Salvation as Central Message of the Bible

„What must I do to be saved?“ the jailer in Philippi asked Paul and Silas according to Acts 16:30. What he originally meant may be disputed. Was he asking for help in a difficult situation? Or did he need protection in the face of the threatening discovery that he had obviously maltreated the messengers of a mighty God and had provoked his wrath? Or is it a question arising out of basic doubts about his condition in the face of God, and therefore a matter of his eternal salvation?

The Greek word for „to be saved“ has a broad field of meaning. This is taken into account by most translations. „Your faith has made you well“, is a formula which is often used by Jesus and could be translated literally: „Your faith has saved you“. This translation we find in Eph 2:8: „By grace you have been saved through faith“, and in many other places where the context seems to indicate that a religious connotation is at stake.

To be saved means primarily to be rescued from the wrath that is coming (cf. II Thess 1:9 and Rom 5:9). But soon the formula gets a broader meaning and describes the more general acceptance into the salvific communion with God (John 3:17).

It is important, however, to realise that the biblical language has no unified concept of what we today call „salvation“. Together with some principal terms we also have to keep in mind everything that is told about God's saving activity for his people in the stories of the Bible.

1. Observations regarding the proclamation of salvation in the Hebrew Bible

In this first part I want to make some observations from the Hebrew Bible in order to outline the width and the depth of the biblical proclamation of salvation. The saving event par excellence for Israel was the exodus of the people out of Egypt. „I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery“ (Ex 20:2), is the basic self-introduction of God within the Old Testament, which not only marks the beginning of the Decalogue but also undergirds in the Holiness Code of God's encouragement of and claim on his people (cf. Lev 19:36; 22:31; but also Hosea 13:4; Psalm 81:11).

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1 A German version of this paper was published in: Gemeinschaft am Evangelium - Festschrift für Wiard Popkes, 1996, 77-96
2 Mt 9:22; Mk 5:34; 10:52; Lk 7:50; 8:48; 17:19; 18:42.
3 Cf. Lk 8:12; Acts 4:12; 1 Cor 1:18 and often.
This saving event which established the existence of Israel has two different aspects:
- The people are brought out and are liberated out of slavery in Egypt and at the same time
- they are brought up into the promised land.

Salvation includes not only liberation from present evil but also the promise of the new land and a new life in it and therefore a dimension which is orientated to the future. Salvation has a very concrete meaning based in real history and its conditions. But the dimension of theological depth is not missing in this tradition. Salvation is rescue from distress, but at the same time encounter with the saving God! Lev 22:32f says: „I am the Lord; I sanctify you, I who brought you out of the land of Egypt to be your God: I am the Lord.” (cf. 20:26 „... and have separated you from the peoples, that you should be mine.”)

The exodus as God’s fundamental saving act with his people becomes a prototype for all saving actions of God for Israel. The experiences of rescue and liberation in the time of the judges are seen as demonstrations of the justice and faithfulness of God, who has brought his people out of Egypt.

The promise of a new salvation after God’s judgement in the catastrophe of 587 speaks of a new exodus and especially Second Isaiah describes the departure and homecoming of the people in eschatological terms and with characteristics which transcend all that could be expected within history and lead to God’s revelation before all people.

On the other hand we will find a reciprocal relation between the description of this unique event in salvation history and of what individual people may expect and experience as salvation in their everyday lives.

Instructive in this context is the terminology by which the experience of salvation is described.

The old tradition speaks besides of „bringing out of and up to“ about God’s „delivering“ the people (Ex 3:8,10; Arm 9:7 a.o.); the younger tradition describes this experience as „redeeming from the house of bondage“ (pdh: Dt 7:8; 13:6; Mi 6:4; Ps 78:42; g‘l: Ex 6:6P; Ps 74:2; 77:16; the English translation makes no difference between both Hebrew terms). Thereby the comprehension of God’s saving action is brought into the context of the obligation of kindred assistance and counsel but also of the distressing experience of bondage and slavery.

