] (Faday) ransom "וַיִּפְדֵּהוּ מִבֵּית עֲבָדִים מִיַּד (Wayyaphdeka mibbeth 'abadin miyyad) Deut. 7: 8; 13: 6; 24: 18; Mic. 6: 4; Ps. 78: 42; I Chron. 17: 21. יָשַׁע (yash'a) and its cognates are used in the Exodus story at the point where the Egyptians were drowned in the Red Sea. Here salvation does not refer to the escape and deliverance from Egypt but it refers to the decisive victory of the Israelites over Pharaoh and his armies at the Red Sea. In the early period of the conquest Yahweh is depicted as war-god leading his people into battle and giving them victory. This idea of victory over

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[8] Gesenius-Kautzsch, 133–b Elsewhere especially after transitive verb min. rather represents the idea of separation, distinction, or superiority of one person or thing from or over others. Oxford, Clarendon, 1910.

[9] Pedersen Jobs, *Israel*, I–II, p. 331. Salvation as a rule contains a certain negative element but this is not the main point. The positive: to acquire victory is the all important thing. London, Oxford Univ. Press, 1926.

[10] Gray John, *Joshua, Judges and Ruth*. London, Thomas Nelson Ltd., 1967, p. 261.

[11] Gesenius, William, *Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament:* tr. by Brown Driver Briggs, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1959, p. 804.

the enemy is later spiritualized as overcoming uncleanness, backslidings and sin. Ezek. 36:29; 37:23. In the Dead Sea Scrolls salvation involves the victory of the hosts of light in final conflict with the forces of evil.[12]

2. Salvation is accomplished by the Spirit of Yahweh

Salvation is associated with the possession of the spirit of Yahweh. Judges are endowed with the spirit of Yahweh by which they overcome their enemies and gain victory. Othniel 3:10; Gideon 6:34; Jephthah 11:29; Samson 13:25; 14:6, 19; 15:14; Saul I Sam. 11:6. (It is interesting to note both these words together in Ps. 51:11, 12). The spirit of Yahweh gives the Judges that extra power and strength whereby at the mortal crises of the nation's history men hitherto completely unknown, unimportant and ordinary Israelites assume leadership and gain victory over the enemy. Bezalel does the most ingenious architecture and furniture for the Tabernacle by Yahweh's spirit. Ex. 35:30 ff. The servant in Deutero-Isaiah is also endowed with the spirit of Yahweh to accomplish his mission 42:1. Salvation is accomplished by the power of Yahweh. It was charismatic leadership proved by the victories they achieved over the enemy. 'Not by might, nor by power, but by my spirit, says the Lord of Hosts' Zech. 4:6. Eichrodt has a section on 'The spirit of God as the instrument of the salvation-history' emphasizing the part played by the spirit of the Lord in the Old Testament.[13]

Salvation as victory is the gift of Yahweh to his people through the power of his spirit. 'The horse is made ready for the day of battle, but the victory belongs to the Lord' Prov. 21:31.

3. Salvation and the Role of the People of God

In this process of salvation God calls his people to co-operate with him. The popular understanding of salvation as entirely the work of God without man's effort takes away man's initiative and co-operation which are implied in salvation. Except in Ezekiel, certain Psalms and in a few other places salvation is used with reference to battle and strife. The judge, king and the people have to go forth into the battle and fight the enemy when Yahweh gives them victory. This passive role assigned to the people of God in the Old Testament is due to the Niph'al of ישע (ysh') which is taken to be the passive. But the usual meaning of Niph'al is reflexive[14] which would be most suitable in this context. This

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[12] Burrows, Millar, *More Light on the Dead Sea Scrolls.* London, Secker and Warburg, c. 1958, p. 296.

[13] Eichrodt, Walther, *Theology of the O.T.* Vol. II, SCM Press, London, 1967, pp. 50 ff.

