

**Salvation from Genesis to Revelation:
God's Eternal Relationship with Us**

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by

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Salvation From Genesis to Revelation: God's Eternal Relationship with Us

Introduction

The Bible discloses God's salvation narrative and the story line is simple: God continuously saves. God's consistent relationship with us, whether or not we choose to acknowledge or participate in it, defines God's salvation. Our awareness of this relationship, leading us to oneness with God, makes this salvation immediately relevant. As we acknowledge our relationship with and come to know God, we begin to experience salvation.

Beginning with creation, God saves humans and all of creation. Following the historic deliverance, or salvation, of the Hebrews from Egyptian slavery, God makes a covenant with Israel to solidify God's forever-saving relationship with this nation. But humans repeatedly fail to hold up their end of the covenant, misconstruing the intent of the commandments that they were to keep, so God sends prophets to remind the people of the law's true purpose---to enhance our relationship with God and each other by having just and merciful relationships.

People continue not to grasp God's salvific intentions so God comes to earth in person---the person of Jesus Christ---to reveal salvation by demonstrating God's kingdom through Jesus' life, death, and resurrection. Just as the Israelites missed the true meaning and purpose of the law, Christians miss Jesus' true meaning and purpose, and convert his message of God's salvation into doctrines about Jesus. During the first century and a half after Jesus' death, the New Testament authors dogmatize Jesus' death and resurrection, developing doctrines about Jesus that require belief in order for one to have salvation. This stands in tension with the fuller biblical vision of God's unconditional salvation.

As was taught to me, salvation is understood as being saved from eternal life in hell by believing that Jesus died on the cross for my sins. I had memorized and I could quote John 3.16, the basis of this doctrine, before I could count. But as I matured, I became disturbed at the implications of this belief. My church emphasized personal belief in the substitutionary atonement theory of salvation to the degree that anyone who did not share this belief was deemed unsaved and destined for eternity in hell---an exclusionary position, to be sure. For a true believer, it therefore followed that witnessing and evangelism became imperative so that no one would perish, and scriptural passages such as Jesus' "Great Commission" at the end of Matthew or Paul's statement in Romans 10:14-17 are often proof texted to support this position.

Considering that at least 70% of the world would never accept Christ as their personal Savior, I became confused, just as I did when some of my good friends expressed disbelief in Christ's salvific death or even in God. I have been equally disturbed when I see a friend's bright and engaging son turn completely away from Christianity after being told that his non-Christian friends weren't saved and therefore would not go to heaven. Every Halloween, to coerce him and his peers into choosing heaven over hell, this young man's parents took him to "Hell-house" at his church in order to terrify them into accepting Christ as their Savior.

It has become increasingly clear to me that something is very askew about this type of theology and with this understanding of salvation. Even though those who espouse it claim that their interpretation is biblically based, I feel that comprehending salvation this way is not only hermeneutically flawed but is actually dangerous. Hence, as with the violence and death necessarily implicit in atonement theories, we see wars and

terrorism justified in the name of necessary sacrifice and violence.

After stepping back from my fundamentalist religious upbringing, and having since studied scripture and theology from a wider perspective, I have re-read the entire Bible to learn what further light it might shed on the idea of salvation. I can now attest that the major divisions of the Bible all speak to salvation, and scripture has much more to say about it than is suggested by atonement theories only. In fact, I argue here that understanding salvation in terms of atonement may itself be flawed.

For many today, salvation amounts to having an insurance policy that assures life in heaven after death, an afterlife obtained only by believing the right thing about Jesus. But the biblical vision of salvation is much larger and lovelier than this. I argue that salvation is living in the presence of God now and forever. We can experience the joy of our salvation immediately as we become consciously aware of God's proximity and accessibility. Our realization of God's presence with us attenuates our tendencies towards anxiety, fear, depression, anger, hate, and other destructive emotions and actions.

In this thesis, I survey all scripture through the lens of salvation, discovering what scripture says about it as related to creation, promised through the covenant, poetically depicted in the Psalms, proclaimed by the prophets, revealed through Christ, and eschatologically assured in John's revelation. I challenge how the early church modified the good news that Jesus taught into good news about Jesus, and how this community elevated the concept of belief in *its* good news to a salvific level. I will discuss theosis as it relates to salvation as reflected in Christian scripture. I will also deal with Paul and other epistle writers' atonement doctrine of salvation---the doctrine that has traditionally dominated Western Christianity yet is arguably at odds with the broader vision of

salvation as otherwise presented in the Hebrew and Christian sections of the Bible.

The Bible is my primary text and the foundation of this thesis. Being raised Southern Baptist means that the Bible is very important. And so it is to me to this day. My search for truth must begin and end with scripture as the inspired word of God, with Christ, the Word of God to whom all scripture points and through whom I interpret all scripture, and with the Holy Spirit, whom I seek to guide me in my search for truth. I interpret Christian scripture through the hermeneutic of Christ's life and teachings. I refer secondarily to tradition to inform my reading of scripture, engaging classical and contemporary theologians in discussion as I work my way through scripture. I read Hebrew scripture on its own merit but do recognize and discuss associations Christian scripture writers make with it.

I begin by exploring the unique relationship between creation and salvation, followed by a scriptural survey beginning in Genesis, where I will recount the stories of creation and the life of the earliest families to demonstrate how salvation commences with creation and continues with each subsequent generation.

I. Creation as the Beginning of Salvation

God has been saving humanity since the beginning of creation and God continuously saves God's created. Notre Dame theology professor, Robert Krieg, describes creation as "God's garden of delight, God's theater or temple for the drama of salvation" (4).

Ecotheologian Ernst M. Conradie contends that Protestant theology and especially evangelical theology "privileges salvation over creation, seeing creation (*creatura*) merely as the stage where the drama of God's salvific interaction with human beings is

being performed (*Creation* 11).” When we contrast Conradie’s critique of the Protestant view of creation as “merely” the stage where the salvation drama is played out with Krieg’s description of creation as “God’s garden of delight” where the drama of salvation gets played out, we see a tension in the viewpoints regarding the relationship of creation and salvation, where one is prioritized over the other.

Gerhard von Rad and Karl Barth resolve this tension with their dialectical theologies, which reject the theological structure of creation as origination, and redemption as restoration. Instead, creation is viewed as “God’s continuous redemptive act towards the *telos* of creation, while redemption could be understood as a creative process in which God allows something new to emerge out of a world infected by sin” (Conradie, 11). This concept of creation as continuous redemption and redemption as a continuously creative process has a dynamic quality to it that is more acceptable than the static notion of origination then restoration, implying a flawed world that needs to be fixed by God, who is thereby reduced to a reactor to a failed plan.

Without a dynamic-interactive understanding of creation and salvation, the ordering of these two of God’s works becomes an issue, and a futile debate between the supralapsarians and infralapsarians ensues. When creation and salvation are viewed as a cyclical continuum rather than linearly, we see Barth’s vision of God’s creative work as falling under the rubric of salvation evolving into a more integrated image, as described by Gerrit Berkouwer who summarizes, “the whole of creation fundamentally rests in redemption,” (Berkouwer, 250). It seems logical to view creation and salvation in this way---continuously working in tandem with each other---God always working, always creating.

The stories in Genesis support this interaction of God's creative and salvific activities. From the beginning of scripture and time, God the Creator brings light to darkness, form to formlessness---salvation in tandem with creation. God begins saving the world the moment God begins creating it. Just as a parent conceives a child and immediately sets about caring for and nurturing that child in order to "save" her from hunger, thirst, cold, fear and whatever else might threaten or cause her to suffer, we see God saving creation simultaneous with creation.

In Genesis' second creation account, God plants trees in the garden that provide beauty to delight the senses, but also trees that supply food. God sees that it is not good for man to be alone so creates a partner for him, thus saving man from loneliness and gifting him with a partner with whom to share beauty and sensory experience.

God places two special trees---the tree of knowledge and the tree of life---in the garden with Adam and Eve. God then instructs Adam and Eve not to eat from the tree of knowledge. The concept of covenant in scripture is based on God and humans' relationship and involves a reciprocal agreement in which God's promise relates to humans' relationship to God. I assert that God's directive for Adam and Eve not to eat from the tree of knowledge presumes continuation of the relationship that God shares with Adam and Eve and represents the first covenant between God and humans, an implicit covenant that humans did not keep.

In disobedience, after eating from the tree of knowledge, Adam and Eve hid themselves from God, perhaps representing the most significant void from which we are saved---that of not being in God's presence (Gen. 3.8). But God, as God does persistently throughout scripture, pursues them, calling out, "Where are you?" After finding them

shamefully hiding and realizing their disobedience, God reprimands Adam and Eve. But this God who pursues and disciplines, proceeds to make clothes to cover them. As we will see, this motif---the motif that our poor choices disrupt our union with God, but this union is restored as a result of God's pursuing us and protecting or saving us---repeats itself throughout scripture.

Because Adam and Eve now have access to knowledge of good and evil, representing encroachment into divine space that makes humans "like one of us," God fears that the next thing they might do is eat from the tree of life, a symbol of eternal life or immortality (Gen. 3.22). So, God doesn't allow these untrustworthy humans to eat from the tree of life and live forever. Instead, God protects Adam and Eve from partaking of this tree not only by sending them out of the garden but, as a double protection, God surrounds the tree of life with a flaming sword and an angel to guard it. Perhaps we can infer that God does not want humans to live forever in a flawed, imperfect state. It is only in the heavenly paradise after life that "those who wash their robes" have the right to eat from the tree of life and gain eternal life (Rev. 22.14). This suggests that God protects us from living forever in an unholy or an unrighteous state, but once we have been returned to our righteous states, God then compels us to live forever in God's presence.

Cain, representing the next generation of humankind, continues to utilize God's gift of free will to choose actions that end up with adverse consequences. Apparently, Cain's offering to God did not represent Cain's best intention, and when God favored Abel's offering over Cain's, Cain became so angered that he killed his brother. God punished Cain by making the ground no longer provide for him, forcing him to become a fugitive and wanderer. Cain instantly anguished over the loneliness of this outcome,

crying out, “I shall be hidden from your face,” but he also feared his own death at the hands of others (Gen. 4.14). Mercifully, God said to him, “Not so!” and marked him so that no one would kill him (Gen. 4.15). Again, we see God responding not only with discipline, but also with compassion and saving grace to our inclination to act against our own best interest.

This pattern toward evil and corruption continues to the point that the Lord sees that “every inclination of the thoughts of their hearts was only evil continually,” and “the Lord was sorry that he had made mankind,” therefore determines to destroy all humans and animals (Gen. 6.5-6). However, in a move that also becomes a repetitive scriptural pattern, God avoids completely destroying created beings by salvaging a remnant, as we see when God establishes the covenant with Noah.

In faith, and obedience to God’s instruction, Noah builds his ark, and after surviving the flood with his family and his animals intact, Noah responds with a burnt offering of thanksgiving. Smelling the pleasing odor of the burnt offering, the Lord “said in his heart” that he would never again destroy the world, despite recognizing still that “the inclination of the human heart is evil” (Gen. 8.21). Amazingly, God ultimately chooses to save humanity even while acknowledging humans’ persistent tendency towards evil. In fact, God then blesses Noah and his sons and implores them to multiply and repopulate the earth.

God continues to protect humanity from itself when he scatters the homogenous, single-language-speaking people who scheme to build a tower that would reach the heavens---a symbol that, like Adam and Eve’s eating of the tree of knowledge, threatens to encroach upon divine privilege. In a thought also reminiscent of God’s reaction to

Adam and Eve, God intuits that “this is only the beginning of what they will do.” God apparently prefers diversity to homogeneity, where power can become too concentrated and used advantageously for those in control, usually at the expense of those without power, so God interrupts their plans.

Following the Noah story in Genesis is God’s covenant with Abram, a covenant that not only promises a great nation, a blessing, and a great name to Abram, but also promises that Abraham himself will be a blessing and in him “all the families of the earth shall be blessed” (Gen. 12.1). Whereas blessing and salvation are not, strictly speaking, synonymous, the notion of divine favor or gift connects the concept of blessing with that of salvation, both of which infer God’s will to take care of people and maintain relationship with them, which is how I define salvation. Salvation is God’s perpetual gift of relationship with people, which is indeed a blessing. The inclusiveness of the covenant promise also hints towards God’s salvific intent for all humanity.

God tells Abraham to leave his home and family and go to the land that God would show him, then reassures Abram by telling him, “Do not be afraid,” a phrase the *Harper Collins Study Bible* contributors consider a “common formula in oracles of promise” (Gen. 15.1). God promises Abram descendants as countless as the stars, despite Abram’s old age and his wife’s barrenness, and Abram “believed the Lord and the Lord reckoned it to him as righteousness” (Gen. 15.6).

In this instance, Abram’s “belief” forms the basis for his reputation of having faith, as referenced by the writers of Galatians and Hebrews. In Genesis, the Hebrew word for “believe” is ‘*aman*, which means, “to support, confirm, be faithful, trust, be certain, believe in” (Strong’s lexicon, *Bible Works*). In Galatians, where the author quotes

Genesis 15.6, the Greek word used for “believe,” is *pistis*, which means “conviction of the truth, trust, confidence springing from faith, assurance, generally including the idea of holy fervor.” In the book of Hebrews, the author refers to Abraham’s “faith” by using the Greek word *pisteuo*, meaning “think to be true, be persuaded of, place confidence in, conviction and trust impelled by a certain inner and higher prerogative.”

Trust is the common thread weaving through these definitions---the absolute certainty and conviction in the faithfulness of God, as opposed to intellectual or cognitive assent to an idea or doctrine about God. Abraham trusted God. And *this* belief, this absolute trust and confidence in who God is and what God will do, was reckoned to Abraham as righteousness, which by later biblical authors such as Paul, gets associated with blessing and justification, or, salvation---which is our continual relationship with God (Rom. 4.3, 5-9 and 4.22-5.2 and Gal. 3.6-9).

Importantly, Abraham’s trust followed God’s initiative toward Abraham. Abraham’s belief was not a prerequisite for God to act but rather a response to God’s already having acted, by bringing him to a new land and promising him possession of this land and multiple descendants to whom to leave it. Interestingly though, despite Abraham’s legendary faith, he expresses doubt to God about both of these promises. But despite his doubt, he believed and acted responsively. Again, the pattern of God promising and humans responding in faith appears to be what God desires of humans, as further unfolding of the biblical story reveals.

Returning to the concept of righteousness is the story of Sodom and Gomorrah. Abraham worries that if the “outcry against Sodom and Gomorrah” and the gravity of their sin are accurate, then God might “sweep away the righteous with the

wicked” (Gen.18. 20, 23). On the one hand, Abraham is concerned about God’s justice, asking, “Shall not the Judge of all the earth do what is just?” (Gen.18.25). On the other hand, God is concerned about Abraham’s reaction to what God is about to do to these cities and considers shielding Abraham from his intended interventions. Nevertheless, God chooses to allow Abraham to observe God’s impending actions, so that Abraham “may charge his household after him to keep the way of the Lord by doing justice and righteousness; so that the Lord may bring about for Abraham what he has promised him” (Gen.18.19).

