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Introduction

Talking about Salvation

In the summer of 2012, I made my first visit to the country of Haiti. I traveled with some colleagues from my Passionist religious community to visit Father Rick Frechette, a Passionist priest and physician who has worked in Haiti for more than twenty years. Frechette initially went to Haiti to establish an orphanage, but he has subsequently led the way in the founding of two hospitals, including the leading pediatric hospital in the country. He has also been involved in the building of a number of primary and secondary schools, as well as projects to provide housing for people who are either homeless or living in woefully substandard housing. Many of these people lost their homes in the devastating earthquake that struck Haiti in January of 2010.

On the second day of our visit, we accompanied Frechette to Cité du Soleil, one of the worst slums in the Western Hemisphere, located outside Port-au-Prince. The area is lined with endless rows of shacks with tin roofs that leak in the rain. It is a bleak place with a history of violence. On that day, however, there was a small celebration taking place in Cité du Soleil. A new bakery was being dedicated there. The bakery had been built to establish a modest business enterprise in the area that would provide a few jobs as well as baked goods for the community. Representatives from a variety of agencies that had collaborated in the project were present, including UNICEF, which had provided some of the funding. There was even a small band comprised of young people from Cité du Soleil, playing patriotic and popular songs under a makeshift canopy.

My travel companions and I stood on the outskirts of this dedication ceremony, listening to lengthy speeches under the hot sun. Small
children milled around us, most of them in bare feet and wearing ragged clothes; some asked us for money, using their own forms of “sign language.” One little girl, about six or seven years old, decided that she was going to watch this ceremony holding my hand. She wore a tattered pink dress that had frayed lace. She had a beautiful smile. She did not ask me for money or anything else. Because I do not speak Haitian, we were unable to converse except by means of expression and gesture. But we smiled at one another and held hands while watching the ribbon cutting for the new bakery. Occasionally, she would rest her face against my arm. When the ceremony concluded, we exchanged one last smile. She then went off to mingle with her friends.

Anyone who travels to Haiti is bound to be struck by the pervasive poverty in that country and the miserable conditions in which many of the people are forced to live. The faces of the poor remain lodged in the memory long after one has returned to the so-called First World. The Haitian face that has been most prominent in my mind is that of the little girl in the pink dress. What kind of life will she have? Will she ever receive a decent education? Does she have any hope of escaping the desperate situation into which she was born?

This is a book about “soteriology.” The term is derived from the Greek word soteria, which means “salvation.” In Christian thought, soteriology is the study of the saving work of God in and through Jesus Christ. We will explore the biblical testimony about salvation, as well as a number of ancient and modern theological accounts of Christ’s saving work. We will see that some soteriological theories are quite complex. Soteriology, however, is not a purely academic pursuit unrelated to the everyday concerns of ordinary people. Whichever soteriological image or theory one adopts, it must always be related to the struggles of ordinary people throughout the world, particularly those who suffer the most. Thus, as I begin this exploration of the Christian tradition about Christ’s saving work, I ask how the Christian proclamation of salvation in Jesus Christ relates to the life and concerns of the little girl in the pink dress who lives in Cité du Soleil. What would it mean for her to be “saved” by Jesus Christ? Would salvation for her consist entirely of the hope for and the gift of eternal life with God? How might the church credibly preach the message of salvation in Christ to her and to her neighbors in Cité du Soleil?
Discourse about salvation seems foreign to some people in the contemporary world. On the one hand, there is a tendency in modern society to question the need for salvation. Emboldened by the remarkable scientific and technological advancements of recent years, some people insist that we can find solutions to our own problems, without any assistance from a deity. In fact, to appeal to a saving act from “outside” of humanity represents, they think, an avoidance of human responsibility in the task of solving the world’s problems. Gerald O’Collins summarizes the view of such critics in these words: “Whatever our spiritual or other problems, surely we human beings can deal with them and solve them, provided we put our minds to it and make a real effort.”¹ In my experience of discussing soteriology with graduate theology students over the years, I have found that a significant number of younger people have difficulty relating to language about “salvation.” Students sometimes ask questions like: What is it that I am supposed to be saved from? Do we really need a “savior”? There is a strong sense of human autonomy and self-sufficiency in some people that makes Christian talk about salvation in Christ seem unintelligible.