[14] Gesenius-Kautzsch, *A Hebrew Grammar.* 51–h 'Although the passive use of Niph'al was introduced at an early period and became tolerably common, it is nevertheless quite secondary to the reflexive use'. Oxford, Clarendon, 1910.

would give man a dynamic role in winning the victory. Among the 21 times in which the Niph'al is used in the Old Testament, each of them could be translated with a reflexive meaning. In the Bible the passive is used to imply exclusively the action of God. This reflexive meaning would emphasize man's co-operation with God in this process of salvation-history, e.g.:

Deut. 33: 29	'A people saved by the Lord' could also be translated' as 'A people who have saved themselves by the Lord'.
Is. 30: 15	'In returning and rest you shall be saved' — '. . . you shall save yourselves'.
Ps. 33: 16	'A king is not saved by his great army' — 'A king does not save himself by his great army'.

In Exodus 14: 14 Moses says to the people 'The Lord will fight for you and you have only to be still'. This would assign a passive part to the people but וְאַתֶּם תַּחֲרִשׁוּן (We'attem taḥrishûn) could be taken as a rebuke to the terrified, wavering people, complaining and wanting to return to Egypt Ex. 14: 10-13. Moses asks them to keep silent, stop complaining and look for Yahweh's help to overcome the enemy. Israelites had to cross the sea in order to accomplish this victory.

In all these salvation is not passive but active and dynamic, calling for man's co-operation with God. God's saving activity is effected through human instrumentality. God gives his power to his people to gain victory over all that hinder their life. Pedersen describes salvation thus: 'To save another means to communicate to him one's strength and thus give him the power to maintain himself'.[15] By this power of God man works out his salvation.

4. Salvation is Peace

'Salvation in the Old Testament sometimes corresponds to the word shālôm'.[16] The author of Judges notes long periods of peace [17] after the salvation (victory) wrought by the saviours whom God had raised to (save) give victory to his people over the power of their enemies. This victory ensured security and peace [18] so that there is room for progress and development in the nation. G. A. F. Knight has an interesting modern illustration of gipsy orchestra and translates שָׁלוֹם (shālôm) to mean harmony—harmony within

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[15] Pedersen, J., *Op. cit.* p. 331.

[16] Allmen, J. J. Von, *Vocabulary of the Bible.* London, Lutterworth, c. 1958, p. 219.

[17] Wattishqôt, 'and the land rested . . .' The noun form of the root 'sheqet' is used only once in the O.T., I Chron. 22: 9 where it is used together with shālôm as being identical in meaning. G. A. F. Knight takes 'rest' as being equivalent to shālôm, *Op. cit.* p. 250.

[18] Pedersen, J., *Op. cit.* p. 312. Pedersen goes a step further when he points out that 'Peace is not release from fighting which follows upon victory . . . Peace is victory itself, because the man develops through it'.

onself, harmony with neighbours and harmony in playing together following the conductor.[19] Harmony is the basis for the development and progress of society. The root meaning of salvation does indicate 'to develop without hindrance'[20] towards an abundant life. Professor Parmar declared at Uppsala that development is the new name for peace[21] but development is disorder. It calls for readjustments, new modes of life and mastering of new skills to ensure maximum progress. It is a revolution. Salvation here has a dynamic meaning of peace, progress and revolution.

Salvation is used in Deutero-Isaiah to indicate the return of the exiles from Babylon 46: 13; 51: 5, 6. Here they were returning to Jerusalem to rebuild the walls and the Temple and to reconstruct and reorganize Judaism. It was a victorious march to Jerusalem with Yahweh leading his people like a good shepherd. This triumphant march is going to be far superior to Exodus, which was redemption. It was not like the escape from Egypt when they went out in trepidation (Is. 52: 12) and often looked back to Egypt to the fleshpots which they had enjoyed there Ex. 14: 10-12; 16: 3. The return from the Exile was a deliberate return to work for the development of the nation. Return to Jerusalem had the emphasis on reconstruction Is. 49: 17; 54: 11, 12. There was neither trepidation nor backward look; instead they will have joy and peace Is. 51: 11; 55: 12.