Being just and righteous is obviously important to God; when Abraham asks God if God would actually destroy the whole city even when some righteous people remain in it, God indeed vows “to forgive the whole place” for the sake of only a few. Is this justice, we might ask? Shouldn’t the unrighteous be punished? Alternatively, should any righteous person be punished because of the actions of the unrighteousness? Well, God did destroy Sodom and Gomorrah, just as God had previously destroyed the whole earth with the flood. But as with Noah, God preserved a remnant---in this case, Lot and his wife and two daughters. The tellers of this ancient orally-transmitted tradition could not fathom a God that forebears any unrighteousness, especially for the sake of only a few righteous, so the God of their understanding must destroy the cities. This, however, seems to be counter to the conversation that God has just had with Abraham where God vows not to destroy the cities for the sake of only a few.

So, other than reflecting the storyteller’s concept of justice rather than God’s, why did God destroy Sodom and Gomorrah after just assuring Abraham that this would not be the case? The answer is not clear, as God’s actions don’t seem to match God’s words in

this case. One explanation is that the city does not live up to the minimum standard for righteousness---or, in fact, there were not even a few (ten to be exact) righteous people found within the city---so God does not save it. But this stands counter to the type of justice that forgives all for the sake of a few---the type of justice that God apparently wants Abraham to practice. This is the justice that God converses with Abraham about and hopes Abraham will pass on to his offspring. The justice and righteousness that God employs in this situation---preserving a few for the sake of all---does bring to fruition that which God has promised Abraham---for Abraham to be a blessing as the father of many nations so that all the families of the earth will be blessed. It is not Abraham's actions, not Abraham's righteousness, not his justice, and not his belief that fulfill the covenant; these are responses to God's initiative. But it is God's justice, as conditioned by mercy, that fulfills this covenant.

The story that follows Sodom and Gomorrah is the story of Abraham's willingness to sacrifice his son, Isaac. This story presumably portends God's eventual sacrifice of Jesus, and it's a story that complicates my argument. I have thus far argued here that God consistently reaches out to save humanity by initiating trustworthy actions which then precipitate human trust responses---that God's saving actions are not contingent on humans' actions. In this story, however, after Abraham obeys God by offering his son as a sacrifice, the Lord tells Abraham, "Because you have done this, and have not withheld your son, your only, I will indeed bless you." The word "because" suggests that God's blessing is contingent upon Abraham's action, an assertion that is not consistent with God's saving activities up to this point. But in this scenario, God set up a situation in which God gives Abraham the choice to obey or disobey God's instruction to

offer his son as an offering, while knowing all along that there was an alternative acceptable sacrifice at hand. Prior to Abraham raising his hand to slay Isaac, God had already selected a ram as a sacrifice. God's saving of Isaac in this situation and God's blessing of Abraham were not contingent on Abraham's choice. God never intended to not keep God's side of the covenant by withholding the blessing, nor did God intend for Abraham to offer a human sacrifice, but because Abraham was obedient to the extreme degree of being willing to kill his own son, God was especially pleased with Abraham and says, "I will *indeed* bless you." In other words, God says, "I will most definitely, or with great pleasure, bless you!" When one places the emphasis on the word "indeed," rather than "because," God's statement to Abraham reads differently---"Because you have done this...I *will indeed* bless you."

The covenant between Abraham and God had already been well established and was not predicated by Abraham's actions. God initiated the covenant with Abraham to assure Abraham that God would be God to him and his descendants, and to bless all the families of the earth through him (Gen. 17.7). This is God's salvation promise as established by the Abrahamic and the later Mosaic covenant---God commits to us, guaranteeing our relationship with God. Abraham's response to God's unsettling challenge to sacrifice his son only reinforced God's predetermined intent to bless Abraham. But now, God expresses delight at Abraham's response, as opposed to God now renewing the decision to enact this covenant of perpetual relationship---salvation---because of Abraham's response.

An even greater message from this passage, however, focuses on the final conclusion to Abraham's saga. In his statement, "The Lord will provide," Abraham

expresses the reality of salvation in a nutshell. (Gen.22.14). Salvation is the assurance of God's reliable, trustworthy, love that sustains our relationship with God---a God who cares about and provides for us. The Lord's provision for us---nurturing, equipping, taking care of---is a manifestation of God's love that has been true since creation, as evidenced in the Garden of Eden, where God provides everything humans need. Rather than sacrifices, God desires that people trust in this divine provision. The notion of offering something to God is meant to be a response to what God has already provided rather than an inducement for God to provide. The way that God deals with Abraham and Abraham's posterity exemplifies God's ideal relationship with humanity. In other words, this is the way things should work.

At the end of his life, Jacob, Isaac's son and Abraham's grandson, blesses his sons, and in the midst of his poetic discourse declares, "I wait for your salvation, O Lord" (Gen. 49.18). This is the first appearance in scripture of the Hebrew word "yeshuw'ah," translated in Strong's lexicon as "salvation, deliverance, welfare, prosperity, victory." The Oxford Biblical Studies commentary suggests that this "pious declaration occurs randomly in the midst of the blessings, possibly representing a pause, or sigh, before Jacob dies" (Whybray, Gen. 49). I have been making a case for God's caretaking, protecting, and saving actions beginning with creation and continuing throughout each subsequent generation. However, until this point, no other authors of the biblical narratives have actually mentioned the literal word "salvation." So to what salvation exactly does Jacob refer to here? What salvation does Jacob anticipate?

Commentators reply with multiple answers including an anticipated salvation in heaven, as alluded to in Hebrews 11.13-16 where, "from a distance" all those who died in

faith saw and greeted the promises that they had yet to receive, including, “a better country, that is, a heavenly one.” Other possibilities include the salvation of Christ, intimated by Jacob moments earlier when he said, “The scepter shall not depart from Judah...until tribute comes to him” (Gen. 49.10). Perhaps, in the face of his own death, Jacob expresses a sentiment similar to my mother’s at the point of her death, of absolute certainty in her salvation and of where she was going, as the psalmist also expresses, “From God alone my soul waits in silence; from him comes my salvation” (Ps. 62.1). It is not certain to what salvation Jacob refers. But the salvation story continues.

Finalizing the first book of the Bible, Jacob’s son, Joseph, reassures his fearful brothers (who had betrayed Joseph years earlier) that they didn’t need to be afraid and that not only would he, from his position of power in Egypt, take care of them and their families, but that God would as well. He states, “Even though you intended to do harm to me, God intended it for good, in order to preserve a numerous people, as he is doing today” (Gen. 50.20). In this depiction, as in previous accounts, God works for good even when humans have intended evil.

As I’ve demonstrated here, beginning with creation and throughout Genesis, God has always been and is always saving creatura. The writer of John records Jesus as saying, “My Father is still working.” I understand this to say that when humans choose paths that take us away from God’s presence, God works creatively and continuously to restore us into relationship with God.

The theologians cited in Conradie’s anthology recognize salvation as salvation of the created world, not salvation from creation, a significant concept to now consider. This distinction is critical as there are those today, such as my long-time friend, a physician

and an estranged Catholic who questions the whole notion of salvation and who often asks from what we are being saved. Today, immediate concerns often outweigh eschatological ones and many people, people such as my friend, place little emphasis on an afterlife and have minimal interest in spiritual speculation about the future. Likewise, sin is an unpopular topic, so the traditional idea of being saved from one's sins to insure an eternal life in heaven is not particularly appealing or even relevant.

But many people, if not most of the people I encounter both socially and in my medical practice, are consumed with fear, lack of self-esteem, worry, and insecurity. They may use alcohol and drugs to deal with this pain; others suffer from depression and anxiety or a multitude of physical-health issues; others in our world resort to violence that they justify in the name of some ideology or religious point of view, including Christianity.

So from what are we being saved if not from ourselves? Perhaps from our fears and worries that stem from not recognizing our "true self," as Merton labels it (*New Seeds* 281). The self we don't recognize is made in the image of God but may lack wholeness or fulfillment because we have separated ourselves from God just as Adam and Eve did. Or perhaps we've become separated from the presence of God by being raised in a dysfunctional home or by living in an abusive environment. According to Franciscan friar Richard Rohr, we then develop a dualistic worldview and come to see God as "out there" rather than in us, (1/10/15 daily meditation); or, as Augustine puts it, we live with "a grave wound that needs to be healed," a view that Derek Flood, who espouses a "medical model of salvation" affirms (Flood, 19).

If there is such a thing as original sin from which we are to be saved then that sin is nothing more than being strangers to the divine nature of our selves and strangers to that same divinity in others. This results in a type of sickness that leads to destructive-behavior patterns that yearn for healing and restoration. This “sin as sickness” model rather than “sin as transgression” is consistent with the biblical view that “presumes the intertwining of salvation and healing,” as Flood suggests, and as is reflected in the Greek word that Christian scriptures use for “saved” (*sozo*), meaning, “to heal” (21). I adhere to Flood’s medical model of salvation and describe salvation (healing) *of* the created world *from* our false selves *to* live in our created divine image, which is our true self.

Biblical scholar D.J.A. Clines, in a 1967 Tyndale Old Testament Lecture, develops a “doctrine of the image” presupposing that “man is in some way and in some degree like God,” but recognizing that because the image is not itself the thing it represents, “the copy must in some respects be unlike its original” (53). It is not possible to definitively know what it means to be created in God’s image, and as Barth shows, theologians derive various conclusions regarding the image doctrine based on their different starting points (61). The Reformers understand God’s image as a “state of original righteousness,” and K.H. Bernhardt speaks of its primary function as “the dwelling place of God” (55, 81). Being created in a state of original righteousness, as the dwelling place of God, resonates with me as I consider salvation---returning to our true selves, the likeness of God.

There are numerous other concepts worth considering regarding the association of creation and salvation, and in Conradies’ anthology, the represented theologians connect the acts of creation and salvation using generic rubrics, including eschatological

categories as represented by Irenaeus' recapitulation theory of atonement, Athanasius' deification model, Gregory of Nazianz's transfiguration imagery, the Franciscans' participation in divine life, and Calvin's understanding of union with Christ by participation in the body. Other rubrics associating creation and salvation include Augustine's emphasis on God's transforming love, Maximus's description of the "dynamic movement of the divine logoi," the medieval female mystics' focus on "God's nourishing and healing presence," the sacramental cosmology of Aquinas, and Luther's narrative of God's "ubiquitous power" (18). The theme of God's providential love interconnects these rubrics.

If a loving God brought us into the world then this God would immediately determine to preserve us, or save us. The Genesis stories speak entirely to God's saving actions in the present. The immediacy of this type of saving does not exclude an eschatological or afterlife salvation, but is also not preempted by it. Augustine refers to these two types of salvation as providence and redemption, seeing God's gifts "in part temporal and earthly, in part eternal and heavenly," and seeing God's salvation extending to all creatures "continuously through the divine work of providence, while human beings also hope for the eternal salvation, which is possible through God's sending of the Son in the incarnation" (qtd in Conradie, 82). Again, I see not only God's creative and salvific acts working together cyclically rather than on a continuum (although the distinction may be semantical), but also providence and redemption occurring in concert with each other.

Because of love, creation by nature must be salvific. God cannot create and love creation, and then not work to help the created thrive and be complete---to save it. But salvation is also creative. God cannot rescue, shield, guide, deliver, bless, covenant with

or heal without something new resulting. Paul refers to this as our “new creation” in Christ (2 Cor.5.17). The cosmic Christ, the Word, who was with God in the beginning, creates and saves with God; saves by creating something new. The acts of salvation and creation intertwine in this cosmic dance that we also see occurring within the perichoresis.

In Ilia Delio’s essay from Conradie’s collection, she summarizes Saint Francis’s perspective on creation as “an outward movement of love that flows from the Father to the Son in and through the Spirit” and contends, “because creation flows out of the goodness of God, it is constantly being created by the gift of God’s love; redemption is an act of creation because it renews our relationship with God, who continues to create us” (130-132). Redemption creates something new and renews what has been created. Salvation emanates from God’s continuous love, love that is ever flowing within the trinity, and love that is always creative. From this perspective, creation and salvation are essentially synonymous.

Abraham Kuyper, a 19th century Neo-Calvinist, explains salvation as the overcoming of suffering. Further, Kuyper sees the eternal life that results from salvation as “no other life than the life we now live in space and time, this life redeemed from the power of sin and death” (Conradie, *Dialogue* 118). He portrays salvation as “God’s faithfulness to God’s creation, to heal, restore, and allow creation to flourish” (130). Suffering is an inevitable reality in a universe where humans are given freedom to make choices and the outcome of those choices is allowed to occur naturally.

I am reminded of the movie, *The Truman Show*, in which an executive producer, Christof, creates an utopian environment in which to chronicle and continuously

broadcast the entire life, beginning at birth, of a person who is unaware that he is the star of a reality TV show. Truman, the main character, eventually suspects the inauthenticity of his situation and ultimately discovers the truth about his orchestrated life. Despite Truman's lack of suffering, suffering that he would normally have experienced due to the consequences of his choices or other natural life events, he felt unfulfilled, dissatisfied, and he intuitively sensed something in his life was lacking. There was no true love in his life. He was not allowed to be a true man. Everyone around him was acting, and nothing of any negative consequence ever happened to him. There was no real freedom in Truman's life because Christof controlled every last detail of it.

There cannot be fulfillment or completeness without love, there can be no love without freedom, and there cannot be freedom without suffering. Reciprocally, suffering is necessary for wholeness, because suffering teaches us to love, and love makes us whole. God creates us in love and loves us through our afflictions. This assessment varies a bit from Kuyper's explanation of salvation as the overcoming of suffering. I see God's salvation not as the overcoming of adversity, but a reliable presence with us in our distress.

Kuyper also distinguished "common grace" from "particular grace." He depicts common grace as "God's way of creating room for the history of salvation" (Conradie, *Dialogue* 100). Whereas particular grace highlights specific moments of God's salvific activities (God's relationship with Israel; God's incarnation in Christ), common grace "offers gifts to humans in order to allow human flourishing" such as the arts, music, cultural and technological developments "but is not by itself salvific and is therefore quite distinct from the history of salvation that followed it" (101). Kuyper preferences

particular grace over common grace and he spiritualizes salvation, seeing it as otherworldly.

I think Kuyper's conclusions are misleading on two accounts: First, common grace is not quite so distinct from the history of salvation as he suggests, and secondly, salvation is most definitely directed to this world and also beyond. Prior to my birth, I lived nine months in utero as my mother daily played sacred and classical piano music. I grew up sitting on the piano bench beside her, listening to her play and playing with her. Music resonated in me from my conception.

Congruously, as a well-trained Baptist, I have read, memorized, and studied scripture extensively. But when I sing or hear played, "Arise, shine, for your light has come, and the glory of the Lord has risen upon you," I know the glory of the Lord. I know salvation. And it is not for the next world. It is here and now. It is not distinct from what God has done through Christ. It *is* what God has done through Christ, that is, to bring us into God's presence, to help us realize the God in whom, as Paul later writes, we live, and move, and have our being. Abiding in God's presence is the essence of salvation, so Kuyper's common grace, with the gifts, such as music, that it bestows, is not distinct from the history of salvation that follows it and that salvation begins in this life and this world.

Ecumenical Lutheran theologian, Robert Jenson, speaks of creation as God's self-expression---the "opening of a depth in God that is salvific by its very nature" (qtd in Verhoef, 3). The opening of a depth in God to allow for the creation of something other than God---created entities that emanate from the "within-ness of God" according to Jenson---portends the definition of salvation, which is God's wholeness (3). A loving

God can do no other than love, and love requires relationship, so God created. This relationship is all-inclusive, hence we see that in the stories throughout scripture, God is in relationship with not only humans but also animals and all created things.