From a quite different perspective, others object to Christian talk about salvation because of the problematic state of the world. They ask: How can we speak of Christ saving the world when the world seems so “unredeemed”—when there is such strife and deprivation across the globe? These critics particularly object to Christian language about salvation that reflects what theologians call a “realized eschatology,” that is, a conception of salvation as a present reality, already transforming the here-and-now. One sometimes encounters such a view of salvation in the prayers of the liturgy. For example, in one of the prefaces for Mass during the Easter season, the priest prays these words: “For, with the old order destroyed, a universe cast down is renewed, and integrity of life is restored to us in Christ.”² These words can certainly be interpreted to mean that Jesus’ death and resurrection had real effects and that integrity of life is found in following Christ. It is through living as a disciple of Jesus that one discovers wholeness of life and an entirely new perspective on the world. Nevertheless, such expressions can also have a triumphalistic ring for those who are painfully aware that the “old order” continues to have adverse effects on the lives of billions of people around the
world. The world about which we read daily in our newspapers is in desperate need of rescue and renewal. These critics provide a salutary reminder to Christians that we need to “watch our language” when speaking about salvation in a world where there continues to be massive suffering—where children have to eke out an existence in places like Cité du Soleil.

Australian theologian Denis Edwards identifies four contemporary issues that constitute the context in which Christians today ask about God’s salvation: first, the arms race, which takes desperately needed resources from the poor and threatens the very existence of the human family; second, the widespread malnutrition, unemployment, and poverty that mark the lives of billions of people around the globe; third, the exploitation of the earth and the resulting ecological crisis; fourth, the aspirations of women for equality in rights and opportunity. As a kind of postscript, Edwards mentions the issue of salvation in Christ in a world where the majority of people are not Christian. I consider this issue of religious pluralism to be of critical significance for contemporary reflection on the saving work of Christ. Edwards argues that a Christian perspective on salvation must address these pressing issues affecting the entire world. A further issue, discussed by Edwards in other works and linked with the ecological crisis, is the connection between soteriology and our understanding of an evolving universe. How does the saving work of Christ relate, not simply to human history, but to the story of the cosmos? Here soteriology must address the relationship between creation and redemption and, more broadly, the dialogue between theology and science.

Talking about salvation, then, requires careful reflection undertaken in light of the Christian tradition and contemporary human experience. Shallow discourse about being “saved” in Christ, which is often characteristic of fundamentalist Christians, sounds shrill to many people and can actually be an obstacle to Christian proclamation of the Gospel. Believers must ask what salvation in Christ means for the present and the future, for the human family and the cosmos as well as for individuals. And they must ask how salvation in Christ is both gift and call—how the saving grace of God in Christ evokes human responsibility for the well-being of the human family and the rest of creation.
Christology and Soteriology

In Christian thought, soteriology has traditionally been understood as a dimension of Christology. Christology can be defined as a historical and systematic study of the person and work of Jesus Christ as the object and foundation of Christian faith. According to this definition, Christology encompasses an exploration of both the person of Jesus (who he is believed to be) and his saving work, that is, what he accomplished that effected salvation for human beings and the world. This is the most complete understanding of Christology. In the early church, the intrinsic relationship between the identity (person) of Christ and his saving work was strongly emphasized. For example, in his defense of the divinity of Christ against the followers of Arius, Athanasius of Alexandria repeatedly stressed that Christ could not give us genuine salvation unless he was truly divine. Since for Athanasius salvation meant participation in the very life of God, he was convinced that only someone who was truly divine could give such a benefit. One cannot “give” what one does not “have.” Similar arguments were offered by theologians of the early church regarding the humanity of Jesus. They were convinced that salvation had to come from “our side”—from someone like us. Thus, Jesus must have truly shared in our humanity. As the theological tradition developed, however, Christology sometimes became fragmented, and discussion of the person of Christ was separated from consideration of his saving work. This disjunction was a feature of neoscholastic theology—the theological movement that resulted from a revival of Thomistic thought in the second half of the nineteenth century and extended through the first half of the twentieth century. In this approach Christology—in a more narrow understanding of the term—was a study of the person of Jesus Christ. It was mainly devoted to a theology of the incarnation. In soteriology, one subsequently studied what Christ did to save the world.

Most contemporary theologians oppose such a disjunction between exploration of Christ’s person and consideration of his saving work. They point out that study of the New Testament has made it clear that, for the earliest Christian communities, it was the experience of salvation in Jesus that led disciples to ask about his identity. Referring to the first disciples of Jesus, Elizabeth Johnson says, “Their encounter with Jesus in his ministry, death, and new resurrected life
in the power of the Spirit unleashed positive religious experiences. They perceived that through Jesus the redeeming God of Israel, the God of boundless hesed and emeth, of loving-kindness and fidelity, had drawn near to them in an intensely gracious way and moved their lives into a changed direction, symbolized by their new community and its mission. The life-giving experience of God mediated by Jesus led these disciples to inquire: If such a gift flows from him, who must he really be? Thomas Marsh puts it like this: “Jesus is recognized as who he is because he is experienced and seen as the absolute Bringer of Salvation.” Thus, while the focus of our inquiry in this book will be on the ways in which the saving work of Jesus Christ has been conceived and articulated, we must keep in mind the intrinsic relationship between Christ’s salvific work and his personal identity.