The appropriate metaphors therefore are used also in a more general way to describe God’s saving intervention in the lives of individuals: „As a kinsman takes
care for one who is in need God 'redeems' human beings out of their distress, be it enmity or disease" (cf. Gen 48:16; II Sam 4:9)

This development has to be understood especially against the background of the Psalms of lament. In these Psalms people call to God in their distress (Ps 26:11; 69:19; 119:155) and appeal to God who is the counsel of the poor and who intercedes where people are in danger of ruin in lawsuit because others deny them the due legal aid. To this corresponds on the positive side the confession to God: „You have taken up my cause, o Lord, you have redeemed my life“ (Lam 3:58; Ps 31:5, 107:2).

It seems to me to be important that God's help is always described with a strong personal dimension. God „answered me“ - that is a permanent motive in Psalms of thanksgiving (34:5). And in supplication as well as in thanksgiving God's helping action is described as „the Lord made his face to shine“ upon those who are in need, i.e. that he himself bestows his grace and benevolence upon them. Salvation is more than rescue from distress and need - as much as such help belongs to it. Salvation means meeting the gracious God - whereby „gracious“ is more than just forgiving but embraces the loving and caring and at the same time powerful attention of the saving God. The confession: „He only is my rock and salvation“ (Ps 62:2) or „God is a refuge for us“ (62:8) may therefore already be spoken in the midst of need and distress.

The broad scope of this understanding of salvation may be seen not only where salvation of the individual is at stake. It applies also to the salvation of the people. As has already been indicated, especially Ezechiel and Second Isaiah take up the motive of the new Exodus. The promise: „Fear not, for I have redeemed you“ (Is 43:1) has at first the old, concrete meaning: „I have ransomed you out of bondage [in exchange for a substitute!]“ (Is 43:3f). But at the same time the statement „the Lord has redeemed his servant Jacob“ becomes the all embracing announcement of God's liberating and saving action (cf. 48:20, 52:9; 44:22). „Redeemer“ becomes a surname of God.

The unique phrase in Ps 130:7f has also to be understood against this background: „For with the Lord there is steadfast love and with him is great power to redeem. It is he who redeems Israel from all its iniquities.“ Although redemption meant first the deliverance from false and unjust accusation here it describes absolution and liberation from the self-inflicted confinement under the power of sin.

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7 For the uniqueness of this statement with in the OT cf. J.J. Stamm, THAT II, 401.
And the comprehension of salvation is also broadening into another direction. What
the people will experience is not only practical help out of great need and trouble, it
is at the same time the revelation of the God of Israel as the only true God. „The
Lord has made known his victory, he has revealed his vindication in the sight of the
nations. He has remembered his steadfast love and faithfulness to the house of Is­
rael. All the ends of the earth have seen the victory of our God„ we read in Psalm
98:2f, which is obviously very close to the teaching of Second Isaiah. Just in the
description of the eschatological salvation in the apocalyptic part of the book of
Isaiah - the description which often transcends what can be expected within his­
tory - the self-revelation of God comes into the centre as the eschatological event of
will be said on that day, „o, this is our God; we have waited for him, that he might
save us. This is the Lord; we have waited for him; let us be glad and rejoice in his
salvation.“ (Cf. 35:4, 60:1, 16; 63:1).
This kind of theocentric expectation may also be observed in the expressions of
hope of individuals. Especially where people not only expect rescue from imminent
death but even believe in salvation still within and beyond death, their hope finds
its assurance in the indissoluble nature of their relationship to God: „My flesh and
my heart may fail, but God is the strength of my heart and my portion for ever." (Ps
73:26) To call God „my portion for ever“ alludes to a motive from the tradition of the
promised land. The tribe Levi received no portion of the land, because as God says
-: „I am your portion and your inheritance“ (Nu 18:20). In the Psalm the motive has
a new meaning: If all fades away and perishes God’s faithfulness is the ultimate
foothold - even in death. (Cf. the parallel assurance for Israel in Is 54:10).
I have dealt with these Old Testament foundations of the New Testament concep­
tion of salvation so extensively (although nevertheless only extremely abridged) be­
cause in their wide scope they are of great importance for any biblically grounded
 teaching and proclamation of salvation. God’s saving action embraces the liberation
of Israel out of Egypt which was so fundamental for its existence as well as the le­
gal aid for the poor and innocent who are persecuted; it includes the eschatological
revelation of God’s faithfulness and justice in favour of his people as well as the
assurance to those who pray in affliction, which grants that when all external secu­
rity breaks down God’s grace will be valid and inviolable, even beyond death.