God never wills disunion, but humans often do “what God does not want done” (this is how Jenson describes sin) and “denies our goal in God,” which is union or reunion with God, or, “adoption into God of the total Christus, of Jesus with his brothers and sisters” (Jenson, 151). As I see it, the opening of a depth in God not only allows for God’s self-expression in the form of creation but also allows for God’s act of salvation as God adopts us back into God’s self when we lose our identity in God.

God creates and re-creates this union within the construct of covenant---a reciprocal arrangement that negotiates God’s will with humans’ will, often unsuccessfully due to human tendency to choose what is not in our best interest. But within this covenant relationship, God consistently rescues humanity from itself, bringing humanity back into relationship with God. We see this occur in the first Bible story, when Adam and Eve act in a way God does not desire, but God immediately rescues them, making garments for them and protecting them from doing further harm by preventing them from eating from the tree of life. God restores Adam and Eve into relationship, even though God banishes them from the garden, as evidenced when Eve conceives and has a son, “with the help of the Lord” (Gen. 4.1). God never stops helping Adam and Eve, or saving them.

By recounting the Genesis narrative and bringing into dialogue the considerations of various theologians, I have demonstrated how God’s acts of creation and salvation are essentially inseparable. God has been saving creatura since the beginning of creation. In

the Exodus story that follows, we will explore how the Covenant serves as an instrument to effect and promise salvation.

II. The Covenant as an Instrument and a Promise of Salvation

In this section we witness God delivering the Hebrews from slavery and severe oppression in Egypt and then covenanting with Israel to be their God and for Israel to be God's people. This relationship between God and the people---the basis of the covenant---accords with my definition of salvation, which is continual relationship with God. The covenant formalizes this relationship, guaranteeing salvation because the covenant cannot be broken. God implores the people to keep the commandments, the terms of the peoples' side of the covenant, so that Israel can be an example among the nations and for their own well being. But Israel cannot and does not hold up its side of the covenant. Despite Israel's infidelity and inability to keep its side of the covenant, God remains faithful to it. God remains faithful to the relationship with us. This assurance is our salvation.

Following Joseph's death, Abraham's descendants became powerful in Egypt, so powerful, in fact, that the new king, who did not even know of Joseph, feared them. The king reasoned that in the event of war, Abraham's descendants might join with Egypt's enemies in fighting against him (Ex.1.10). The Egyptians, therefore, made slaves of the Israelites thereby setting the stage for God's great deliverance of the Israelites out of Egypt and back to the promised land in Canaan, an event that marks the highest point in Israel's salvation history (Ex.1.13).

The narrator of the book of Exodus ascribes a certain strategy to God, a strategy that eventually results in Pharaoh's releasing the Israelites from Egyptian bondage. God's

scheme includes an onslaught of plagues, plagues involving thunder and hail and gnats and boils, and culminates in the death of all of Egypt's firstborn children. The Egyptians finally relent in response to all this pressure and urge the Hebrews to "hasten their departure from the land, for they said, 'We shall all be dead.' (Ex.12.33). Presumably, the Israelites also endure all these same plagues, though God spares the Israelites the agony of the last curse by allowing Israelites to smear the blood of a sacrificial lamb on their doorposts. God promises that when God sees blood on the doorposts, those families will be spared the plague of death targeted to all Egyptians (Ex. 12.13).

Pharaoh allows the Hebrew people to leave Egypt, and God leads them into the wilderness (Ex.13.21). God consistently leads and guides. The Exodus narrator writes that, in order to gain glory and so that all Egyptians know that God is Lord, God hardens Pharaoh's heart. This hard heart causes Pharaoh to change his mind regarding the release of the fleeing Israelites, so he sends his armies to pursue them.

As the Egyptians chase the Israelites toward the sea, Moses tells the Israelites, "Do not be afraid, stand firm, and see the deliverance that the Lord will accomplish for you today... the Lord will fight for you, and you have only to keep still" (Ex.13.13-14). The Hebrew word used for deliverance, *yeshuw'ah*, which is cognate to *yashua'* (meaning to deliver, liberate or save) is used here for only the second time in Hebrew scripture, which is somewhat surprising given the multiple saving acts that God has already accomplished since creation. In the exodus from Egypt and now on the banks of the Red Sea, God dramatically intervenes for the fleeing Hebrews and consoles them not to be afraid.

According to Stephen Harris, at this point in the Hebrew scripture it appears that a later redactor weaves together three distinct narratives into a single account of the rescue at the Red Sea (99). The redactor makes this narrative decision in order to emphasize the “pivotal event in the story of Israel’s salvation” and “ultimate demonstration of Yahweh’s might” (99). These originally different accounts vary in the degree to which Yahweh is responsible for the demise of the Egyptians, while each account focuses on God’s salvation of Israel.

Despite Israel’s salvation, I find it challenging to reconcile the annihilation of the Egyptians at the sea with Israel’s deliverance, not to mention the killing of all Egyptian firstborns, a move that prompted Pharaoh to free Abraham’s descendants in the first place. How are we to speak of God’s saving love for Israel if it is at the expense of hundreds or thousands of Egyptians, such as the scene depicted by the Exodus narrator who nonchalantly records, “As the Egyptians fled before it, the Lord tossed the Egyptians into the sea” (Ex. 14.27)? In order to send a specific message to a specific audience, scholars believe that legend and folklore embed the early Biblical stories. These scholars agree that the Tanakh authors never intended for these stories to be interpreted literally as historical narrative. The motif of “the endangered child,” for instance, is a common mythological rendering in Greek and Roman mythology and Near-Eastern lore (Harris, 96). Congruous with Pharaoh’s killing of the firstborn at the time of Moses’ birth, and consistent with the eye-for-an-eye, retributive-justice mentality of the day, the tenth plague---God’s curse that kills all Egyptian firstborns---fits literarily into the exodus account. Also, did God afflict the Egyptians with the plagues, or were these plagues

natural disasters that “coalesced to form an opportunity for the escape” of Moses and the Israelites, as Krieg suggests (Krieg, 51)?

Rather than reflecting a divine strategy that miraculously saves one group at the expense of another, the redaction of the three separate Red-Sea-escape traditions into a single, convincing, hyperbolic narrative, represents a rhetorical device used to impress a later, post-exilic Jewish community of God’s faithfulness to the Abrahamic covenant. Hebrew scripture recounts God’s salvation history with a chosen people, and it employs multiple literary genres to accomplish this. The purpose of recounting these renderings helps demonstrate God’s consistent and reliable will to save and protect God’s creation--- this plays out through all the stories of God’s interactions with the Israelites. I argue that it is a misreading to extrapolate God’s literal violence from these mythical renderings; we misinterpret the narrative when we assume that a violent God destroys one group of people in order to save another.

In his book, *The God of Peace*, John Dear asserts that we use God as a scapegoat upon which we heap humanity’s violence, vehemence that often gets perpetrated against victims in the name of God (130). I suspect that this same scapegoating is more often than not also true in scripture. The Tanakh authors would have held an ancient worldview, a theology that viewed God as warrior. The severe genocidal language, such as that used when the Exodus narrator writes of God speaking in terms of obliteration or annihilation (or cutting them off, as Strong’s lexicon translates the Hebrew word, *kachad*), reflects this God-as-warrior theology. For God to save one nation at the expense of another is contradictory to the net of Hebrew scripture, that stresses God’s focus on justice, mercy, and compassion for all people.

The freed Israelites continue their journey from Egypt back to Canaan, wandering through the wilderness where God supplies manna (Hebrew *man hu*, translated what is it? or, what it was) and transforms bitter water to sweet for them. God continues to provide. They arrive at Sinai and camp at the mountain where, through Moses, the leader of this exodus, God initiates the third major covenant. After articulating the premise of this covenant to Moses and instructing him to share it with the people, God gives Moses the Ten Commandments which will become the foundation of the Mosaic covenant.

The Ten Commandments were no sooner given to Moses and not yet presented to the people before the people acted out their unfaithfulness to God. As they waited impatiently for Moses's return from the mountain, they fashioned a golden calf to worship. Symbolic of the covenant that was in the process of being broken by the people, as Moses descends the mountain, he breaks the tablets upon which God had written the commandments. Comically---or tragically, depending on your point of view---Moses climbs up and down Mount Sinai multiple times during this process of receiving the commandments, perhaps reflecting and/or portending the up-and-down relationship between the unfaithful Israelites and God.

For their own well being, as we will soon hear the Deuteronomist say, God gives the Israelites these commandments in order to sustain their already-functioning relationship with their Lord. The law was never meant to represent a set of preconditions for establishing a relationship with God; rather, it was meant to concretize the pre-existing relationship between God and Abraham's ancestors. The stipulations of the covenant, the specific commandments, are for humans' own good---they serve as a

mechanism to help people make the right choices. Our choices do not, however, determine God's actions, nor do they influence the integrity of the covenant.

In his article, Rolf Rendtorff recognizes the three successive covenants with Noah, Abraham, and Moses as “structuring concept in Genesis and Exodus,” (385). He notes God's unilaterality, and the lack of human responsibility or involvement in the covenants with Noah and Abraham; interestingly, Rendtorff also notes that human behavior doesn't necessarily change in response to the covenants. Both before and after the flood, for instance, God observes that “the inclination of the human heart is evil” (Gen.6.5). Nevertheless, God promises to not “curse the ground because of humankind again” (Gen. 8.21). Rendtorff alleges that after the flood, God guarantees the continuation of the basic preconditions for life upon the earth (387). God stays true to the covenants, protecting and sustaining life, leading and guiding those that will follow.

God initiates and sustains all three covenants. When it comes to the Mosaic covenant, however, God speaks directly to humans and invites their participation. When God suggests, “*If you* obey my voice and keep my covenant, you shall be my treasured people...you shall be for me a priestly kingdom and a holy nation” the implication is that God will *then* do something (Ex.19.5-6, italics mine). In other words, if you do something, then I'll do something. Rendtorff notes that “the human side is particularly emphasized” in this covenant, and I agree that the narrative does suggest an interesting contingency here, implying that God's decision to make Israel God's treasured possession, a holy nation, and a priestly kingdom is predicated by Israel's actions.

But God has already chosen Abraham to be the father of the nation that God delivers from slavery in Egypt and leads through the sea and wilderness to Mount Sinai,

where they now are. And as we shall see, God continues to treasure Israel and remain with them regardless of their indiscretions. So, despite this text's implication that God's actions are dependent on Israel's, I do not feel that the sum of scripture validates this. God acts in fidelity to the covenant and the promise to care for Israel regardless of the peoples' actions. This is possible because of who God is---God is trustworthy.

Additionally, God often changes God's mind. I find this fascinating, and true, especially when it comes to following through with threats to wreak havoc on Israel if the people fail their part of the agreement. God changing God's mind seems incredulous when we consider God's sovereignty and omniscience, but, in fact, this happens repetitively in this ongoing saga between God and Israel. Consider the incident of the people worshipping the golden calf while waiting on Moses to return from the mountaintop. In anger, God tells Moses, "let me alone, so that my wrath may burn against them and I may consume them" (Ex.32.10), but Moses implores the Lord not to bring disaster and "the Lord changed his mind" (Ex. 32.14). God's actions are not determined by humans' actions but God is always receptive to humans' turning towards God and is eager to respond with mercy.

The biblical redactors present the Sinai covenant in a way that makes it sound as if the people must do this or that as a precondition for God's response, but this does not hold up. Over and over, as we shall continue to see as we look at Hebrew scripture, particularly in the Prophets, God changes God's mind about destroying the people and then reestablishes the covenant, despite the fact that Israel's nature never changes. Israel repetitively continues to break the covenant but "the covenant itself will never be broken because God has promised to keep it" (Rendtorff, 390). God is a God of second, third,

and fourth chances; God relents and shows mercy despite human shortcomings. This represents further evidence of God's saving actions toward humanity despite humanity's unfaithfulness toward God.

Each of the three covenants we've explored thus far are forever marked by a specific sign: the recurrence of the rainbow signals God's covenant with Noah; circumcision signals the Abrahamic covenant; and the set-aside day of Sabbath is the weekly sign of God's commandments. Rendtorff nicely associates the Sabbath, the covenant, and creation, referencing Ex. 31.16-17 in which the Lord tells the Israelites to keep the Sabbath as a "perpetual covenant," and as "a sign forever." The continuity between creation (where God pursues and protects Adam and Eve, who willfully leave God's presence), the covenant (where God provides a tangible mechanism to help us stay within God's presence), and the Sabbath (where God expresses concern for our rest and refreshment as we go throughout our days, in and out of God's presence) is remarkable. In each of these instances, we see evidence of God caring for humanity--saving us from our self-will and poor choices, our tendency to disregard our relationship with God, and even our tendency to overwork and exhaust.

Hebrew scripture reflects God's concern for justice, and this gets spelled out in the Torah, or the covenantal law. In Leviticus, we see God instructing the people to "be holy, for I the Lord your God am holy" (19.2). God desires that the people imitate God, and God offers concrete examples about how to do that. For instance, God suggests that humans 1) leave leftover harvest in the fields for the poor, 2) not hold grudges or enact vengeance, 3) love one's neighbor as one's self, 4) treat an immigrant as a citizen, and 5) provide food and clothing for strangers.

The introduction of the concept of debt forgiveness in Deuteronomy supports God's ideal justice for humanity, as does God's persistent plea to take care of the widow, orphan, and alien. The people are implored not to be "hard-hearted" toward needy neighbors, but are encouraged to give liberally, not grudging "some of the bounty which the Lord your God has blessed you" (Deut.15.7,10,14). Recognizing that there will always be some in need, God commands that the people share with those in need.

I am struck by the detail with which God explains, through Torah law, how God desires us to treat one another. It is clear that God desires to save people...from hunger and poverty and alienation and debt...and also from self-centeredness. Interestingly it is for their own well being that the Lord implores Israel to imitate the Lord, serve the Lord, and keep the commandments (Deut.10.13). Apparently, doing justice and caring for one's neighbor helps not only the needy but also the one providing care, which is why God pleads for us to keep the commandments...for our own good. Is this not salvatory?

Conversely, God warns those who serve other gods that they will perish---a natural consequence of breaking the covenant and not remaining faithful to God. But God goes so far as to promise compassion even to these unfaithful, as described by Deuteronomy's editor. God assures them that "Even if you are exiled to the ends of the world, from there the Lord your God will gather you, and from there he will bring you back" (Deut. 30.4). Additionally, God vows to "circumcise" the hearts of God's people, so that they will love God with all their hearts and soul and, therefore, live. This promise on God's part reminisces circumcision, the sign of the Abrahamic covenant, and anticipates the prophet Jeremiah's new covenant (which is heart-based), bridging the past Abrahamic and the future Jeremiah covenant with the current law-based covenant. All of

these God-initiated covenants promise life, prosperity, and salvation. From the ends of the world, God gathers God's people and returns them to God. And in order that they live fully and love God, God circumcises their hearts. "The word is very near you. It is in your mouth and in your heart, so you can do it," the Deuteronomist says (Deut. 30.14). These acts of God are all salvific---God guides us out of exile and returns us to God's presence, circumcising our hearts so we will love God and live.

Loving God means loving like God loves, and this entails mercy. We find no better demonstration of God's mercy than when the Lord instructs Joshua to carry out instructions previously given to Moses; these instructions designate six "cities of refuge," cities set aside as a "refuge from the avenger of blood" for those who had unintentionally killed another person, (Joshua 20.3). In these cities, after the local congregation had held a trial for the accused and if that accused person was found innocent, that accused person could return home. While in the refuge city, the accused would be safe from anyone who might try to apply eye-for-an-eye-based retribution.