As Christian doctrine developed, the church issued a number of official statements related to the person of Christ. These are teachings of faith that serve as norms for thinking and speaking about Christ. At the Council of Nicea (325 CE), the church officially taught that Jesus Christ, the incarnate Son of God, was truly divine. The Son of God is consubstantial with (homoousios: one in being with) the Father. At the First Council of Constantinople (381), the church taught that Christ was truly human, that his humanity was complete and not abbreviated in any way. The Council of Chalcedon (451) officially declared that Christ was one person in two distinct natures, human and divine. Each nature maintains its integrity, but the two natures are united in one person. The Third Council of Constantinople (680–681) defined that Jesus had both a human will and a divine will, though these were always in harmony with one another. These dogmatic definitions resulted from protracted debates. They were made in response to other positions that the church came to reject as incorrect or inadequate conceptions of the identity of Christ.

The church has not promulgated such defined teaching about the saving work of Christ to the same extent that it has about Christ’s identity. It teaches that Jesus Christ is the unique savior of the world and that the salvation he effected has implications for all people, and even for the cosmos itself. But the church has not officially taught that there is one specific way in which Christ’s saving work must be conceived or explained. We will see that the soteriology of Anselm of Canterbury—known as the theory of satisfaction—achieved widespread
recognition in theology, popular preaching, and spirituality and that Anselm’s formulation of soteriology retains its influence even today. But it was never officially defined as the only way to conceive of the saving work of Christ. For example, about 170 years after Anselm developed his argument, Thomas Aquinas drew on the theory of satisfaction but also introduced subtle changes into it. The church has tolerated a rather wide-ranging diversity in thinking about soteriology. Gerald O’Collins remarks that “no period of Christianity can claim to have produced a truly unified systematic soteriology.”10 In our exploration of soteriology, we will need to pay attention to this diversity of thought and explore the underlying reasons for differences in approach.

Images and Theories

It is important to distinguish between images and metaphors employed to speak of Christ’s saving work, on the one hand, and theories that are constructed to explain it, on the other. For example, the image/metaphor of “ransom” is found in the New Testament to depict Christ’s saving work, particularly his death by crucifixion. In a moving section of the First Letter of Peter, the author exhorts the Christians to whom he writes to exhibit reverence in their way of living. He tells them that they were “ransomed” from their old way of life “not with perishable things like silver or gold but with the precious blood of Christ as of a spotless unblemished lamb” (1 Pet 1:18-19). Here the author may be drawing on the Fourth Servant Song from the book of Isaiah in comparing the blood of the crucified Jesus to that of an unblemished lamb (see Isa 53:7, 10). The practice of ransoming was well known in the ancient world. Prisoners of war and slaves could be ransomed in a variety of ways, usually through the payment of money. Thus, ordinary people could readily imagine what it might be like to be ransomed and set free from captivity or slavery. And so in early Christianity ransom served as an intelligible image to express what God had done in Christ to give disciples a new experience of freedom and a fresh start on life. In this case the ransom “price” did not consist of a payment of money but Christ’s offering of his very life—signified by his “precious blood.”

The author of 1 Peter does not elaborate further on this image. He does not ask, for example, to whom the ransom was paid or how the
“transaction” was effected. He simply employs the metaphor as one way of expressing the munificence of God’s saving work in Christ and as motivation to his readers to act with reverence for God in every aspect of their lives. Later Christian authors, however, will attempt to develop this ransom metaphor into a theory, speculating about the means of the transaction, to whom the ransom was given, and why it had to be offered in the first place. We will see, for example, that Gregory of Nyssa (among others) argues that the ransom was paid to the devil.

Theologians sometimes distinguish between “first-level” (“first-order”) language and “second-level” (“second-order”) language. First-level language abounds in image and metaphor. It is the language of proclamation, narrative, poetry, and prayer. The four gospels show that the early communities of disciples employed narrative in their proclamations of faith; they told the story of Jesus, the crucified and risen One. Narrative has its own characteristics and rules, which differ from those of theory. For contemporary believers, the collects and the eucharistic prayers of the liturgy are rich in images and metaphors that are employed to tell the story of God’s redeeming action in history and in the present. They reflect the language of proclamation and prayer; they are first-level religious language. Music and art can also be considered as first-level expression. Think of the rich ways in which the redemptive work of God in Christ is articulated in hymns like “Hail Redeemer, King Divine” or in artistic works like the Isenheim Altarpiece of Matthias Grünewald.