In my book „Call and Response“ I have attached the crucial points of the New Testament teaching of salvation to three areas of tradition. Although such classifications may have something schematic I want to keep to them in order to be able to represent the data as differentiated as is necessary and as clearly as possible.

I want to describe these lines of tradition in a concise and pointed manner.

a) The Gospel of the Kingdom

The essence of what is meant by salvation in the teaching of Jesus according to the synoptic tradition is found in the announcement of the coming of the Kingdom resp. the reign of God. People may come to Jesus and ask for the way to salvation by saying: „What must I do to inherit eternal life?“ (Mk 10:17). But Jesus himself speaks about „entering the Kingdom of God“ (Mk 10:23) or „receiving the Kingdom of God“ (Mk 10:15) when he wants to tell of the way to and the acceptance of salvation. Above all according to the unanimous witness of the synoptic Gospels the proclamation that „the Kingdom of God has come near“ (Mk 1:14) stands in the centre of Jesus teaching. Whereas the teaching of John the Baptist centred around the judgmental aspect of the coming Kingdom Jesus laid all emphasis on the dimension of the coming salvation. This is shown by the fact that as another basic summary of Jesus teaching Is 61:1 f is quoted: „The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovering of sight to the blind, to set at liberty to those who are oppressed, to proclaim the acceptable year of the Lord.“ (cf Lk 4:18f; 7:22) What is meant by this may be explained best by the first Beatitude: „Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the Kingdom of God.“ (Lk 6:20 - probably the original version of this Beatitude; cf. the parallel phrase in Mk 10:14, which says that the Kingdom of God belongs to the children.)

Just those people who may no longer expect anything from the society they live in are promised that they may expect everything from God and that their lives will be enriched by the communion with him in his Kingdom and under his gracious rule. That nevertheless the daily needs of these people are not forgotten is shown by the blessing of those who are hungry and weep; they are promised that they will be satisfied and be able to laugh again. But whereas this is promised for the future
the tense of the blessing of the poor is open. This may be caused not only by the lack of a verb in the Aramaic sentence which is behind the Greek. It may also indicate that this promise is already beginning to be realised by the proclamation of the nearness of the Kingdom of God.

Present reality of salvation through the immediate coming of the Kingdom is shown by Jesus in another instance also. A saying which is very important for the understanding of his calling reads: „But if it is by the finger of God that I cast out demons, then the Kingdom of God has come to you.“ (Lk 11:20). The Aramaic which may be conjectured behind the Greek ephthasen expresses almost graphically that God’s reign stretches out so close to human beings that it touches this world and its needs in at least one spot: In Jesus’ healing and liberating actions the Kingdom has already come although it still does not embrace all things.

In these and other similar words the need to which Jesus’ saving activity responds is outlined. It is the alienation from God which takes effect in the enslavement under the destructive power of evil which manifests itself in diseases but also in the social ostracism and marginalisation of people with problems or in need. Personal guilt of the persons affected is not ignored or trivialised. But it does not stand in the centre of this view of human need: men, women and children come into the picture not only as perpetrators but also as the victims of more comprehensive structures of evil from which God’s reign liberates and saves.