The fact that these cities developed in a less-evolved society, a society where killing was the norm, symbolized God's role in the evolution of understanding that there must be mercy in our interactions with one another. Societies that do not function based on the law of mercy will self-destruct, just as individuals will. But when God commands Joshua to create these cities of refuge, God interrupts our self-destructive tendencies.

In the United States today, we have sanctuary cities that serve as safe havens for refugees and illegal immigrants. In a recent *Christian Post* article, Castellacos and Salvatierra define these refuges as "God's response to the tragic fallibility of human law and justice in a fallen world (1)." God realizes that humans are fallible and therefore

creates opportunities that provide a merciful antidote to this fallibility. Our participation in these opportunities facilitates God's saving activity.

Joshua led the Israelites into Canaan, where he renewed the covenant and urged the people to "put away foreign gods" and "incline your hearts to the Lord, the God of Israel" (Josh. 24. 23). The people did not consistently do this, so the Lord delivers them into the hands of a neighboring king under whom they served for eight years. But when they cried out to the Lord, "the Lord raised up a deliverer for the Israelites, who delivered them" (Judges 3.9). Note here that the Hebrew word *yasha'*, used for "deliver," means to save, deliver, or liberate, and refers here to the judges whom God successively appoints to save the Israelites from their apostasy. From the Deuteronomistic Historians' point of view, obedience brings prosperity, apostasy brings captivity, and God is directly involved in each of these scenarios.

In the books of Deuteronomistic history, the biblical writers document Israel's pattern of 1) remaining true to the covenant, 2) worshipping only Yahweh, and 3) keeping the Torah, that results in national prosperity. In David's song of thanksgiving to the Lord for "delivering him from the hand of all his enemies," David refers to God as, "the horn of my salvation, my stronghold and my refuge, my savior; you save me from violence... I am saved from my enemies" (2 Sam. 22.1-4, also Ps. 18)). The Hebrew words, *natsal*, *palat*, *yeshah*, and *yasha'*, all used in this song, connote rescue, deliverance or being saved, expressing David's definite sense of God's salvific activity in his life.

Likewise, the Deuteronomistic Historians document times when Israel abandons the Mosaic covenant to worship other gods and also abandons the spirit of justice and mercy as the Torah prescribes. In these instances, Israel suffers ruin, defeat, and eventual

exile. According to deuteronomist logic, it is because of Israel's apostasy that we see the downfall of the Northern and Southern kingdoms of Israel culminating in the Babylonian exile in 586 B.C.E. The Chronicler records Solomon's prayer for his people in exile as he dedicates the temple, in which Solomon asks for the priests to be "clothed with salvation" ---here the Chronicler employs *teshua*, another Hebrew word for salvation that also means deliverance (2 Chron. 6.41). My point is that the idea of deliverance or salvation abounds in Hebrew scripture, and there are multiple ways of expressing it. God does not wait to save with a single redemptive act; God saves continuously from the beginning of creation and saves in many ways and from multiple problems, fears, and entrapments.

The Lord hears Solomon's prayer and responds with the musical words, "If my people, who are called by my name, humble themselves, pray, seek my face, and turn from their wicked way, then I will hear from heaven, and will forgive their sin and heal their land" (2 Chron. 7.14). Here, we see God seeking to forgive and heal, if only the people will turn to God. The Hebrew word *rapha*, meaning to heal, or make healthful, is used here, representing yet another component of God's ever-encompassing salvation.

But there is that qualifying word, "if" again, with the implicit understanding, and many times the explicit assertion, that "if" the people do not keep the covenant and do not turn away from other gods, God declares to them "you shall perish" (Deut. 30.18). The Lord follows this warning with a choice: life or death, blessings or curses. The writer of Deuteronomy places the people's destiny in their own hands---their choices will have inevitable consequences. But, a couple of centuries later, when the people end up exiled in Babylon, Deuteronomy's writer places the responsibility for this on God who, the writer suggests, responds to Israel's infidelity by exiling them to Babylon. Because this

theology of divine retribution is counter to the theology of salvation for which I argue here, I must deal with this further.

Actually, the book of Job deals with this further for me. Biblical scholars surmise that the story of Job initially circulated as a short folktale that served as a source of encouragement to the Israelites during hard times. An original abbreviated version of the story did not include the visitations from or any of the discourse with Job's four friends, nor did it include Job's confrontation of and conversation with God. The message of this ancient, shorter folk tale was simply that God would reward us if we remained faithful to God in both good and bad times. But the converse implication that we would be punished if we reject God "fueled a theology of divine retribution" that served as an explanation for why God willed or allowed the Israelites to be enslaved in Babylon in the late 500s B.C.E. (Krieg, 33).

This theology of a punitive God was popular following the Babylonian exile, and in order to counter this rationale as the answer to the theodicy question, an author from the 400s B.C.E. (post-exilic) constructed the book of Job, "transforming the original folk tale into an extended dialogue between the proponents of the theology of divine retribution and the proponents of a more sophisticated view of God's relationship to human suffering" (34). Job's four friends strove to convince Job that he must have done something wrong to deserve God's punishment, but in this extended version of Job's predicament, God effectively dismisses the proponents of divine retribution.

Job insists that he has done nothing to deserve his suffering and expresses his desire to argue his case before God. Krieg characterizes Job's lamentations as a legitimate response to suffering and even extols them as a vehicle that can lead us to

greater intimacy with God and “as they express our dark emotions, can lift us from despondency to trust in God” (76). Preceding his lament, Job states, “This will be my salvation, that the godless shall not come before God” (Job 13.16). But Job does go before God with his questions and lamentations, implying God certainly does not see him as godless. God then affirms Job, saying Job’s friends “have not spoken of me what is right, as my servant Job has” (Job 42.7). God vindicates Job and renounces the false theology of retribution asserted by Job’s friends.

Feminist theologian Carol Newsom contends that Job has a flawed image of God--Job “envisioned God in his own image, as a sort of divine patriarch” (135). Anthropomorphizing God, Job expects God to behave as Job would, assuming “that God primarily *reacts* to human conduct, a view of the world that puts the individual human being at its center” (135). But God is not a reactor and human beings are not at the center of the world. God frames Job’s situation in a much larger context when God speaks of the ordering of creation and God’s free will to act, not react, within that context. Consider God’s statement to Job that God brings rain on land where no one lives, and rain to the desert, which is devoid of human life (Job 38.26). We cannot logically explain why God would do this, particularly if we view the earth and God’s actions from our egocentric points of view. Likewise, Job’s “categories of right and wrong and his conception of God as a larger version of himself are simply inadequate to encompass the vision God shows him (135). Job’s starting points are wrong and God wants Job to have a new image of God and the world. This new image is of a God that considers the needs of all creation therefore does not act in accord with a human-centered worldview, or a model of God whose justice is based on legalistic, retributive motives.

After Job listens speechlessly as God questions him about creation and that which God created, Job finally responds, “I know that you can do all things and no purpose of yours can be thwarted,” followed by his confession that though he had previously heard of God, now he actually sees God (Job 42.2,5). It is at this point that Job repents, not from doing anything wrong or from any sin, but simply away from his old self to God, who he now sees. This turning to God, seeing God, and coming before God, (as Job earlier remarked the godless do not do) defines Job’s salvation---a response to God’s words or actions, not a prize for our actions.

Krieg contends that the complete book of Job’s “more sophisticated theology” holds that “although we can never fathom the full significance of suffering, we can trust God’s pledge to bestow *salus* on us” (36). God’s question to Job, “Who is this that darkens counsel by words without knowledge?” suggests that God recognizes Job’s suffering but also infers that Job must trust God despite not having an explanation for his suffering (Job 38.2). This theme of unconditional trust in God in all circumstances, knowing that God will be faithful, runs throughout Hebrew scripture and overshadows less-evolved theologies---theologies found within the same scripture---of a punitive God who waits to punish us when we err. The message that I hear persistently as I read scripture is this message of unconditional salvation, not retribution or denial of salvation because of our unfaithfulness. We can trust God to take care of us because God is God. God loves us. And God is trustworthy.

God sustains Israel’s salvation through the covenant---a promise to be Israel’s God---a promise that God consistently keeps, despite Israel’s fickleness. We will next

hear what the prophetic voice tells us about salvation, but before moving to the prophets, I would like to look at some of the salvation imagery found in the Psalms.

III. Salvation in the Psalms

One could argue that the entire book of Psalms is about salvation, and, in fact, the word salvation appears to occur more often in the Psalms than any other book in the Bible. The Psalmist's primary emphasis is that salvation comes from God. We see verse after verse in the Psalms speaking to this theme, including:

- “Deliverance belongs to the Lord” (Ps. 3.8)---the Hebrew word “deliverance” used here is *yeshuw'ah*, meaning salvation, rescue, or deliverance
- “The Lord is my light and my salvation” (Ps. 27.1) (*yeshuw'ah* is used again)
- “They forgot God, their Savior, who had done great things in Egypt” (Ps. 106.21)---the Hebrew word for “Savior” used here is *Moshi'a*, meaning savior, liberator, or deliverer---here, the psalmist recognizes God as Savior
- “Do not put your trust in princes, in mortals, in whom there is no help...Happy are those whose help is the God of Jacob” (Ps. 146.3,5)---the Hebrew word for “help” used here is *teshuah*, meaning deliverance, salvation

Walter Brueggemann describes God's salvation as recorded in the Psalms in terms of orientation, disorientation, and new orientation. Brueggemann recognizes 1) psalms of praise related to creation and humans' initial phase of orientation; 2) psalms of anguish and lament associated with the disharmony that followed creation, and corresponding to humans' disorientation; and finally, 3) psalms of thanksgiving,

representing the new creation of humans in the cosmic Christ that occurs with new orientation (30). God's salvation finds many forms of expression relating to humans' relationship with God, and this point is not missed by the psalmist.

The psalmist (and other psalmists who contributed to the Psalms over the generations) also describes God's salvation when speaking to the Lord: "You have been our dwelling place in all generations. Before the mountains were brought forth, or ever you had formed the earth and the world, from everlasting to everlasting you are God" (Ps.90.1-2). The Hebrew word, *ma'own*, means dwelling, habitation, or refuge. The psalmist's referral to the everlasting God as our dwelling place, our refuge, even before creation, speaks magnanimously to the psalmist's appreciation of God as our salvation.

As noted, God's salvation takes many forms and in Psalm 34 alone we see several of these forms. In verse 4 of this psalm, the Lord delivers the psalmist from all of his fears. In verse 6, the afflicted one is saved from all his trouble. In verse 7, the angel of the Lord encamps around and delivers those who fear the Lord. In verse 8, the Lord saves the brokenhearted and those "crushed in spirit." In verse 22, the Lord redeems the life of his servants. God the Savior, as the psalmist writes, so loves the world that God saves us in all these multiple and varied ways.

So far through this scriptural survey, we have established continuity between creation and salvation, we have depicted the covenant as an instrument and promise of salvation, and we have extracted from the Psalms a multitude of salvation images. We will now hear what the prophets have to say about salvation.

IV. What the Prophetic Voice Tells us About Salvation

God wants Israel to categorically trust in God. The prophets preach this over and over, beseeching the people to rest in the assurance of God's salvation. The prophets announce the new covenant that will transform people from within. The God of the prophets holds Israel to a higher moral standard than other nations so that Israel will be a light to the rest of the world. Knowing God and dwelling with God defines salvation; acting with love and mercy enacts salvation. This is what the prophetic voice is saying. This voice also seems to be saying that God chooses to trust Israel---God entrusts Israel to be God's servant in the world.

Beginning with God's lamentation about the people's lack of understanding and their continued rebellion against God, the prophet Isaiah delivers his poetic oracles to Israel in First Isaiah around 742-701 BCE. Essentially, according to Isaiah, Israel just doesn't get it. God expresses disdain at their offerings, their incense burning, their solemn assemblies, and their festivals. God admonishes the people to make themselves clean and to cease doing evil and learn to do good; God desires they seek justice, rescue the oppressed, defend the orphan, plead for the widow (Is. 1.16-17). The prophet continues, claiming that redemption comes through justice and righteousness. He echoes the 48th Psalm, describing the "mountain of the Lord's house" to which all nations shall stream and where the Lord will arbitrate for many peoples, who will "beat their swords into plowshares, and spears into pruning hooks" (Is. 2:1-4). Isaiah makes it clear from the beginning that God desires that the world be different, and he foretells of a future in which this is the case. All nations and all people will be a part of an ideal, peaceful world.

Isaiah's message is consistent throughout his prophetic career and is repeated by later Isaiah-influenced prophets who write the second and third sections of the book of

Isaiah. The prophet's central message is that Israel's salvation depends upon trusting God. Isaiah pronounces this sentiment clearly as he transmits God's message that, "In returning and rest you shall be saved; in quietness and in trust shall be your strength" (Is. 30.15). I often hear Christians say that all we need to do in order to be saved is to believe that Jesus died for our sins. But the prophetic voice tells us that to be saved, all we need to do is return and rest. Interestingly, the Hebrew word used here for "return," *shubah*, may be used metaphorically to indicate "returning to God" or "turning to God," but also translates to retire or withdraw. This suggests that we don't have to believe anything. In fact, we don't have to do anything to be saved. We just get to pull back and rest. Then, in this place of quietness and trust, we can be strong, confident, and saved.

The Hebrew word translated as trust, *bitchah*, connotes confidence, a feeling of safety, and a sense of being care-free. There is a distinction between this kind of trust and the kind of belief that Paulinian theology reflects. The Greek word used for "belief" by the New Testament writers is *pisteo*, which can infer only thinking something to be true, or being persuaded as to the truth of something. Trust is deeper, more gut-based, and less intellectual. Trust allows for complete rest and quietness of the mind and soul. The proverb states that we are to trust in the Lord with all of our heart, and not to depend on our own insight or understanding (Prov.3.5). This absolute assurance, this sense of serenity, is what God, through the prophetic voice, gives us.

Isaiah addresses the Israelites, who interpret his message in the context of their primary concern of being delivered from their enemies. Later readers of Isaiah's words, including the writer and readers of Christian scripture, reinterpret these words within our own contexts. The context may be that of the Roman empire, which sought to gain

complete control of surrounding territories, or in the context of today's American empire, where we fear attack by ISIS, Al Qaeda, or other nations of power. In either case, fear of our neighbors consumes us. The human response to fear is to exert more control---we take matters into our own hands and justify whatever means we then take to insure our safety. So we find it more acceptable to frame Isaiah's words as eschatological. The notion of resting and trusting God in the face of perceived threat is naïve and idealistic; thus, we cast this thought into the future.

Whether understood as applicable to the Israelites' world, the early Christians' world, our world, or the next, the message remains the same: We are saved now and forever as we rest in God. The problem here is that we cannot seem to fathom this truth. It is not only idealistic, but it also goes against everything we believe and accept as truth. To be "saved," we not only have to protect ourselves, but we must think right, act right, and live right---right as determined by one's interpretation of an external standard, such as a human commandment. Thinking and living right is important. But this occurs only as we trust God and rest in that trust---trust that occurs as a result of spiritual transformation. Then God will no longer say, "these people draw near with their mouths and honor me with their lips, while their hearts are far from me, and their worship of me is a human commandment learned by rote" (Is. 29.13). As the Deuteronomist describes, our hearts will be circumcised. But how does this circumcision, or personal transformation occur?