Second-level expression is the language of doctrine and theology. Such theological expression often draws on philosophy for purposes of clarification and precision. When images or metaphors are turned into theories and doctrines, one has moved from first-level to second-level expression. Gregory of Nyssa begins to make this move in his elaboration of the biblical language of ransom, as does Anselm of Canterbury in his theory of satisfaction. Anselm employs sophisticated rational argumentation to construct his theory of satisfaction. The distinction between first- and second-level language is not always hard and fast, but there is a real difference. O’Collins puts it like this: the images and metaphors of first-level language “show” God’s redeeming action, while theories attempt to “explain” God’s redeeming action. Theories attempt to provide a coherent explanation
that accounts for all the relevant data at hand. O’Collins emphasizes that theories that attempt to “explain” salvation in Christ cannot take the place of images and metaphors that “show” Christ’s saving work. This is true because in speaking about God’s redemptive work we are trying to articulate a mystery of faith. The mystery of God’s redeeming action is inexhaustibly rich. We will never wrap our minds around it or be able to explain it adequately, though we can make affirmations about it that are true. Even the most subtle and compelling soteriological theory will fall short of capturing the mystery of salvation. So we are always brought back to the language of proclamation, narrative, and prayer in giving testimony to God’s saving love in Christ. Anselm of Canterbury taught that theology is a dynamic movement of faith seeking understanding. This dynamism ultimately ends in prayer—prayer that employs words and contemplation that is lovingly silent before the mystery of the God who saves.

One of the reasons for the broad diversity in the Christian soteriological tradition has been the multiplicity of images and metaphors used to “show” God’s redeeming action, even within the New Testament itself. Elizabeth Johnson observes that in telling the story of the crucified and risen Jesus early Christians “spoke in financial categories of redemption or release from slavery through payment of a price; in legal categories of advocacy, justification, and satisfaction; in cultic categories of liberation and victory over oppressive powers; in personal categories of reconciliation after dispute; in medical categories of being healed or made whole; in existential categories of freedom and new life; and in familial categories of becoming God’s children by birth (John) or by adoption (Paul).” No single image or metaphor could exhaust the mystery of God’s saving love in Jesus Christ; many were needed. This multiplicity of biblical images gave rise to diverse theologies of salvation.

“Moments” in the Jesus Story

John Galvin suggests a helpful question to keep in mind when exploring Christian soteriology: Which aspect of the existence of Jesus Christ is viewed as salvific by this author or in this text? The four main points of reference have been: first, the incarnation—the becoming flesh of the Word/Son of God; second, the public life and
ministry of Jesus; third, his death by crucifixion; fourth, his resurrection, which also implies his glorification and the gift of the Holy Spirit. Keeping this question in mind will help to shed light on the texts and authors we will study.

Some Christian thinkers highlight the salvific significance of the incarnation itself. They propose that the becoming flesh/human of the Son of God was itself transformative of the human situation, and even of the entire cosmos. Certain theologians of the early church will espouse this idea, which is sometimes called “physical redemption.” It is based on the notion—inspired by Platonic philosophy—that human nature is a universal in which all people participate. So the becoming human of the Son of God in itself transforms human nature. Since in Christ God shared our life, we are granted a share in the life of God. Human nature has been elevated because in Christ it was assumed by the divine. We will see that some contemporary theologians who address scientific findings about the evolution of the cosmos retrieve this patristic theme in their soteriologies. They speak not only of the elevation of human nature but also of the transformation of the cosmos.

Other thinkers elucidate the words and deeds of Jesus in his public ministry as salvific. For example, in his deeds of healing and exorcism, Jesus made the reign of God present in the lives of people who were in dire need. His table fellowship with all kinds of people—rich and poor, saint and sinner—had the effect of bringing these people into communion with God. People who encountered Jesus experienced God’s saving presence and action in their lives. A careful reading of the soteriological tradition reveals that this aspect of the existence of Jesus has sometimes been underplayed in depicting his redemptive work. Contemporary liberationist and feminist theologians—among others—argue that more attention should be given to the salvific significance of Jesus' public ministry. They suggest that there has been a tendency in soteriology to move directly from the incarnation to the death of Jesus. This is reflected in the assertion that Jesus “came to die” or that God “sent his Son to die for us.” Even in the Nicene Creed, professed at the Eucharist by Christians, there is no mention of the earthly ministry of Jesus. Attention to Jesus’ public ministry is particularly important when it comes to the question of the image of God that is reflected in a particular soteriology. If one ignores the
public ministry of Jesus and focuses on his death as the salvific action of his life, this can result in a distorted notion of God.