In Jesus’ teaching and action two things are happening: People are already experiencing in their lives the saving power of God’s Kingdom. At the same time they are invited by Jesus’ parables to recognise in all that they now witness as an incomplete token of a future fulfilment the beginning of the overwhelming abundance of the Kingdom of God.

b) The Word of the Cross

„God has Jesus raised from the dead“, that was the fundamental experience and confession which was given to the disciples after Jesus violent death. This sentence becomes the central confession of the early church and the foundation of their calling. It speaks at first about God’s action to the crucified one, but it obviously includes the notion that with the raising of Jesus God’s eschatological work of raising all the dead has already begun. Jesus therefore is seen as the „first fruits of those who have died“ (I Cor 15:20).

But this insight must soon have raised the question of the meaning of the death of Jesus. Guided by words of the Scriptures (esp. Is 43 and 53) and probably by hints of Jesus himself the early church soon began to understand Jesus death as the vicarious sacrifice of his life which through the acceptance of our guilt and sin by
God's anointed one effected atonement and reopened our communion with God. The confession which Paul quotes in I Cor 5:3-5 shows how early this notion of Jesus' death and resurrection became fundamental for the conception of „salvation in Jesus Christ“.

In this context the problem of guilt becomes crucial. And especially for Paul this means more than the settlement of the consequences of some transgressions of the law. These are only the symptoms of the fundamental sin of human beings since Adam (thus even before the law was in force and could identify individual transgressions). The fundamental sin is the rebellion of human beings against God through which they place their own being - just in its fragility and transitoriness (as Paul calls it: their „flesh“) - in the centre of their existence and therefore miss their true vocation to live their lives in the face of God.

Dying the death of a sinner and accepting - almost as impersonation of sin - the alienation from God and the curse of the law Jesus bears the deadly consequences of unsettled guilt. In the centre of God's saving activity is forgiveness of sin; but forgiveness is only part of the much more comprehensive process of reconciliation and inauguration of a new communion with God (II Cor 5:18-21).

We can find the same conception connected with the teaching of salvation in the terminology of justification. Justification in the categories of Hebrew-biblical legal thought means a verdict of not guilty, but the declaration: „He or she is justified“ includes also a positive judgement: „He or she belongs to our community“. On the theological level this means: In the justification of our life God acquits us for the sake of Jesus Christ from the charge of having failed to reach the goal of our life and he abolishes our failure by accepting us into his saving communion and by giving our lives the right direction and the right goal.

It is important to notice that on the level of the phenomena this failure can assume different forms. It may appear in the transgression of the law, the open violation of God's will and the human rights and the living space of others; but it may also appear in the hidden manipulation of the law for the sake of self-justification. The own achievements are made absolute, the memory of own short-comings is suppressed and the will of God is missed as well as the potential of others hindered - although in a much more subtle and hidden form than that of the open transgression of the law.

The message of justification therefore is not bound - in its effectiveness to a situation where people deliberately ask how they may „get a gracious God“. It may speak to all who struggle for meaning and worth in their lives. It may proclaim salvation to those who find themselves amidst the ruins of a spoiled and lost life and to those
who pretend that they have "justified" their lives through success, property, power, reputation or efficiency and who nevertheless feel - be it conscious or unconscious - that this is not true life. The true life is always God's gift, that is the message of justification through Jesus Christ even for the people of our time.

c) The word became flesh

The third line is connected closely with the second one. It is marked by the fundamental confession of the Johannine tradition: "For God so loved the world that he gave his only son, that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life" (John 3:16)

In the centre of this "formula of the 'Giving up' of the Son" which corresponds to a similar structure of a "formula of sending the son" (I John 4:9f, 14), we find the statement that the son is given up unto death. But beyond that statement the formula describes the saving effect of the adoption of our human nature in general by the son of God. In this sense we find formula and intention also in Paul, although for him the main emphasis is always on the death of Jesus Christ (cf. Gal 4:4f; Rom 8:3f with Rom 8:32; Phil 2:6-8; Gal 2:20).

It is characteristic for the whole tradition that it is closely connected with the title "Son of God" and that the deep connection between Father and Son is emphasised by the words "only" or "own". God gives himself through the son!