5. Salvation is Righteousness

Righteousness is one of the most fascinating and important words to express the revolutionary theology of the Old Testament. It expresses social duty rather than legal obligation.[22] צְדָקָה, (zedāqāh) צֶדֶק (zedeq) mean 'to be right', in the sense of 'to be normal.' It also means in certain places 'to prosper', 'to gain victory' and in the Psalms Dahood translates this verse in two places as 'meadow' and 'thrive'.[23] Eighth century prophets gave צֶדֶק (zedeq) a wider ethical meaning because they thought of it as that which God is seeking to establish in the world. The word forms part of the salvation vocabulary in Second Isaiah 45: 8; 46: 13; 51: 6, 8. Salvation is righteousness in the sense of giving man that status he ought to have,—true humanity. It consists in providing man with that extra energy and strength to overcome things that prevent him from enjoying fuller life as one created in the image and the likeness of God—Man as he ought to be.

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[19] Knight, G. A. F., *Op. cit.* pp. 250–252.

[20] Richardson, Alan, *Theological Word Book of the Bible.* New York, Macmillan, c. 1950, p. 219 (Word Book).

[21] N.C.C. Review, Vol LXXXVIII No. 9, National Christian Council of India, Nagpur, p. 419.

[22] Scofield, J. N., *Introducing O.T. Theology.* London, SCM., c. 1964, pp. 41, 42.

[23] Dahood, Mitchell, Psalms I Doubleday Co., Inc., Garden City, New York, 1965, 1966, pp. 33, 221.

There has been an interesting suggestion by R. S. Rosenberg that צֶדֶק (zedeq) refers to the Messiah himself.[24] He bases his study on Jeremiah 23: 5; 33: 15; Hos. 10: 12; Joel 2: 23, Isaiah 45: 3, the Qumran and Karaite literature. The Vulgate translates צֶדֶק (zedeq) as the Righteous one. He finds two Messiahs צֶמַח צַדִּיק, צֶמַח צְדָקָה (Zemaḥ Zaddiq, Zemaḥ Zedāqāh) and מוֹרֶה הַצֶּדֶק (mōreh hazzedeq,) Davidic and Aaronic in Qumran literature (Manual of Discipline 9: 9–11 and Damascus Document 19: 34-20: 1) confirmed in the teachings of the Essenes. Here again it is of interest to note that this word is connected with the Messiah who will gain victory over the evil one. These Messiahs will accomplish victory for the people of God so that they will be free to fulfil the mission which God has entrusted to his people.

6. Salvation is New Creation

According to the ancient Hebrew mythology the original act of creation is regarded as a great divine act of salvation—the victory of Yahweh over the primeval chaos, just as Marduk had overcome and gained victory over Tiamat in the Babylonian epic of creation—'Enuma Elish'.[25] The Exodus and the return from Exile were thought of as victorious divine acts of new creation. Is. 43: 15, 19. A similar strain is echoed in other places also Ps. 74: 12–14; 89: 8-10; Job 9: 13; 26: 12 f. This has been applied to the salvation wrought by Christ in the 'classic view' described by Gustaf Aulen in his 'Christus Victor'.[26]

Salvation is new creation. In the Old Testament nature is very often called upon to join in the joyful chorus at the salvation of Yahweh for his people Is. 42: 10–12; Ps. 93 and 98. Nature rejoices at the salvation of man because this would include the renewal of nature itself. St. Paul speaks of the whole creation waiting with eager longing for the revealing of the sons of God and that creation itself will be set free from its bondage to decay and obtain the glorious liberty of the children of God Rom. 8: 19, 21. Salvation is renewal of man and nature including the historical processes in time. Isaiah speaks of renewal in the nature of the animal world (Is. 11: 6–9) and also of renewing and refashioning old instruments to suit the new age of peace Is. 2: 4.