It is clear that the death of Jesus has been a key point of reference for identifying the saving work of Christ from the beginning. Even the most critical New Testament scholars—those who accentuate the influence of later Christian belief and practice in shaping the gospel narratives—point out that Jesus’ death is understood as salvific in the most ancient strands of the tradition. For example, in 1 Corinthians 15:3-8, Paul quotes an early Christian tradition about the resurrection of Jesus and the appearances of the risen Christ to various individuals and groups. It is a tradition that predates him and that he has received, though he appends his own experience of the risen Jesus at the end. This creedal formula begins by affirming “that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the scriptures.” In this early profession of faith, then, the death of Jesus is viewed not simply as a brute fact of history. It is envisioned as a death “for our sins,” and it is “in accordance with the scriptures.” In other words, it is a death that has salvific significance, and it is in some way integral to the revelation of God’s intentions for the world. In popular piety, Christians are accustomed to prayers such as, “We adore you, O Christ, and we praise you, because by your holy cross you have redeemed the world.” And the redemptive power of Jesus’ death on the cross is articulated often in liturgical prayer. Still, Christian thinkers through the centuries have struggled with how to elucidate the salvific significance of the death of Jesus. What is it about Jesus’ death that makes it redemptive? Distinct theologies of the cross have been crafted, giving rise to diverse perspectives on the role that Jesus’ death plays in his saving work.

Finally, the resurrection has also been viewed as having redemptive implications. The passage from 1 Corinthians cited above makes it clear that a number of disciples claimed to have encountered Jesus after his death. They experienced him present to them in a transformed state. These experiences led to the fundamental Christian confession that God had acted to raise the crucified Jesus from death. And his being raised from the dead engendered their own hope for resurrection. Through the centuries, certain accounts of soteriology have paid little attention to this key moment in the Jesus story. We will see that Anselm does not integrate the resurrection of the
crucified Jesus into his theory of satisfaction. On the other hand, the Christology and soteriology of other authors can be viewed as resurrection-centered. The soteriology of Edward Schillebeeckx is sometimes understood that way. The resurrection of the crucified Jesus is obviously another key “moment” in the existence of Jesus that has soteriological implications.

It is helpful to keep Galvin’s question in mind as we explore the soteriological tradition. Typically, Christian authors appeal to some combination of these four aspects of the existence of Jesus in articulating their theology of salvation, though they often place particular emphasis on one of them. Contemporary theologians point out that these “moments” in the Jesus story, while distinct, should never be separated. Thomas Marsh emphasizes this point:

Attention must be focused, then, on the ministry, death and resurrection of Jesus not as isolated events but as intrinsically connected events which constitute the unfolding character of the continuum this history is. The total meaning of this history, therefore, cannot be found in any one moment of it separated from the others.15

In speaking of God’s redeeming action in Christ, then, one must attend to the entire Jesus story. For purposes of analysis, however, identifying where various authors place their emphasis is helpful for understanding and evaluating their arguments.

The “From” and the “For” of Salvation

The idea of salvation, or redemption, implies a movement from a negative state to a positive—or at least a more positive—state. Salvation, then, involves being rescued or liberated from some form of evil. The source and nature of the evil from which human beings are saved has been identified in various ways in Christian soteriology. Sometimes it is described simply as “sin.” Here sin is understood as something more encompassing than an individual offense against God. It is a power that holds humanity in thrall, as described by Paul in his letter to the Romans (see Rom 7:13-25). Other writers focus on “death” as the evil from which Christ frees us. Human enslavement to death—usually connected with the presence of sin in
human history—is overcome by Christ, enabling us to share in his immortality. A number of theologians of the early church spoke of Christ redeeming us from the power of death, making us sharers in his victory over death. We sometimes hear this idea in the liturgy, for example, in the preface for the Epiphany of the Lord: “For today you have revealed the mystery of our salvation in Christ as a light for the nations, and, when he appeared in our mortal nature, you made us new by the glory of his immortal nature.”

Some modern theologians describe the “from” of salvation in terms of “alienation.” Human beings have become alienated—estranged—from their true selves, one another, and God. We are not who we were meant to be. In particular, the capacity to love ourselves, others, and God has been stunted, and so we live in a state of exile from our true selves. It is Christ who frees us from this alienation, not only by showing us what it means to be human, but also by enabling us to recover our genuine humanity and, thus, to thrive in life-giving relationships.

At the same time, the Christian concept of salvation does not entail only being rescued “from” some form of evil or negative state. It is also salvation “for”; it entails the capacity and the summons to live as redeemed people. This dimension of soteriology is often referred to as the “benefits” of salvation. Philip Melanchthon, the disciple and colleague of Martin Luther, was famous for speaking of “Christ and his benefits.” New Testament authors use a variety of different images to describe what salvation in Christ is “for.” For example, Paul employs the language of “adoption” to speak of the new relationship with God that Christ has made possible: “For those who are led by the Spirit of God are children of God. For you did not receive a spirit of slavery to fall back into fear, but you received a spirit of adoption, through which we cry, ‘Abba, Father!’” (Rom 8:14-15). Paul accentuates the freedom that Christians enjoy, a freedom to relate to God with the trust and intimacy that a child has with his or her parent.