Personal transformation occurs as a result of God's spirit. "Until a spirit from on high is poured out on us," Isaiah says, there won't be justice and righteousness, the result of which is peace and quietness and trust (Is. 32.15-17). God's spirit is poured out on us. Acknowledging our tendency to function independently and act as if we were God yet

remaining devoid of God's spirit, the Lord, in Isaiah's vision, ironically instructs Isaiah to say to the people, "Make the mind of this people dull, and stop their ears, and shut their eyes, so that they may not look with their eyes, and listen with their ears, and comprehend with their minds, and turn and be healed" (Is. 6.10). In this vision, God has become so frustrated with Israel that God says cut them loose. In fact, God suggests, make it so they can't even turn to me and be healed. It seems here that Isaiah anthropomorphizes God. Or, at the very least, he allows God to lament Israel's recalcitrance.

Hence, we hear messages, like this one of Isaiah's, in which God is portrayed as the one who makes it so that the Israelites can't turn to God and be healed. But this is totally inconsistent with the corpus of scripture that depicts God as forever seeking Israel and pulling the people back to God. In the ancient writer's worldview, God gets credited or blamed for everything that happens. So when events that jeopardize Israel's safety begin to occur, events such as those leading up to the exile, God is blamed as being the cause of Israel's disobedience. Therefore, occurring throughout all three sections of Isaiah, which span a time period of approximately 200 years, we witness oracles of judgment and desolation admixed with oracles of deliverance. But God promises to redeem Israel (Is. 43.1). As always, when there is exile or desolation involving Israel, both of which are attributed to God, God also preserves a remnant, and eventual redemption for Israel.

Then Isaiah writes, "Here is your God. He will come with vengeance, with terrible recompense. He will come and save you. Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened and the ears of the deaf unstopped" (Is. 35.4-5). With his usual rhetorical flourish,

Isaiah describes God saving the people then re-opening the people's eyes and ears. When the exiled return to Zion, there is everlasting joy, and a banquet on the mountain of God where death is swallowed up forever and the Lord God wipes away all tears (Is. 25.8). Notwithstanding my hermeneutical conflation of the Babylonian exiles' return to the earthly Jerusalem and the return of the spiritually exiled to the eschatological Zion, Isaiah ultimately pronounces God's blessing and salvation of the people. This motif repeats itself in Deutero-Isaiah, Third Isaiah, and also in Jeremiah because, fortunately, God has an endless supply of energy and patience.

The Lord does not grow weary, nor will God's servant, Israel, grow faint or be crushed until justice is established (Is. 40.28, 42.4). In the first Suffering Servant Song, Isaiah reveals God's persistent love toward Israel, linking the themes of creation, the covenant, salvation, and the new exodus (the Israelites return from the Babylonian exile). God created the world and gave breath to the people in it, calling the chosen, and giving them "as a covenant to the people, a light to the nations, to open the eyes that are blind" (Is. 42.6-7). God not only opens the eyes of the people of Israel but now Israel is meant to light the world. God works through Israel by giving Israel as a covenant to all people. Through Israel, God opens the eyes of the blind, freeing prisoners everywhere.

In the scripture, "For I am the Lord your God, the Holy One of Israel, your Savior" (Is. 43.3), Isaiah declares that God is savior, as did the psalmist. As someone who grew up Southern Baptist, that's new language to me. *God* as Savior? Being Christocentric, many Christians deem Jesus as Savior, essentially to the exclusion of God as Savior. An incarnational and trinitarian understanding of Jesus as God absolves this

position, but the idea of God as Savior who has been saving all along has been lost in the process. This is the prophetic voice speaking.

Once again, however, we must deal with the scriptural assertion at this point that God “ransoms” other nations (Egypt, Ethiopia and Seba) in exchange for Israel (Is. 43.3-4). Hebrew scripture records the story of God’s relationship with Israel. The Lord calls Israel precious and avows point blank to Israel, “I love you” (Is. 43.4). This language is similar to what we will hear from the disciples after Jesus’ death and resurrection, when love language towards Jesus and redemption and ransom metaphors abound. Isaiah’s emphasis throughout this song remains on God’s quintessential love and salvation of Israel, and he uses ransom metaphors to reiterate this. From the prophets, we begin to hear more and more themes that resonate in the gospel writers.

Consider the Lord’s address to Israel in the 10th verse of Isaiah 43: “You are my witnesses (compare to Acts 1.8 where Jesus says this verbatim to his followers, just before his ascension) and my servant whom I have chosen, so that you may know and believe me and understand that I am he (compare to John 8.24 where Jesus, when speaking of the Father, says, ‘I am he’).” The Lord goes on to say, “Before me no god was formed, nor shall there be any after me. I, I am the Lord, and besides me there is no savior” (Is. 43.11). This passage is extremely enlightening when you consider the relationship it shares with Jesus’ words identifying himself with the Father, and also the relationship it shares with the “I am” passage in the book of Exodus, where God identifies God’s self to Moses as *Yahweh* (translated from the Hebrew as “I am”). The Lord God tells us succinctly that there is no savior other than God---“I am”---the same I

am that delivers the Israelites from Egypt and the same I am with whom Jesus identifies. The Savior has been with and has been saving us forever.

The Savior God intends for salvation to reach to the ends of the earth and for Israel to be the “light to the nations” that facilitates this goal (Is. 49.6). God acknowledges that, in frustration, God briefly “hides his face” from Israel; on the other hand, God shows everlasting compassion to Israel (Is. 54.7-8). Although Israel repeatedly fails to uphold the covenant, God continually envisions Israel as the faithful servant. The servant, though, will suffer. Does God cause or allow Israel’s suffering? The fifth chapter of Isaiah depicts God as the vinedresser who prunes the vines to foster growth. This analogy suggests that God may allow Israel to suffer so the people will become as God desires.

The prophets in Hebrew scripture assure the people that while God sent, or allowed, suffering on the people of Israel, God would eventually send blessing on them (Krieg, 94). Krieg asserts that God did not intend the suffering of the Israelites in the 6th century B.C.E. but “throughout their captivity, God sought to strengthen and guide them” (73). Krieg goes on to suggest that the servant suffered vicariously, saying, “God can commission a group of people or someone to undergo hardship for the well-being of all people, and that their suffering can cleanse the people of the effects of their sin” (99). This vicarious form of suffering is what love can effect. God loves Israel, yet allows Israel to suffer and suffers with Israel, for their well-being and for the good of all nations. Israel was to be a light to the nations, so God, the potter, according to Isaiah, allows Israel to suffer, shaping it into the model nation that God intends it to be.

In the fourth Suffering Servant Song of Isaiah 53 we see God's servant, Israel, described as "a man of suffering" who was "crushed for our iniquities," "like a lamb led to slaughter" and "by a perversion of justice" was taken away and cut off from the land of the living. He did no violence yet bore the sin of many, the prophet writes (Is. 54.9,12). Comparing Israel to the sacrificial lamb of the first exodus, Isaiah echoes the expiatory Passover language in this song.

At the time this oracle was written, the inhabitants of Israel are exiled in Babylon. They are indeed suffering in this exiled state, just as their forebearers suffered under Egyptian oppression. It's ironic that Israel once again finds itself in captivity and bondage. God leaves them in that situation for almost sixty years. Perhaps God is trying to teach them something new during this time of exile. When God delivers them from Babylon in the second exodus, God announces that God's house will be a house of prayer for *all* people and that God "will gather others to them besides those already gathered" (Is. 56.7-8). It appears that God *is* doing something new at this point, and in fact, now announces that the Lord's spirit is upon the people, and the Lord's words in their mouths would never leave them (Is. 59.21). This promise anticipates the new covenant that Jeremiah will later announce (Jer. 31.31-34).

The new covenant---the covenant in which God inscribes the law on the people's hearts so that they will know God and be God's people, and the covenant in which God also forgives and forgets their sins---defines the ultimate relationship that God desires with Israel. The ideal Israel is a just and righteous nation existing as an exemplar of the new covenant for all other nations. But this ideal state has yet to exist. So Christian

scripture writers identify this ideal servant, the model for all nations and all humanity, as Christ.

The New Testament authors reinterpret Isaiah's oracles christologically, with Jesus Christ being the suffering servant, the one wounded for our transgressions and by whose bruises we are healed (Is. 53.5). I see the ideal Israel and Christ as essentially synonymous. Jesus is the ideal Israel, the personification of the new covenant. Jesus is also the servant who suffers, suffering with humanity and in solidarity with the poor and the oppressed. We can interpret Isaiah in the context of Israel and Christ and understand the same message---a message of hope and assurance.

Isaiah sings a song of triumph for Israel, or Christ, in which Isaiah sings, "the glory of the Lord has risen upon you" (Is. 60.1). The prophetic voice tells us that God's glory rises on us. Isaiah, speaking for himself or perhaps the servant, says, "The spirit of the Lord God is upon me because the Lord has anointed me; he has sent me to bring good news to the oppressed, to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and release to the prisoners" (Is. 61.1). These are the same words that Jesus chooses from the scroll to read aloud when he begins his ministry in Nazareth, representing another parallel between Jesus and the servant.

Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Hosea, Amos and Micah all declare similar messages. They speak forcefully against social injustice, challenging Israel to a higher standard---one that manifests righteousness, justice, love, and mercy. Prophesying for God, Amos admonishes Israel for hypocritical religious observances while "trampling on the poor" and "pushing aside the needy" (Amos 5.11-12). Grimsrud states that the voices of the prophets were "voices of accountability" that arose to challenge religious distortions such

as presenting sacrifice as a means to salvation (50). Amos declares God's preference for justice and righteousness over ritual, solemn assembly, offerings, and hymns (Amos 5.21-24).

The prophets speak of the new covenant in which inner transformation---the law written on the heart---replaces legalistic adherence to statutes (Jer. 31.31-34). Ezekiel describes God's "covenant of peace" as an everlasting covenant in which God promises to dwell with the people forever (Ez. 37.26-27). Jeremiah reveals God entreating the people to change their ways, pleading, "let me dwell with you" (Jer.7.4). The various prophetic voices all describe salvation, which in essence, is dwelling with God---living in God's presence, eternally. This transforms us so that we are holy, as God is holy, manifesting love and mercy.

Hosea promotes *hesed* (loyalty and steadfast love) over sacrifice, and he advances the idea that knowing God is preferable to burnt offerings (Hosea 6.6). Hosea also speaks of abolishing the bow, the sword, and war so that all creatures can "lie down in safety" (Hosea 2.18). Micah resonates with Hosea and Isaiah, describing universal peace, as nations beat their swords into plowshares and spears into pruning hooks (Mic. 4.3). Grimsrud notes Hosea's declaration that just as violence breeds violence and war leads to war so it is that returning to God and the covenant restores harmony (57).

Hosea says, "return to God, hold fast to love and justice, and wait continually for your God" (Hosea 12.6). God simply wants us to turn to God, to love, and to wait. This requires trust, remembering who God is. Grimsrud writes, "to 'know' God is to trust in God above all else" (66). Knowledge of and trust in God are central to prophetic teaching and to salvation, which according to the prophets results in the healing of relationships.

Salvation is viewed in terms of the covenant relationship that God has with God's people, with the deity considered a loving, healing God who shows mercy and desires mercy in return.

Most prophets make some reference to universalism, projecting a time when people of many nations will stream to the mountain of the Lord (Micah 4.2-3). Inclusivism usurps Israel's exclusive relationship with God, as related in the book of Jonah---a fictional prose-narrative with a prophetic-sounding message---in which God expresses mercy to a Gentile nation that does not worship God. "God directs the destinies of other nations" and other nations have their own exoduses, as we see in Amos' reminder to the Israelites (Amos 9.7) (Harris, 205). Throughout the prophets, God continues to seek a special covenant bond with Israel, envisioning an evolved relationship where the Israelites know God intrinsically, and this relationship transforms them, resulting in peaceful, loving interactions. God says, "I will be your God, and you shall be my people, and walk only in the way that I command you, so that it may be well with you" (Jer.7.32). This is God's deepest desire and what the prophetic voice tells us we receive only from God---our *salus*, our well-being, our salvation.

We hear this salvific voice within the writings of the prophets even as we also see a God that, at times, still fits with the ancients' divine-warrior image. Weaving through this ancient theological understanding, the prophets reveal a God of peace who desires mercy over vengeance, and peace over retribution. Stephen Finlan observes this changing view of God in scripture and the "progress in religious conceptualization that takes place in the Bible," which is a record of the "gradual human absorption of and interpretation of revelation received from God" (*Options* 112). As human intellectual, philosophical and

ethical capacities evolve, we find that humans mediate a progressive revelation within scripture (115). As we read pages of scripture from the different biblical periods, we witness these “stages of evolution and sometimes regression” in human understanding of God (116). We certainly witness these stages in the writings of the prophets.

In order to appease a primitive worldview, the prophets continue to present the image of a judgmental God even as they preach oracles of deliverance by a Savior God. This begins to change, however, as a more peaceful God image becomes desirable. The prophetic voice sheds light on God’s salvation by depicting a God that desires mercy over sacrifice, a God that wants to be trusted and wills to trust Israel in return, a God that holds Israel to a higher standard so Israel will be the light of the world. We are now ready to meet God in person and see firsthand what salvation looks like.

V. Salvation as Revealed Through Christ

God participates in human life through the person of Jesus. Jesus reveals God’s salvation, represented by God’s kingdom. Jesus demonstrates kingdom living in multiple ways, such as healing the sick, showing mercy to a neighbor, loving enemies. Jesus announces that God’s kingdom is present. Salvation is living in God’s presence and Jesus makes salvation reality.

Mark begins his gospel by announcing the beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, Son of God. Mark immediately mentions Jesus’ good news and, in the same sentence, he identifies Jesus with God. So we can assume that whatever Jesus’ good news is, it is probably very similar to God’s. In fact, only a few verses later, Mark tells his readers that Jesus came proclaiming the good news of *God*. Jesus reports that the kingdom of God is near; he urges people to repent and believe in the good news. All of

this follows John the baptizer's preaching regarding repentance for the forgiveness of sins while also foretelling of Jesus, who would soon arrive on the scene.

Throughout Hebrew scripture, the prophets repeatedly express God's desire for Israel to repent from unfaithfulness, and John's continuation of this message regarding repentance and the forgiveness of sin (or unfaithfulness) establishes continuity between Mark's gospel and the prophets. Jesus continues to announce God's good news---that God's kingdom is near. Jesus invites his listeners to repent and believe this good news. Jesus' exhortation to repent and believe sounds very much like the prophets' call for Israel to repent and trust; in fact, it is this exact same message that reverberates throughout Hebrew scripture and now culminates in Jesus. Once again we discover the continuity between the old and new messages. This is important to my argument that God's salvation does not begin and end with Jesus---it begins with creation and continues indefinitely. Jesus's life, death, and resurrection represents the salvation story in a nutshell---Jesus shows us how salvation works. Jesus is the personification of God's desire for Israel and Jesus' message maintains continuity with Hebrew scripture.

Mark writes that after Jesus performs his first miracle, an observer asks, "What is this, a new teaching---with authority?" (Mk. 1.27) This question may represent the single most important question ever asked regarding Jesus. I say this because this question goes directly to the heart of the issue about who Jesus is. Does Jesus teach something different from what the Torah teaches and what the covenant demands? And who exactly is Jesus? Whether he represents a completely new concept or whether he represents the Torah's fulfillment remains a central question. Not only does Jesus exorcises demons and heal the sick, he goes so far as to forgive sins. The Jewish leadership challenges his

authority to do all these things, particularly forgiving sins, because these powers are reserved for God alone. This question of Jesus' mission and identity, what scholars call the Messianic secret, escalates throughout Mark's gospel.