Salvation endues man with new power and strength so that he is transformed into a new creation and is given the power to transform the world and the very structures of society. Salvation here would imply giving man victory over things that cramp his progress, bestowing upon him all possibilities for flowering into manhood to grow into the stature of the sons of God. God gives his spirit

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[24] Journal of American Academy of Religion. Vol. XXXVI No. 2. Who is the Mōreh Hassedeq?

[25] Thomas, D. Winton, *Documents from O.T. Times*. London, Nelson and Sons Ltd., c. 1958, pp. 9–11.

[26] Richardson, Alan, *Theology*. London, SCM Press, c. 1958, p. 203–207.

and victory to his people so that they are renewed and recreated to fulfil God's purpose in the world. Chenchiah speaks of Christianity as 'not primarily a doctrine of salvation but the announcement of the advent of a new creative order in Jesus Christ. This is our thrilling discovery imparted to mankind.'[27] Chenchiah was right in giving expression to this most important aspect of salvation, which is often divorced from its cosmic dimension and diluted into an individual rescue operation. Chenchiah's new creative order is implied in 'salvation', which is renewal and recreation of man and the whole world to form the kingdom of God.

7. Salvation within History

Salvation is experienced within the history of Israel. It is related to the struggles and triumphs, hopes and fears of the people of God. The writer of Judges shows how God saves (gives victory to) Israel in every generation in spite of the repeated relapses into a state of disobedience towards the covenant law. God works out his salvation for every generation in terms of the individual, social and political life of Israel. Their annual festivals were occasions of a recital of their faith in Yahweh who acted in their history Deut. 26: 5–9. These recitals at the amphictyonic centres formed the basis for the writing of the history of Israel as salvation-history. At these festivals they affirmed their faith in Yahweh who had acted in their history. Von Rad indicates that Deuteronomic theology of history was the first which clearly formulated the phenomenon of saving history.[28]

The New Year, Covenant and Enthronement festival provided within the cult the opportunity to repeat and re-experience the primeval victory of Yahweh over the chaos. The festival was similar to the Babylonian New Year festival. The similarities between these could be summarized as follows:

In both of them:

(i) the defeat of the chaos powers and the creation of cosmos take a prominent position.

(ii) God's fight and victory are symbolically represented in a kind of drama.

(iii) The aim of the festival is to secure the order of the world and to provide prosperity and happiness for the year to come.

'A creative factor was provided by the experiences in the cult when Yahweh could come every year, revealing himself creating salvation.[29] Thus salvation of Yahweh was experienced in every generation. Gullmann points out that the prophets had experienced the salvation of Yahweh in their own times and then

[27] Estborn, S., *Op. Cit.* p. 9.

[28] Rad, Gerhard Von, *Old Testament Theology.* Vol. I. Edinburgh and London Oliver and Boyd. 1962, 1967, p. 344.

[29] Mowinckel, S., *He that cometh.* Oxford, Basil Blackwell, 1956, p. 152.

they looked back upon their whole history as salvation-history. 'The events of the past became actual for him by association with the event he himself has experienced'.[30] Salvation experienced in each generation was conveyed to posterity in a written tradition, in confession and in the liturgy representing salvation-history.

This experience of salvation within history made Israel to be concerned about the whole life of man: the social, political, economic and religious life of man were of utmost concern because it is through these processes in time and space that Yahweh reveals and works out his salvation for his people. Thus even their eschatology was understood in terms of this world. 'The Israelite hope remained loyal to this earth. It was too full-blooded and alive to find a fulfilment in the realm of spirits. What it wanted was renewal of bodily existence'.[31] This understanding of salvation makes religion relevant here and now. Chenchiah wants such a religion when he says, 'we refuse to accept credit religion to be cashed in future, we want a religion negotiable now'.[32] Salvation in the Old Testament is based within history and the whole of life, the sacred and the secular are the field of God's saving activity.