The Christian idea of salvation, then, entails more than simply release from a state of negativity. At its deepest level, it is the gift of sharing in the very life of God. We will see this conviction in our examination of patristic theologians, for whom “God’s ultimate design is that we become totally united with God, sharing the divine life, light, and love.” We will also encounter it in the thought of Karl...
Rahner, who adopts the position that the incarnation would have taken place even if there had been no sin. Release from the power of evil and sin is certainly intrinsic to the Christian notion of salvation, but it is not the total meaning of salvation. There is something more happening in the story of salvation; that “more” has to do with God’s self-communication, God’s gift of self to the human family. As we explore various approaches to soteriology in the Christian tradition, it is helpful to identify what an author depicts humanity as being saved “from” and the way in which he or she describes what we are saved “for.”

Soteriology and Other Dimensions of Christian Life and Thought

In my reference to my visit to Haiti, I mentioned that Christian soteriology has relevance for the real concerns of everyday life, especially for those who suffer most acutely in our world. It is also important to note that soteriology is closely related to other dimensions of Christian thought and practice. What is explored and discussed in soteriology connects closely with Christian spirituality and pastoral ministry. If Christian spirituality is ultimately about the life with God that disciples of Jesus experience, the conception of salvation/redemption in Christ is integral to spirituality. What does it mean to live a “redeemed” life? In the practice of pastoral care, ministers help others recognize and respond to the invitations of grace that are present in their lives. Our understanding of redemption, of what the grace of Christ holds out for us, influences the healing, hope, and direction we share with others.

The references to the liturgy that I have made suggest that soteriology is also closely related to liturgical theology and the practice of liturgy within the life of the church. The celebration of the Eucharist, for example, is replete with affirmations of God’s salvation accomplished in Christ. The proclamation of the eucharistic prayers consists of a narration of the story of salvation in the context of praise and thanksgiving. One eucharistic theme that is explicitly soteriological is that of sacrifice. The sacrificial offering of the Eucharist is, of course, intrinsically connected with Jesus’ death on the cross. We will see that the concept of sacrifice is integral to the Christian soteriological tradition, though its relevance for today is contested.
by some thinkers. Is the language of “sacrifice” intelligible to people today and does it inform an authentic Christian spirituality? As we proceed in our exploration, I invite readers to connect the expressions of soteriology found within the tradition with the affirmations about salvation that are made in the celebration of the Eucharist.

A Look Ahead

I will adopt a chronological approach for our study of the development of Christian thought on salvation. The first two chapters will consist of a summary discussion of key soteriological terms and themes in the Hebrew and Christian Scriptures. It is impossible to offer an adequate account of the rich biblical testimony to salvation in a book with as broad a scope as this one. But we will explore salient features of the experience and articulation of God’s saving presence found in the Old and New Testaments. In the third chapter, reflection on the meaning of salvation by theologians of the early church will be thematized. Chapter 4 will consist of an exploration of medieval and Reformation soteriologies. We will consider Anselm’s theory of satisfaction, the approach to Christ’s saving work found in Peter Abelard, and the soteriology of Thomas Aquinas, especially as found in the Summa Theologiae. We will also address the perspectives on salvation found in the work of the Protestant Reformers Martin Luther and John Calvin. In the fifth chapter, we will engage the thought of three of the most influential Catholic theologians of the twentieth century: Karl Rahner, Hans Urs von Balthasar, and Edward Schillebeeckx. The soteriologies of these seminal thinkers reveal distinct concerns and approaches. Putting them in “conversation” with one another illuminates key issues in the modern discussion about the saving work of Christ. The aspirations of the poor and of women will occupy our attention in the sixth chapter. Liberationist and feminist Christologies have challenged some of the assumptions and expressions of traditional soteriology, particularly in light of the suffering of marginalized peoples throughout the world. We will explore some of the key themes found in the work of liberationist and feminist theologians. In the seventh chapter, we will delve into the dialogue between science and theology by examining the relationship between salvation in Christ and the evolution of the cosmos. This discussion
will necessarily touch on ecology and the future of our endangered planet. In chapter 8, we will address the burning issue of the relation of Christ to other religious traditions. What does the Christian confession of Jesus Christ as the unique and universal mediator of salvation mean in a world where most people are not professing Christians? Finally, in chapter 9, I will glean some principles from our exploration of the tradition and suggest one soteriological model that I believe is relevant for our contemporary world.

Throughout this introduction, I have raised a number of questions for readers to keep in mind as they enter into this theological conversation that spans the ages. Some of these key questions are:

- Which aspect(s) of the existence of Jesus is viewed as salvific by this author or text?
- In the work of this author, what does Christ save us from? What does Christ save us for?
- What is the image of God that is conveyed in this account of the saving work of Christ?
- What implications does this perspective on soteriology have for Christian life and worship?
- In what way does this soteriology speak to human concerns and aspirations across the globe?
Christian conceptions of salvation are rooted in the biblical testimony to God’s saving action in the history of Israel. Though seemingly obvious, it is important to recall that Jesus himself was a first-century Jew, and he drew on the story of his own people in speaking about the way in which God was offering salvation in and through his ministry. For example, his proclamation of the reign of God tapped into the Jewish belief that God was the ultimate ruler of Israel and of all nations. After Jesus’ death and resurrection, his disciples utilized images and metaphors drawn from the Scriptures of Israel to proclaim the salvation that God was offering in and through Jesus. Christians should not forget that their faith is rooted in Judaism and in Israel’s experience of God.