Jesus defines his mission as to proclaim the message (Mk.1.38). From the start, this message has a practical quality to it. Jesus did not simply preach, he took action. He did not only proclaim the good news that the kingdom of God is near, he enacted this good news. Grimsrud defines the kingdom of God as a "creative, fluid symbol meant to convey God's participation in human life as creator and savior" (75). Jesus refers to what occurs in his life and among his followers as the presence of this kingdom (75). This good news is original---no one has ever actually witnessed God's kingdom in person until now.

Regarding his ministry, Jesus utilizes the analogy that no one puts new wine into old wineskins because new wine bursts the old skins. He proclaims the familiar message to trust and turn to God, but he demonstrates this familiar message in tangible new ways --ways never seen before. And from the beginning he makes it clear that he is bringing this message to those who most need it---not the righteous, but the sinners---those who are lost, or not in relationship with God (Mk.2.17).

When he redefines the meaning of the Sabbath, Jesus demonstrates how it is to live in harmony with God. The Pharisees rebuke him when he and his disciples break Torah law by harvesting grain to eat on the Sabbath. But Jesus turns the law on its head by stating that the Sabbath was made for humans, and therefore it is proper to eat and do good and enjoy life on the Sabbath (Mark 3.4). Jesus embodies what God's kingdom actually looks like in action. He compares it to a mustard seed in which the grandeur of

God's presence is at first hidden, but which eventually grows and provides a nesting place for the birds (Mark 4.30). As Jesus teaches and demonstrates God's kingdom, we sense that he describes a template for salvation in this life. Or, for life in this salvation.

Fear has no place in God's kingdom. Jesus calms the storm on the sea for the panicked disciples, and because of their fear of death, he questions their faith. God's good news, the news Jesus came to proclaim, is that faith and trust negate fear. As a physician, I can honestly say that fear is the most frequent symptom that I deal with on a day-to-day basis. My patients seem afraid of everything, and their anxieties are pandemic. Jesus must have recognized this problem in his world, too, because he was frequently encouraging people not to be afraid. To the synagogue leader whose young daughter died, Jesus said, "Do not fear, only believe" (Mark 5.36). In the face of even death, the good news is that we don't have to be afraid when we trust God.

The concept of salvation implies that we are being saved from something to something. I experience fear as one of the most prevalent conditions from which people need to be saved. God saves us from our paralyzing states of fear when we trust God to take care of us. We may not know exactly what this means---it may even mean that we or someone we love dies. But God tells us that we can be assured even in the circumstance of death that all will be well, and all shall be well, to quote Julian of Norwich, from *Showings*. God saves us from fear to assurance. We can trust God.

This trust also applies not only in the face of death but also in relation to our daily needs. For instance, the fear of scarcity worries many of us, but in order that we not be controlled by this concern, Jesus demonstrates how God provides. Reminiscent of how God provided manna for the Israelites, Jesus feeds five thousand people with a few

loaves of bread and some fish. Yet again, this move demonstrates God's willingness to provide abundantly for our daily needs.

In a later story, when responding to the Pharisee's criticism that his disciples ate with unwashed hands, Jesus makes the bold statement that all foods are clean. He insists that nothing going into a person defiles that person, only those things that come out: "For it is from within, from the human heart, that evil intentions come," Jesus says (Mark 7.21). Jesus' emphasis on the heart recalls the prophetic voice announcing that the new covenant is written on our hearts. In God's kingdom there is more concern for true intentions than whether or not people follow the letter of the law. God's embodiment in Jesus clarifies what the law and the prophets taught. God, in Jesus, showed us the way of salvation, the way to have serenity and an abundant life now and eternally. The way begins in our hearts, with our intentions.

My father spent many weekends building a bathroom and installing indoor plumbing in the farmhouse where his parents lived. Because he financed these projects, Dad did not give as much money to the church as he might have otherwise. Some people faulted him for this. But I conclude that Jesus would not have found such fault. In the pericope in which Jesus declares all foods clean, he deems it hypocritical to abandon God's commandment, such as honoring your father and mother, while adhering to human tradition, such as washing your hands (or giving a defined amount of money to the church). Jesus proceeds to give a specific example of hypocrisy as it applies to offerings when he speaks of Corban---that is, an offering to God (Mark 7.11). He makes it very clear that obeying God's commandment to honor one's parents takes precedence over human precepts and doctrines about offerings (Mark 7.7). Jesus clarifies the law and

corrects its misinterpretations, showing what God desires of people by transforming their understanding of obedience and faithfulness. This is the repentance, or *metanoia*, that Jesus has come to effect---the new wine in the new wineskin---always the first step of salvation. Jesus' emphasis on the heart, and the spirit rather than the letter of the law, saves us from our wrong motives and judgments, to something much more genuine.

Jesus demonstrates yet another facet of God's kingdom (which I see as a metaphor for God's salvation) when he exorcises a Gentile woman's daughter. At this moment, he crosses the barrier that separates Jews and Gentiles, introducing inclusivity of non-Jews as a facet of God's kingdom and, therefore, of salvation. Gradually, Jesus manifests the complete nature of God's kingdom, just as Jesus gradually gives sight to the blind man at Bethsaida (Mark 8.24). Likewise, in stages, those following Jesus begin to realize that Jesus is God's son, God's human presence in this world, showing us the way of salvation from whatever it is that keeps us from resting in God's presence.

When a paralytic comes to Jesus for physical healing, Jesus forgives his sins; and the Jewish scribes question Jesus' authority to do this. Prior to physically healing the man, Jesus pronounces his sins forgiven and proceeds to cure his paralysis only so observers would "know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sin" (Mark 2.10). Here, Jesus establishes that he has the authority to forgive sin, but at this early stage of self-disclosure, refers to himself merely as the Son of Man rather than the Son of God.

Jesus makes an implicit reference to his identity with God when he responds to the Pharisees' complaint that Jesus' disciples don't fast. Using wedding imagery such as the prophets frequently used when referring to God, Jesus states that wedding guests do

not fast when the bridegroom is present. The prophets often referred to God as Israel's husband, or Israel as God's wife. Here, Jesus seems to refer to himself as the bridegroom, which associates him with God, while making the point that rituals such as fasting are not necessary when one is in God's presence. Therefore, when Jesus is with them, the disciples are in God's presence. Jesus gradually reveals this, the significance of which is salvific. Salvation is living within God's presence---knowing that God dwells with us---we are not alone and God will provide for us.

According to Mark, Jesus uses metaphor (such as wedding imagery, or the wine and the wineskin) and parables in order to *confuse* those who are not a part of his inner circle. This odd sentiment has echoes in Isaiah, who voices God's frustration regarding the recalcitrant Israelites. God invites Isaiah to confuse the Israelites so that they *cannot* "comprehend with their minds, and turn and be healed" (Is. 6.10). Oxford Biblical Studies commentators suggest that the failure of Jesus's audiences to understand is part of God's will. God is more concerned with trust and repentance, which result in *doing* God's will. This will lead to greater understanding than simply hearing and depending on intellect for understanding. The parable of the sower that Jesus shares next makes this point. Only when the word falls on good soil will it be accepted and bear fruit. The good soil is analogous to the transformed person who turns to God in trust and is then receptive to hearing the word and understanding it.

Jesus increasingly desires his disciples understand the concept that Jesus is God's anointed one, sent to manifest God's will in the world. If the disciples understand Jesus as God's anointed, it follows that they will realize how Jesus's words and actions represent God's will for the world. Jesus asks his disciples, "Who do you say that I am?"

(Mark 8.27). Peter responds that Jesus is the Messiah (the anointed one). Jesus then tells the disciples that he will suffer and die and rise after three days. He tells the disciples that if they want to follow him, they must take up their own crosses and be willing to die for the same cause, which is to be the personification of God's will in the world.

Ironically, Jesus says that those willing to lose their lives for Jesus and the gospel will save their lives (Mark 8.35). According to Jesus, then, it is salvific for us to be willing to suffer or die in order to reveal God's will. This is hard to comprehend. As Micah put it, God's will is for us to do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly with God (Mic.6.8). We save ourselves and leave a positive mark on the world when we live, and if necessary, die for this cause. This salvation is God's good news, which Jesus delivers.

A rich man approaches Jesus with a question about salvation in terms of inheriting eternal life. Grimsrud defines eternal life as continuous mercy, or "love without limit" (81). When Jesus tells the wealthy man that in order to inherit eternal life he must keep the commandments and also to sell what he owns and give it to the poor, the man is shocked. He doesn't want to part with his stuff. Jesus remarks that it will be difficult for the wealthy to enter God's kingdom, prompting his disciples to ask him, "Then who can be saved?" Because Jesus knows that we cannot change our own attitudes and hearts, he informs the disciples that they can do nothing to save themselves (Mark 10.27). But, he assures them, God can save them. In fact, salvation is based solely on God's initiative---only God can circumcise our hearts and change us.

Jesus' soteriology is in perfect alignment with his mission, which perfectly aligns with Hebrew scripture. Obeying the commandments, fostering humility, living compassionately and with mercy---these are the things that encompass Godly living and

eternal life. Eternal life means having a full, abundant life that continues indefinitely to be full and abundant. Jesus makes it clear that those who live a life consistent with these divine values “will receive a hundredfold now in this age...and in the age to come eternal life” (Mark 10.30). According to this scripture, salvation is now and forever.

Living a humble life is not conventional, though, and the disciples don’t wholly buy into it. They so yearn to be honored that two of them ask Jesus if they could sit at his side in the afterlife (Mark 10. 37). Jesus teaches them that to be great means to be a servant, just as Jesus serves. Jesus seems to understand that this unorthodox, humble behavior is unpopular, but he consistently demonstrates an attitude of humility that accompanies service. I suspect that Jesus’ desire for us to manifest humility and truly be great, was intended to save us from our natural inclinations toward prestige and pride.

In proceeding to say that the Son of Man came to “give his life a ransom for many,” Jesus references the price that must be paid when staying true to one’s values, even to the point of death. In this process of self-sacrifice, followers witness what is truly at stake to live a life of service and obedience. When living this faithful life, those who suffer maintain their integrity and stay true to themselves and their divine natures. Many benefit by the price that the faithful pay. Jesus shows the world how God wants us to live, even, or especially, in the face of suffering and death.

At the Passover feast, Jesus shares the bread and the cup with his disciples, saying, “This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many” (Mark 14. 24). In his letter to the Corinthians, Paul refers to this as the new covenant, and in this new covenant, God embeds God’s law within people, who then intuitively know God. Jesus’ blood---a symbol for life---is the sign of this new covenant. Jesus pours out his blood as

he models the covenant life that brings abundant life, as John will later attest. (John 10.10).

Jesus offers a template for obtaining this abundant life when he addresses a Jewish scribe who questions him about the greatest commandment. In light of the new covenant, God's laws are written on our hearts. Jesus explains that the basis of God's laws and God's commandment is love. The law, the prophets, and Jesus' revelation of God's will are summed up in these two greatest commandments: To love God with all the heart, mind, soul, and strength, and to love one's neighbor as oneself, which are "more important than burnt offerings and sacrifices" (Mark 12.33). This is the essence of living the covenant life, and this is the good news that saves us from our tendency toward fear, prejudice, and hatred. This is the type of love that Jesus embodies.

In this same conversation with the scribe, Jesus initiates his response by stating, "Hear, O Israel: the Lord our God, the Lord is one" (Mark 12.28). The scribe responds by saying, "You are right, Teacher; you have truly said that 'he is one, and besides him there is no other'" (Mark 12.32). In Mark's gospel, Jesus does not equate himself with God. Thus far in Mark, Jesus only alludes to his relationship to God, mostly referring to himself as the Son of Man, rather than the Son of God. But after his arrest for blasphemy, the high priest interrogates him as to whether he is "the Messiah, the Son of the Blessed One." Jesus finally admits, "I am" (Mark 14.61-62).

"I am," (translated from the Greek, *eimi*) infers a state of continuous being and basically translates to "I exist." It is the same expression of divine self-revelation used in Hebrew scripture (recall God's self-revelation in the book of Exodus when God reveals the name *Yahweh* to Moses). At this point, prior to his impending death, Jesus identifies

himself as God's son. The Messianic secret is now revealed. Even in Mark's low Christology, Jesus claims this divine sonship. Recognizing Jesus as God's son is critical, as it gives rise to an understanding of God that would otherwise not be available.

Roger Haight invites us to imagine Jesus as "parable of God" (49). Haight says Christians encounter God in Jesus and that Jesus reveals God, making God present in a more conscious and personal way. He asserts, "Christian salvation consists in the encounter with the saving God in and through Jesus, so that Jesus saves by revealing and making God present" (49). He understands salvation as a condition of being united with God. God saves us from being outside of God's presence, where we are left to our own less-than-ideal tendencies. Salvation symbolizes the fulfillment of human existence--- what Jesus referred to as the kingdom of God (74). Jesus' role in God's salvation is to reveal, through his life, death, and resurrection, the "very nature of God as savior" (91). Jesus is not the vehicle of salvation, but rather, the revelation of God's salvation, that has been going on since the beginning and will continue.

In Mark's gospel, between the time of Jesus' death and his ascension, Jesus tells his followers to go into the entire world and proclaim the good news of God's salvation. In Matthew's gospel, he encourages his followers to make disciples of all nations. And in Luke's narrative, Jesus instructs his disciples to proclaim repentance and forgiveness of sins. This is consistent with Jesus' actions all along. He does not give his disciples a new message; rather, they are encouraged to go out in his name and in his spirit, spreading the good news that we can always turn toward God.

This message differs from that of Christian fundamentalists today, who understand the good news as Jesus dying as an act of atonement for our sins, thus saving

us from eternal life in hell. They then interpret the Christian mission as that of convincing the world that Jesus is Savior, and that to be saved, one must believe Jesus died for our sins. This is not how I read Jesus' words in Mark. Jesus did not speak of himself as Savior---he consistently deferred to God as Savior. In other words, Jesus was theocentric rather than Christocentric. And although he existed "in the form of God," as Paul puts it, he did not equate himself with God nor desire equality with God; rather, he "emptied himself," assumed the role of a servant, humbled himself, and remained faithful to his father's will to the point of death (Phil.2.7-8).

I have prioritized Mark's gospel for discerning what Jesus says about salvation because it is the earliest account of Jesus' ministry; therefore Mark's narrative may be a more accurate representation of what Jesus actually said. In Matthew's birth narrative, which Mark omits entirely, Matthew speaks of Mary having a son whom she will name Jesus (in Hebrew, *Yeshua*) because "he will save his people from their sins" (Matt.1.21). Matthew does not offer a mechanism of this salvation, but, as in Mark's gospel, Jesus focuses on the Kingdom of God. Kingdom living is what Jesus teaches, hence, Jesus' movements are later referred to as "The Way" (Acts 9.2). Living God's way saves people from multiple issues such as fear, anxiety, anger, malice, and greed.

In Matthew, Jesus teaches us about kingdom living---repentance, not worrying, treating others the way you would want to be treated (the law and the prophets condensed), acting mercifully over offering sacrifices, loving your enemies, and having faith. He refers repeatedly to the good news as the kingdom of God that is within our presence. Jesus not only embodies this presence but also invites all who are tired in their

struggles to join him in finding rest (Matt.11.28-30). This rest is the salvation that Jesus offers us as he brings us into God's presence.