At the same time this soteriological scheme is almost always connected with a statement about the love of God or the Son (John 3:16; I John 4:9f; Rom 8:37-39; Gal 2:20; Eph 5:2; cf. Rom 5:8!). That the son has given himself into the world and unto death is the deepest evidence of the love of God!

Whereas the formula of the "Sending of the Son" describes the saving effect of the sending with the notion of atonement and vicarious death (cf. I John 4:10; Gal 4:4f), the formula of the "Giving up of the Son" characterises God's saving action in a much more comprehensive way. In Rom 8:31-39 the formula gives reason for the fundamental assurance: "God is for us". Through the Son God enters into human need, even death, the deepest and most extreme distress of human existence. This abandonment of self authenticates God's "Yes" to us which is valid even when all external circumstances seem to speak against it - be it our own sin (33f) or be it the heights and depths of human existence (38f).

We find a similar thought in II Cor 8:9 and Phil 2:6-11. In the humble and obedient adoption of the limitations of a human existence with all its constraints and weaknesses the one who is equal to God not only proves himself to be the real Lord of the world but by his acceptance of "the human condition" he heals and fulfils our human existence. The same concept is laid down in Rom 5:12-19. By reconciling
himself with the limitations of a created being and acknowledging God’s godhead Christ establishes a new humankind which will take part in the abundance of God’s life-giving reign (Rom 5:17).

What salvation gives according to this tradition is life: life with God, eternal life, and - as it is well known - the Gospel of John dares to say that all who by their faith in Jesus Christ have been received into the communion with God already have this life from God even now, eternal life. God becoming human, even “flesh”, fills the “lack of God” of human beings which originates in the loss of the real human purpose from God and for God. Now the glory of God is seen again in the face of Jesus Christ after we have fallen short of the doxa of God (Rom 23:3).

The human need to which the proclamation of salvation responds in this tradition is the need of the „God - forsakeness“ of human beings. Of course it is not that God has forsaken them, they have forsaken God; it is the need of their isolation, loneliness and forlornness. People are lost - not only in the eschatological sense, doomed to the final condemnation, but also in a ontological sense: people are lost in their loneliness and isolation amidst the infinite cosmos without hold and orientation. It is the need of the human „angst“ which attacks, weakens and erodes the foundations of our lives and because of which we try to secure and defend our lives for ourselves. And just this makes us aggressive against others and suffocates real life with others.

In the context of this tradition salvation is seen as the gift of a new existence from God; it is the gift of becoming children of God: „God sent his Son ... so that we may receive adoption as children“ (Gal 4:4f). Salvation includes the gift of our lost original trust in God which conquers „angst“; it includes also the moving experience of being authorised and empowered by God as a mature and responsible child; and it includes thereby also the basis for a new relationship the people with whom we live with.

3. Unity and diversity in the biblical proclamation of salvation

We have seen that the New Testament speaks in different ways about salvation. But all of these different ways have in common that salvation has its roots always in the encounter with the saving God.

It is the coming of God’s Kingdom in the work and teaching of Jesus which delivers the oppressed and exalts the poor. It is the revelation of God’s righteousness in death and resurrection of Jesus Christ which justifies sinners and reconciles enemies. And it is the light of God’s glory in the person and life of the Son of God.
which stills the hunger and thirst for life and heals the deep anxiety to be lost in a hostile world.

Salvation is not a good which may be isolated from its giver. It is not a form of quality of life or a pious possession. It springs out of the revelation of God's divinity, of God's reign, of God's righteousness, of God's glory. In this basic notion we find the unity of the New Testament proclamation of salvation. And just where God reveals himself really and truly, precisely there he will meet human beings in their deepest need. Because God's nature, as revealed in Jesus Christ, is totally love, the revelation of his divinity means salvation for human beings, gives space for true humanity. God is not a means or instrument to satisfy this or that of our needs. But where God reveals himself, human life will be healed. There are different aspects of distress and need in human life. Therefore we may need different ways of expressing God's saving response. But there is a deep unity in all these different expressions. I hope we are able to experience this unity within a necessary diversity also in our proclamation of salvation today.

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