The Hebrew Scriptures are a complex set of documents comprised of many strands of tradition. They reflect nine centuries or more of written tradition and an even longer span of oral tradition. The understanding of salvation that is found in these texts manifests diverse perspectives and some significant developments. For example, belief in an afterlife is a late development that is expressed in only a few texts of the Old Testament. It is not possible to attend to all of the complexities of Hebrew thought about salvation in an overview such as this. I will simply highlight certain themes that were central to the faith and praxis of the people of Israel and reflected their experience of God’s saving presence in their lives.
Salvation Terminology

In the introduction, I pointed out that language about salvation is drawn from ordinary human experience. This is certainly true of the terminology found in the Hebrew Scriptures, which reflects categories found in the legal, financial, and interpersonal spheres of life. While semantic considerations do not tell the whole story in understanding biblical soteriology, attention to terminology does offer insight into the ways in which God’s saving action was experienced and expressed. I will explore just four terms that are found in the Hebrew Scriptures, noting all the while that this list is not exhaustive.

Words drawn from the Hebrew root *ys* (*yasa*, to save; *yeshua*, salvation) are found with great frequency. These terms have a wide-ranging sphere of meaning—to help in times of distress, to rescue, to deliver. They can signify being set free from many different forms of individual or communal distress—danger, injustice, sickness, war, famine, etc.1 This Hebrew root is, of course, the basis of the name for “Jesus” (see Matt 1:21). In the ancient world, the king was envisioned as the king-savior, whose role was to protect his people from external enemies and to rule them with justice.2 Israel will come to name God as the ultimate protector and source of justice. In the Song of the Sea, which extols God’s act of liberating the Israelites from slavery in Egypt, the poet writes, “My strength and my courage is the L**ord**, and he has been my savior” (Exod 15:2). In the so-called enthronement psalms (Pss 47; 93; 96–99), God is praised as the king-savior who rules over Israel and over the whole world:

    Sing to the L**ord** a new song;  
    sing to the L**ord**, all the earth.  
    Sing to the L**ord**, bless his name;  
    announce his salvation day after day. [Ps 96:1-2]

The Hebrew root *pdh* (*padah*) means to purchase or to ransom, and it originally had a commercial context. It can refer to the ransom of a person from slavery (e.g., Exod 21:7-11). It is also used to denote the redemption of one kind of firstborn animal with another. The firstborn male animal was to be sacrificed to God in commemoration of the tenth plague (see Exod 13:11-16; Lev 27:27). And at the age of one month, all firstborn boys were to be redeemed by the payment of five silver shekels (Num 18:16). This term is then employed to
describe what God did to liberate Israel from oppression by the Egyptians. In the sermon about the covenant that Moses is depicted as giving in Deuteronomy, he enjoins the people to show justice to their servants, with the reminder that they, too, “were once slaves in the land of Egypt, and the Lord, your God, ransomed you” (Deut 15:15). God ransomed God’s people from Egypt, making them God’s special possession. There is, however, no mention of a purchase price; God is sovereign over all of creation and gives no recompense when he ransoms.³

Another Hebrew root for ransom is kpr. The recalcitrant owner of an ox that gores someone to death may spare his own life by paying a ransom (Exod 21:28-30). The verb kipper is used in the ritual of the Day of Atonement in Leviticus 16, and here it means “expiate” or “atone.” The priest is instructed to take some of the blood of the goat that is sacrificed for sin and sprinkle it around the Holy of Holies: “Thus he shall make atonement for the sanctuary because of all the sinful defilements and faults of the Israelites” (16:16). This “making atonement” or “expiating” refers to the purging of the sanctuary, which has been polluted by human sin and impurity. The sacrificial blood is an effective cultic cleansing agent. Through this action, the Holy of Holies is made clean and holy; it is reconsecrated to God.⁴

From the same root comes the noun kapporet, which designates the golden cover of the ark of the covenant, called the “Mercy Seat” (see Exod 37:6-7). On the Day of Atonement the priest applies the blood of a sacrificial bull to this golden cover in order to cleanse it (Lev 16:14). In all of these rituals, it is God who provides the means to remove the effects of the sins and impurities of the people. When we examine the passage from Paul’s letter to the Romans, wherein Paul refers to Christ as having been “set forth as an expiation” (Rom 3:25), we will see that this ritual of the Day of Atonement forms the background for Paul’s assertion about salvation in Christ.