Jesus disdains hypocrisy, scolding the scribes and Pharisees for tithing extravagantly while neglecting the weightier matters of the law (Matt.23.23). He criticizes their missionary work because of their hypocrisy, saying the Pharisees keep people from the kingdom because they don't experience it themselves. He tells them, "For you cross sea and land to make a single convert, and you make the new convert twice as much a child of hell as yourselves" (Matt. 23.15). That's a pretty straightforward assessment of how Jesus feels about pious evangelism.

Scholars estimate that Luke's gospel was written near the time of Matthew's, approximately 30 years after Mark's. Luke records that angels announce good news to shepherds that a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord, is born (Luke 2.10). Though the word, Savior, is used in Hebrew scripture in reference to God and is also used politically in reference to the Roman emperor, it is rarely used in the gospels. But Luke uses it here, clearly associating God's salvation with Jesus, and in his birth narrative, he employs the titles of Savior, Messiah, and Lord, which openly informs his readers as to Jesus' status. Luke then recounts the story of Simeon, a righteous man who awaited "the consolation of Israel," and the fulfillment of the promise to see the Lord's Messiah. When Simeon saw the child, Jesus, he praised God, saying, "my eyes have seen your salvation" (Matt. 2.30). Luke equates Jesus with God's salvation, reflecting a higher christology than Mark's.

When introducing his ministry, Jesus acknowledges his anointed position, quoting Isaiah in reference to himself, to bring good news to the poor, release to the captives,

sight to the blind, and freedom to the oppressed (Luke 4.18-19). Through Jesus, God's salvation takes the form of justice, mercy, liberation, and sight. God's kindness even extends to the ungrateful and the wicked (Luke 6.35).

Responding to a lawyer's inquiry as to how he can inherit eternal life, Jesus tells the lawyer to love the Lord and also to love his neighbor. Using the parable of the Good Samaritan, Jesus defines neighbor as anyone in need. Being a good neighbor means showing mercy to the one in need. Inheriting eternal life is directly linked to loving God and being a person who shows mercy. To put it another way, eternal life is realized or defined by loving God and neighbor.

Jesus frequently states to those he heals, "your faith has saved you." Apparently, there is something salvific about absolute trust, or faith. Salvation is not preconditioned by belief in a doctrine about Jesus. It is not even preconditioned by our faith or love, although having faith and love saves us from the opposite of these qualities: fear and hate. Salvation---abiding in God's presence---is God's gift to us, preconditioned by nothing. We realize our salvation when we trust in God and have faith in God's love for us.

Jesus tells the crowds to not be afraid, that it is their Father's good pleasure to give them the kingdom (Luke 12.32). Jesus shows them how the Father will receive them in whatever state they are in, before they do anything, just as the father in the prodigal-son parable rejoices and goes to the son "while he was still far off" and *before* the son repents (Luke 15.20). Jesus manifests God's kingdom and reveals God's salvation throughout his life. According to Jesus as recorded in the three earliest gospels, salvation is ours today, tomorrow and forever in a very real and tangible form.

---The New Good News of the Early Church

Jesus lives and proclaims the good news of God's kingdom. He defers to his Father often and promotes God's way for living. He encourages his disciples to do the same. But after Jesus dies and is then resurrected, his followers, who are initially devastated, become completely exhilarated. They start spreading their own good news---the news of Jesus' resurrection. Their experiences with the resurrected Jesus, whether historical or mystical, were obviously very real to them. The one whom they had followed and thought the Messiah, the one who would redeem Israel, had not been defeated after all. This post-crucifixion reality of the disciples was so transformative that the disciples began proclaiming this *new* good news to the entire house of Israel "*with certainty* that God has made him both Lord and Messiah, this Jesus whom you crucified" (Acts 2.36, italics mine). The disciples are now convinced that Jesus is both Lord and Messiah, and now, when they preach repentance for the forgiveness of sins, it is in the name of Jesus.

When Peter addresses the crowd in Jerusalem, he quotes the prophet Joel, who says that everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved. Peter then links Jesus to words about the Lord found in the Psalms and the prophets, and concludes by telling the people, "Repent, and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ so that your sins may be forgiven" (Acts 2.38). The phrase "in the name of" is used throughout scripture to connote acting in the essence, spirit, or nature of a being or person. It can also imply authority or relationship. When the disciples preach forgiveness they now do so in relationship with Jesus Christ. The disciples also now indisputably see Jesus as Christ, God's anointed one, so they increasingly equate God's forgiveness with Jesus the Christ's.

The disciples begin healing the sick in the name of Jesus Christ. When the Sadducees question Peter and John about their healing of a crippled beggar, they let it be known that the man is standing before them in good health “by the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth” (Acts 4.10). They continue by associating Jesus with salvation, as Peter does when he declares, “There is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among mortals by which we must be saved” (Acts 4.12). Today’s fundamentalists often quote this verse to suggest that one must be a Christian to be saved. They then exclusively define “Christian” as one who believes Paulinian-derived doctrines about Jesus.

But if we read Peter’s exuberant statement in context, there is no exclusivity, because at this point, Peter operated in the name of Christ; to him, there was absolutely no other name under which healing, repentance, forgiveness of sins or anything else of salvific value occurs. All salvation happens in the name of---in the spirit of and in accordance with the nature of---Jesus Christ. But Peter also recalls Hebrew scripture to assure his audience that “the promise” of repentance, baptism, forgiveness, and the gift of the Holy Spirit is provided for them, their children, and all who are far away, “everyone whom the Lord our God calls to him” (Acts 2.38-39). There is no exclusivity in God’s salvation. And as always, God initiates the promise---the promise that he gave to their ancestor, Abraham, to bless *all* nations, even those that are far away. God is true to the covenant, or promise, that God made with Israel through Moses to always be their God and for them to be God’s people---this is God’s salvation.

God keeps his promise of sending the Holy Spirit to Jesus’s followers after his death, and as they were all filled with the Holy Spirit, these initial Christians, or followers

of The Way (as they came to be called), did the strangest thing. They began to act like socialists: Paul claims that they were “of one heart and soul, no one claimed private ownership of any possession, but everything they owned was held in common” (Acts 4.32). But Saul, before he became known as Paul, opposed The Way and strove to destroy this new movement.

Saul breathed threats and murder against the disciples as he was “ravaging the church by entering house after house, dragging off both men and women” committing them to prison (Acts 8.3). But even as Saul was doing these monstrous acts, God appeared to Saul and saved Saul from himself---from his anger, his wrath, his misinterpretation of Torah. Not only did God change Saul’s understanding of scripture and his heart towards the Jewish Christians, but God then chose Saul to proclaim *the Lord’s name* to the Gentiles.

It’s unclear whether Luke is referring to Jesus’ or to God’s name here. Luke uses the Greek word *kurios* (meaning master or lord) ambiguously. *Kurios* refers to Jesus in Saul’s conversion epiphany, but may refer to God in Ananias’s vision in which “the Lord” tells Ananias, Saul is the one I’ve chosen “to bring my name” to the Gentiles and kings and people of Israel (Acts 9.15). This ambiguity conflates God’s name with Jesus’ so that Saul and others in the early church are now preaching salvation in Jesus’ name rather than God’s---something Jesus himself didn’t do.

As Saul realizes this confluence of God and Christ, he immediately begins to proclaim Jesus as the Son of God, and as a result of this, the Jews plot to kill Saul, perpetuating an endless cycle of violence. In the meantime, Peter has a vision in which God tells him that his understanding of Jewish law is incorrect. Peter understood that it

was unlawful for a Jew to associate with or visit a Gentile, as Gentiles were considered unclean. God makes it clear to Peter that God shows no partiality and that Peter should not call anyone profane or unclean. Peter comes to understand that peace through Jesus Christ, not violence, is to be preached to all because Jesus is Lord of all (Acts 10.36).

This same attitude of inclusivity applies to the ensuing debate about circumcised versus uncircumcised believers (the Gentiles). The Spirit tells Peter not to make a distinction between the two and that the Holy Spirit falls upon the Gentiles just as it had on the Jews at Pentecost, prompting Peter to say, “God has given even to the Gentiles the repentance that leads to eternal life” (Acts 11.18). Peter refers here to God as Savior, but the recently-converted Saul begins to develop a more Christocentric concept of salvation and begins referring to Jesus as Savior.

I’m not sure whether Saul’s referral to Jesus as savior represents a more mature understanding of God and God’s salvation as revealed through Christ or if it represents a distortion of the Jewish (including Jesus’) understanding of Jahweh as the originator of salvation. This distinction is critical because I argue that scripture supports salvation’s presence since the beginning of creation. But suddenly, with Saul, salvation begins millennia later with Jesus. If Saul says that salvation has always been present because Christ was present with God in the beginning and Christ is God, therefore Christ is Savior, then that is acceptable. But as we shall see, Saul/Paul will proceed to develop sophisticated metaphors and rhetorical arguments to explain the mechanism of salvation by Jesus’s death and resurrection, which is actually different than God’s salvation that began in the Garden of Eden.

Saul---whom Luke abruptly begins referring to as Paul---begins rereading Jewish scripture, seeing Jesus in passages from the Psalms and Prophets. He speaks more often of forgiveness through Jesus and emphasizes belief in Jesus as a precondition for salvation (Acts 16.31). This represents a diversion from what both Jewish tradition and Jesus teach. While acknowledging that God and Jesus are of the same ousia, I feel that Paul's Christocentricity and the doctrine to which it gives rise, creates a schism within the synagogue that Jesus never intended.

Jesus causes tension within Judaism because of his insistence on social justice and mercy, reflecting his hermeneutics of the law and the prophets. This drew large numbers of people to Jesus...which threatened Jewish leaders. They were the keepers of the law, and Jesus, with his enlightened interpretations, usurped that role. Jesus loosened Jewish leaders' control over the synagogue and its political affiliations. The byproduct of this was a schism between those in power and those outside of power.

But the divisions Paul caused are based on his evolving doctrinal positions about Jesus---beliefs that, at this juncture, had nothing to do with justice and mercy (although he later develops doctrines regarding these issues as well). Ironically, in the synoptics, Jesus did not defend the fact that he was God's son. He admitted it, especially toward the end of his life, but he did not dwell at any length on it during his life. Instead, Jesus kept his emphasis on God's kingdom. He asked people to follow him, not worship him. Paul is more concerned with correct belief. I think this distinction is critical because the focus of Christianity is so often doctrinal, rather than practical, and consequently it entirely misses the beauty of salvation.

Paul comes closest to sounding like Jesus when he speaks to the religious and the philosophers in Athens where, in the midst of this city that is full of idols, he finds an altar with an inscription to an unknown god. In his speech, Paul indirectly references Jesus---a man appointed and resurrected by God, who will judge the world in righteousness---but Paul's emphasis is otherwise quite theocentric. He defines the unknown god as the God who created the world yet is not far from any of us. "For in him we live and move and have our being," he states (Acts 17.28). This saving God in whom lies our very existence is the God of Noah, and Abraham, and Moses. This is the God of Jesus.

Jesus proclaims the good news of God's kingdom and reveals God's salvation. Living, moving, and existing in God defines salvation. Before Jesus' ascension he instructs his followers to go everywhere and make disciples, teaching others what he had taught them, which is the same as the prophets taught: compassion, mercy, taking care of the poor, and loving one's enemies. The early Church does this with passion, but the subject of the early disciples' good news, inspired by Paul, evolves into a doctrine that explains Jesus' death and resurrection as the mechanism of salvation. This new good news amends that of the prophets and also Jesus, and proper belief becomes increasingly important and itself salvific.

---The Imperative of Belief

Sixty to seventy years after Mark writes his gospel and thirty years or so after Matthew, Luke and Paul write their gospels and letters, an anonymous author, who scholars refer to as John, then wrote the fourth gospel. Because it represents a theological treatise of Jesus's life that was influenced by these earlier writings, I deal with the John gospel

separately from the synoptics and only after exploring salvation concepts as they develop in the first Christian community.

In the first verse, John connects Jesus (the Word) with God, the beginning, and creation. John makes it clear that, unlike the previous three gospels, his primary reason for writing his story is to establish Jesus's divinity. John wrote to encourage those Jewish Christians who, because of their belief that Jesus was the Messiah, had been expelled from their synagogues.

Belief is crucial to John. The Greek word *pisteuo* (meaning believe, commit to, or put trust in) occurs 19 times in the first four chapters of John and no less than 100 times in the remainder of this gospel. One knows instantly when turning the page from Luke's gospel to John's that something has changed. John's emphasis, like Paul's, no longer focuses on God. It insists that eternal life depends on *believing in Jesus* as God and savior.

A Jewish leader named Nicodemus came to Jesus one night, admitting that Jesus must have been sent from God, and conversed with Jesus about eternal life. Jesus responds to Nicodemus' admission saying that no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above (John 3.3). He goes on to explain that being born from above is the same as being born of the Spirit. Jesus proceeds to tell Nicodemus that Jesus had descended from heaven and that he will be lifted up, so "that whoever believes in him may have eternal life" (John 3.15). In other words, those who believe that whatever happens to Jesus will happen to them, will also have life eternally.

John 3.16, the verse that has motivated my entire effort, follows this. Just as the resurrected Jesus "opened the minds" of the disciples to understand the scripture as they

walked with him on the Road to Emmaus, my mind has been opened to a greater understanding of this verse (Luke 24.45). Jesus tells his audience that God loved the world so much that he gave the world his only Son, Jesus, so that everyone who trusts God and commits to the lifestyle that Jesus lives, will never be lost nor feel worthless (in Greek, *apollumi*), but will have a complete life now and forever (John 3.16). John expounds on this, making sure his readers understand that God did not send Jesus into the world to condemn it, but only that the world might be saved through him (John 3.17). This salvation comes through repentance (in Greek, *metanoia*), and by allowing God's law to result in kingdom living, as manifested by demonstrating mercy and love. When we have confidence in and commit to Jesus's way we are not condemned, but if we choose to follow our own paths, we are already condemned, or on a road to self destruction (John 3.18).

In John's gospel, Jesus strongly associates himself with God, metaphorically referencing himself with the divine name, "I am": I am the gate; I am the good shepherd; I am the resurrection and the life; I am the light of the world; I am the bread of life; and I am the way, the truth and the life. Further aligning himself with God, Jesus prays in the high priestly prayer, "And this is eternal life, that they may know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent" (John 17.3). He says, "Believe in God, believe also in me," and "no one comes to the Father except through me" (John 14.1,6). Frankly, I don't see how anyone could come to the Father except through Jesus if they represent the same essence.

Jesus' way of life resulted in his crucifixion. He spoke for the oppressed to the extent that he was killed for it. Pushing against political and economic systems of

oppression, especially when those powers are conflated with the church, is dangerous business. Those in power label the one opposing their unjust actions as misguided and antipatriotic, and therefore a threat to national security. Those revolutionaries like Martin Luther King, Jr., Ghandi, and others who oppose the status quo, are killed. But Jesus said, “No one has greater love than this, to lay down one’s life for one’s friends” (John 15.13). Jesus commands us to love like this. If you love me, he says, you will feed my lambs and tend my sheep (John 21.15-17). Loving to the extent that you threaten the status quo may be perceived as revolutionary and you may end up losing your earthly life. But this is the way, the truth, and the life, which is also our salvation.