8. The Name Jesus

It is interesting to observe that the name given to our Lord is 'Jesus' which comes from the same root (*Ἰησοῦς*, יֵשׁוּעַ (yēshû'a) Jeshua, later form for יְהוֹשׁוּעַ (yehoshû'a) (Joshua). The angel instructs Joseph to name the child 'Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins'.[33] This could be translated as 'for he will give victory to his people over their sins'. It is not salvation from but salvation to[34] positive growth into maturity. This Old Testament understanding of salvation would make our faith an adventure and not a passive reception of the salvation of God in Jesus Christ. It would also make us serious in our commitment to the renewal of ourselves and the renewal of the whole world.

'Hosanna'[35] in the triumphal entry is a victorious battle cry and not the diffident, desperate cry of the people for rescue and protection from the enemy. It is not a prayer for saving from the struggle but for overcoming and gaining victory. We often come across this metaphor of battle and victory in the New Testament Eph. 6: 10–17; Rev. 2: 7, 17; 3: 21.

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[30] Cullmann, Oscar, *Salvation History*. London, SCM Press Ltd., 1967, p. 92.

[31] Eichrodt, W., *Op. cit.* p. 491.

[32] Rethinking Christianity in India., (I.R.B.C.) p. 130.

[33] Richardson, Alan, *Word Book* *αὐτὸς γὰρ σώσει τὸν λαὸν αὐτοῦ ἀπὸ τῶν ἁμαρτιῶν αὐτῶν*. p. 220.

[34] Knight, G. A. F., *Op. cit.* p. 248 'If we remove the emphasis from the conception of rescuing from, to that of saving for or into some new state, then we obtain a much wider view of the meaning of the verb hoshia'.

Mowinckel, S., 'Word of God' p. 40.

[35] *ὡσαννά* = Aram. hôsh'a n'a = Hebr. hôshia'h'na (Ps. 118: 25) Mk. 11: 9, 10; Mt. 21: 15; Jn. 12: 13.

Salvation in the Old Testament has a dynamic meaning of life abundant. It makes renewal and reconstruction part of our faith in God who is revealing himself in his acts of renewal and giving victory to his people. He is calling men to co-operate with him in this task of renewal. God renews his people and recreates them to be agents of change, peace and progress in the world.

Books in the O.T.	Hiph'il הוֹשִׁיעַ (Hôshi'a)	Niph'al נוֹשַׁע (Nôsh'a)	יֵשַׁע (yēsh'a)	יְשׁוּעָה (yeshū'ah)	תְּשׁוּעָה (tehū'ah)	מוֹשִׁיעַ (môshi'a)	מוֹשִׁיעוֹת (môsha-'oth)	Total
Genesia				1				1
Exodus	2			2				4
Leveticus								
Numbers		1						1
Deuteronomy	1	1		1		3		6
Joshua	2							2
Judges	17				1	3		21
I Samuel	13			2	3	1		19
II Samuel	8	1	3	2	3	2		19
I Kings								
II Kings	6				2	1		9
Isaiah	15	4	5	18	3	9		54
Jeremiah	11	6			1	2		20
Ezekiel	3							3
Hoshea	3					1		4
Joel								
Amos								
Obadiah						1		1
Jonah				1				1
Micah			1					1
Nahum								
Habakkuk	1		2	1				4
Zephaniah	1							1
Haggai								
Zechariah	5	1						6
Malachi								
Psalms	49	6	18	45	13	4	1	136
Proverbs	1	1			3			5
Job	4		2	2				8
Song of Sol.								
Ruth								
Lamentations	1				1			2
Ecclesiastes								
Esther								
Daniel								
Ezra								
Nehemiah	1					1		2
I Chronicles	6		1	1	2			10
II Chronicles	2			1	1			4
	152	21	32	77	33	28	1	344