In John’s gospel, Jesus speaks more about belief in Jesus than in any of the other gospels. But the belief John’s gospel advocates is more than a cognitive assent to a doctrinal statement about Jesus’ hypostatical relationship to God or his role in the economy of salvation. In John, Jesus teaches trust in and commitment to Jesus’ way of life as it reflects God. Jesus equates love for God with love for neighbor; he equates love for Jesus with taking care of people. He also wishes for all creation to be one, praying to his father, “as we are one, I in them and you in me, that they may become completely one” (John 17.23). Salvation is living in God’s presence, in unity with Jesus and God, the manifestation of which is love for and taking care of neighbors. We will now look at how Paul further develops the concept of oneness with God for which Jesus prayed.

---The Doctrines of Theosis and Atonement

In his letters to the newly formed Christian churches, Paul refers to the oneness for which Jesus prayed. He speaks of there being one body, one Spirit, one hope, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is above all and through all and in all

(Eph.4.4-6). He refers to Christ as the “image of the invisible God...in whom all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell,” through whom all things were created and in whom all things hold together (Col.1.15-19). This scripture resonates with the creation passages from Genesis, where humans were made in God’s image, and also the first chapter of John, where the author describes all things coming into being through the Word. Using image theology, Paul unites Christ with God and creation, and then he includes humanity in this union. Paul tells the Corinthians that through the Lord, the Spirit, all of us are being “transformed into this same image---this image of God, the Lord, the Spirit--- from one degree of glory to another” (2 Cor. 3.18). Eastern Orthodox Christians identify this transformation, or oneness with God, as deification, divinization, or *theosis*.

Many Protestants recoil at the notion of deification, despite multiple references to it in Christian scripture, such as Paul’s inference when he uses phrases such as being “in Christ, ” or “Christ in me” (Gal. 2.20). Likewise, the author of 2 Peter states more explicitly that Jesus Christ calls us “to his own glory and excellence” by granting to us his great promises, so that through them we “may become partakers of the divine nature” (2 Peter 1:3-4). Theosis adherents also consider Jesus’s reference to the psalmist’s words, “I said you are gods” (John 10.34). Was Jesus suggesting that we are born gods or that salvation transforms us into gods? Ben Blackwell, who understands salvation as becoming one with God, describes this transformation metaphorically---believers don’t literally *become God*, he states, but as we draw closer to God and are transformed by this relationship, we reflect the image and likeness of God (4). He makes the distinction

between the Son “who is God by nature” and believers, who are “adopted and become gods by grace” (5).

Gregory of Nyssa speaks of theosis but draws a distinction between the “energies and essence” of God (Russell, 133). He explains that through theosis, we become *homothēoi*, one with God, not because we have become God’s essence, but because we have come to share in his attributes” (134). Blackwell sees theosis as a gift of the Spirit, reminiscent of the epistle writer’s sentiment that by knowing God lives in us, we know that we abide in him and he in us, because he has given us his Spirit” (1 John 4.12-13). Scriptures such as the ones mentioned here, when read in light of Jesus’ prayer for oneness among the Father, Jesus, and his followers, lend credible support to the idea of theosis. Paul certainly toys with it as he simultaneously explains salvation in terms of atonement. Had Paul developed a theosis salvation hermeneutic to the degree that he developed his atonement theology, there may have been more unity among those of various faiths, as Jesus envisioned, than there is today.

But Paul and other Christian scripture writers seemed more interested in explaining *how* God saves people. They don’t simply accept that God saves---that God is creator and God is savior, and God’s actions don’t need explanation. Stephen Finlan, who has written extensively about the problems with and options for atonement theologies, argues that offering mechanisms for how God saves negates authentic theology; that God’s free will, compassion, justice, and healing power are enough to cause salvation (*Options* 87). To describe mechanisms of atonement, Paul uses and conflates many different metaphors: the ritualistic and cultic powers of blood, sacrifice, satisfaction, scapegoating, vicarious suffering, divine retribution, redemption and ransom. Western

Christians have literalized these metaphors and made them sacrosanct to our understanding of salvation. Consequently, salvation has been reduced to a notion of escaping an afterlife in hell by accepting Jesus' atoning act on the cross---an act initiated by God as reaction to human sin.

Finlan quotes Ignatius that, "atonement is literalized to such a degree, that 'death,' 'blood,' and 'cross' are themselves the source of salvation" (54). He asserts that atonement theologies lead only to idolatry of the cross and blood, "as if God the Savior has no saving power" independent of these symbols (87). But God has been saving creation since its inception and has utilized multiple vehicles in this process, including the covenant, the voice of the prophets, and Jesus' life, death, and resurrection. So Finlan's point is well taken, as is his comment that "if salvation came only as a consequence of his crucifixion, Jesus certainly forgot to mention this to those people who come to him seeking salvation. They must have gone away unsaved---but then, why did he say, 'your faith has saved you'?" (87)

Jesus knew, and I think Paul understands as he reasons and works out his theology throughout his writings, that God's faithfulness and our trust in God's unwavering commitment to us saves us from our inherently self-destructive ways. Instead, God's way for us---the way exemplified by Jesus's life and death---is immortal, everlasting, eternal. Paul writes to the Christians in Rome, "the righteousness of God is revealed through faith for faith" (Roman 1.17). In other words, God's justice, or righteousness, which is different from our own, is revealed by God's faithfulness, a faithfulness that initiates a human response of faith. The Greek *pistos* used here for faith connotes "a way of life that encompasses trust in God, belief in the context of the Torah

and the gospel of Jesus Christ, and faithful living” (Grimsrud 187). This justification by faith, as Paul ascribes it, represents a process that occurs as we turn to God and follow God’s way---the law of mercy and love that is written on our hearts.

Grimsrud and Finlan appear to agree that justification, righteousness, and salvation are the results of a restorative relationship with God, and not a “transaction taking place at the cross” (Finlan 3). Grimsrud is able to salvage Paul’s messages of justification by faith and unmerited grace from Paul’s atonement theologies by more broadly translating some of the Greek words Paul uses in his atonement metaphors. Finlan, on the other hand, says Paul basically got it wrong---that Paul’s assertion that Christ is the mediator, not the proclaimer, of salvation, and his insistence that one must accept soteriological formulas about the death of Jesus to enjoy salvation is not consistent with Jesus’s message (*Problems* 60). Jesus repeatedly tells those who come to him, “Your faith has saved you” (Luke 7.50). For Paul, faith is not so much about our relationship with God and one another, as Jesus stresses, so much as it is about believing that “Christ died for our sins” and through his death we are reconciled to God (1 Cor. 15.3).

Paul and other writers of Christian scripture seemed to need to understand Jesus’ death in terms of atonement. Paul, himself, had blood on his hands. Perhaps his blood metaphors helped assuage his own guilt. Anselm and Aquinas later developed this satisfaction theory more fully. Paul was quite familiar with Jewish scripture and the ancient understanding of sacrifice and atonement, so it was natural that he would apply this logic to explain why Jesus died. But in the process, he disregarded the Hosea principle---the principle that guided Jesus’ entire life. God desires mercy not sacrifice,

says Hosea and the other prophets. It would be inconsistent with God's nature and God's history that God would demand a human sacrifice in order to offer salvation to the world--salvation that God provides continuously from the beginning of creation.

Christian scripture writers lived in the context of a patriarchal empire in which retribution for wrongdoing was broadly accepted; therefore, the idea of divine retribution was also easily accepted. If people sinned, then someone had to die to redeem the sinners. This concept of reparation, even though inconsistent with divine justice, made sense then and makes sense today to those who value retribution over restoration. Jesus died because people feared his message. It is hard to fathom that it was God's *will*, or God's way, for Jesus to die---this simply is not consistent with the God of scripture that Jesus embodied--a God that demands mercy and not sacrifice.

Even in his death, Jesus shows us God's way. The author of 1 Peter describes that "When he was abused, he did not return abuse; when he suffered, he did not threaten; but he entrusted himself to the one who judges justly" (1 Peter 2.23). The peace that Jesus exemplified throughout his violent death is consistent with the overall nonviolent message of Hebrew and Christian scripture. Yes, throughout the evolving conceptualization of salvation within scripture, there are a variety of perspectives on brutality---but a consistent thread of divine harmony weaves its way through the human tapestry that undergirds scripture's salvation story. This peaceful thread is the way of "at-one-ment": it is the way of Jesus, the merciful way, the way that puts us "at one" with God.

That they be one with God was Jesus's prayer for his followers. In the act of creation, God shared God's self. God also chose to participate in life with humans so

came to earth in human form---the Word, that was with God in the beginning, and was God...became flesh and lived among us (John 1.1-2,14). As reflected by Duns Scotus and Bonaventure, who emphasize and refer to the “primacy of Christ,” Jesus was not an afterthought to creation nor was he Plan B for a sinful creation (qtd. in Delio, 5). God’s supreme acts of creation and incarnation are interrelated acts of divine love. And we are included in this love, as reinforced in 1 John, “God is love, and those who abide in love abide in God, and God abides in them” (1 John 4.16). The incarnation of God’s love is ubiquitous---it unites us with God and each other. This is the oneness---the salvation---to which Jesus refers and makes possible, that will never perish.

V. The Ultimate Revelation of Salvation

Paul speaks of “Christ in you, the hope of glory” as the mystery that has been hidden through the ages (Col.1.27). In his revelation of Jesus Christ, John refers to the “mystery of God” that will be fulfilled (Rev. 10.7). In John’s vision, this mysterious, eternal Christ appears as a Lamb. This Lamb stands by the one seated on the throne and “every creature in heaven and on earth and under the earth and in the sea,” worships God and the Lamb. Many angels and creatures and elders, numbering in the thousands of thousands, sing, “To the one seated on the throne and to the Lamb, blessing and honor and glory and might forever and ever!” (Rev.5.11-13). Grimsrud notes, “the Lamb embodies God as nothing else does, hence the most important revelation here is not that Jesus is divine, but what this affirmation tells us about God” (212). Grimsrud observes that lambs don’t kill, dominate, or instill fear. So it is not coincidence that Jesus is likened to a lamb, and

Jesus' "lamb power"---his persevering love even in the face of violence---is fundamental to God's nature (208).

Grimsrud quotes Rossing, "Lamb theology is the whole message of Revelation. Evil is not defeated by overwhelming force or violence but by the Lamb's suffering love on the cross. The victim becomes the victor." (208). To those of us today whose lives are dictated by fear, this revelation may seem unbelievable, but it is the message that resonates in scripture from Genesis to Revelation. When God promises to make all things new, God assures the realization of this peaceful vision.

John saw a new heaven and a new earth (Rev. 21.1-2). In John's vision, God dwells eternally among creation. This has been God's desire from the beginning and represents the covenant's ultimate fulfillment. Living in God's presence is our salvation.

After disobeying God and eating from the tree of knowledge, Adam and Eve hid from God's presence; but God sought them out and protected them from eating from the tree of life---often considered a metaphor for eternal life---because eating from this tree would have caused them to live in an eternally imperfect state.

Theologian and co-author of *Jerusalem, The Eternal City*, Andrew Skinner concludes that had Adam and Eve eaten from the tree of life in their corrupted condition, the effect of the tree of life would have reversed---it would become the "tree of death" (Welch, 28). In the first Psalms, the poet links the tree-of-life motif and immortality with obedience. The writer of Proverbs depicts Wisdom as "a tree of life to those who lay hold of her" (Prov. 3.18). Jesus spoke of himself as the way, truth and life, so Christians associate Christ with the tree of life. Ezekiel speaks of the healing properties of trees and their leaves, just as John speaks of the tree of life on either side of the water of life, that

flows from the throne of God and of the Lamb, and the trees' leaves, which are "for the healing of the nations" (Rev. 21.2). The tree of life is associated with eternal life, provision, Wisdom, Christ, healing---these images coalesce, forming a picture of apokatastasis and salvation that emanates, alongside the life water, from the throne of God and the Lamb. In the eternal city, we no longer lack access to this tree, because here we are never estranged from God---in God's presence we have everlasting salvation.

Interestingly, in the Bible's final chapter, John out-of-the-blue refers to the throne of God and the Lamb as one. Referring to the New Jerusalem, John writes, "the throne of God and of the Lamb will be in it, and his servants will worship *him*" (italics mine, Rev.22.3). John refers in the singular pronoun to God and the Lamb. It is now understood that God and the Lamb, who is the Word, Jesus Christ, are one. The New Jerusalem, wherein dwells God, the Lamb, and the now-accessible tree of life, is the place we live forever in God's presence---as we did in the Garden of Eden when first created. God dwells with us and we are God's people. This is the Biblical vision of salvation.

Conclusion

Many Christians believe that salvation is determined by belief in Jesus Christ---more specifically, that people are saved when they accept Christ's death on the cross as a sacrificial atonement for their sins. But scripture supports a different vision. I suggest here that salvation is found by living in the presence of God and that this salvation is not based on atonement for sins and is not predicated on a sacrificial Christ.

Adam and Eve abandoned God, but God pursued them. God provided the commandments---a template for living in harmony with one another and with God---and

promised through the covenant to always be the people's God. Through the prophets, God spoke to reveal God's desire for just and merciful relationships, seeking to save people from their tendencies toward inferior ways of relating to one another. God eventually came into the world as human, demonstrating salvation through Jesus' life, death, and resurrection---the way, the truth, and the life. John's revelation assures us that we will forever live in God's presence and that there will be healing and peace---the telos of creation and salvation, which I argue, dynamically coexist.

Significant portions of Christian scripture describe salvation in terms of atonement, but the entire biblical canon supports a broader view. Atonement typically assumes a state of original sin resulting in actions which require exoneration. But in the Genesis account, humans lived harmoniously in God's presence until the point at which they utilized their free will to disobey and then hide from God. I don't see this as representing original sin---instead, this behavior exhibits our inexplicable human desire for something less than that for which God created us, a state in which our false selves substitute for our true selves, as Merton claims. This poor choice does not require atonement; instead, it calls for redirection---which is exactly what God provides. God pursues humans, inviting us to return to and trust God, and rescues us from whatever has lured us away. God desires to restore humans to our original state of blessing---which is living in God's presence and in God's image.

Being in God's presence and reflecting God's image is the biblical vision of salvation, and consciously realizing and participating in God's consistent relationship with us is the goal of creation, which is why I begin this exploration by associating salvation with creation. God initiates the two in concert...creation and salvation occur

simultaneously...and through both Hebrew and Christian scripture, from Genesis to Revelation, we find evidence of God continuously saving his creation. God's love is the sole driver of creation and salvation---salvation that is not preconditioned by or reacting to anything---it is a natural outflowing of God's nature.

Salvation does not hinge on atonement mechanisms of Jesus' death. Rather, the true biblical vision of salvation finds its most complete expression in Jesus' *life* and the cosmic life of Christ: the presence of the eternal Christ at the beginning who is active in creation; the incarnated life of Jesus as the human personification and expression of God's love; and the resurrected life of Christ, united with God forever, assuring us of the same. Christ creates with God, manifests the ideal covenant relationship with God, exemplifies the compassion and mercy heard through the prophetic voice of God, and lives as one with God. Christ's story provides the perfect model for all people to be at-one with God and find complete fulfillment in this world and the next.

With this scriptural vision of salvation, one based on God's desire for us to turn to God, live in God's presence, and trust in the sufficiency of this relationship, there is no need for atonement; therefore, there is also no need for doctrinal beliefs about atonement. Cognitive assent to human constructs is unnecessary and even potentially misleading. God provides salvation unconditionally, and we can realize it now as we trust in God to save us from our fears and anxieties, our tendencies to choose what is not in our best interests, and the futility of our finite existence. We can rest in the promise of God's love and the unconditionality of our salvation---living with God forever.

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