The Hebrew root gl [ga’al, to redeem; go’el, redeemer] relates to family law. The go’el was the nearest adult male relative, who had a special responsibility to assist his kin in times of adversity or loss. The go’el was enjoined to redeem the property of a brother who had been forced to sell his ancestral property (Lev 25:25), to rescue kin who had sold themselves into indentured servitude (Lev 25:48), to marry the wife of a deceased brother in order to raise up the name
of the deceased (Ruth 3:9, 12), and to avenge the murder or severe
harm inflicted on a relative (the go’el haddam, blood redeemer; Num
35:19; Judg 8:18-21). This terminology, too, is applied to God to speak
of God’s redemptive activity on behalf of Israel. In Moses’ encounter
with God in Exodus 6, God instructs Moses to assure the enslaved
people that he will redeem them with an outstretched arm and with
mighty acts of judgment (6:6). God does this in order to take Israel as
God’s own people (v. 7). This term is also used in the Psalms to refer
to God’s saving action in the exodus (see Pss 78:35; 106:10). In the
book of Job, in the midst of Job’s fierce laments about his inexplicable
suffering, he proclaims his trust in a divine go’el: “But as for me, I
know that my Vindicator lives, and that he will at last stand forth
upon the dust; Whom I myself shall see: my own eyes, not another’s
shall behold him, and from my flesh I shall see God” (Job 19:25-26).
This term is also employed by Second Isaiah (Isa 40–55), the anony-
mous prophet who spoke a word of hope to those who had been exiled
to Babylonia. In language that evoked the saving action of God in
the exodus, the prophet assured these suffering people that God was
about to act in a new way to liberate them and bring them home. He
promised them that God would be their go’el, their redeemer: “Break
out together in song, O ruins of Jerusalem! For the LORD comforts
his people, he redeems Jerusalem” (Isa 52:9). This naming of God as
the go’el of Israel meant that God had established a relationship of
closest kinship with the people. They were family to God and God
had assumed responsibility for their well-being.

Eventually the terms ga’al/go’el and padah came to be employed
interchangeably in the Hebrew Scriptures. For example, both words
can be found in Psalm 78, which is a lengthy hymn of praise that
celebrates God’s saving deeds from the exodus up to the reign of
King David.

The Experience and Tradition of the Exodus

Our brief consideration of Hebrew terminology for salvation
shows that the memory of liberation from slavery in Egypt was cen-
tral to Israel’s conception of God and God’s saving activity. The very
existence of Israel—the covenant community—was dependent on
God’s gracious action of setting free a group of slaves living under
grinding oppression. The Song of Miriam—appended to the Song of the Sea mentioned above—is one of the most ancient extant expressions of Hebrew poetry. In this refrain, Miriam (the sister of Moses) is depicted as dancing and proclaiming what God has done in liberating the people God has chosen:

Sing to the LORD, for he is gloriously triumphant; horse and chariot he has cast into the sea. (Exod 15:21)

The memory of this foundational event became ingrained in the minds and hearts of the people of ancient Israel as it was commemorated each year in the celebration of Passover. K. A. Kitchen comments on the ways in which the memory of this event shaped the thinking of Israel: it provided the basic historical reason why Israel should accept and obey God’s covenant, since God had acted as their deliverer from slavery in accord with the ancient promise; it was the motivating reason for Israel’s proper treatment of one another and of strangers; it manifested the sovereignty of the God of Israel; and it was used as an initial dateline for the history of the people. The exodus also revealed the corporate nature of salvation: it was the whole people of Israel who were saved by the liberating God. Salvation is not an individualistic affair. “Within the biblical tradition, few other events enjoyed anything like the prominence accorded so pervasively in the work of so many writers, or were deemed of such basic importance for Israel’s history.”

Scholars debate issues related to the historicity of the exodus event. There is an absence of extrabiblical sources documenting Israel’s oppression in Egypt and its migration to Canaan. There is evidence, however, of Egypt exploiting the forced labor of foreign captives and of the presence of Semites at the Egyptian court. There is also archaeological evidence of a rapid rise in the population of Palestine and the Transjordan between 1250 and 1150 BCE. Some scholars argue that it is not so strange that Egypt would have failed to record this event. It would not have kept a chronicle of what would have been considered a minor military mishap. Most scholars suggest that the escape of the slaves from Egypt was an event on a smaller scale than that which is depicted in book of Exodus. Though the historicity of the exodus event cannot be proved from historical records, the available external evidence and the enduring nature
of the exodus tradition suggest an event that actually took place. Nahum Sarna asks why Israel would have preserved an embarrassing tradition about slavery if it did not have historical roots. He wonders how such a tradition would have left such an indelible mark on the national consciousness if it was pure fiction. And he asks what other cohesive force could have united heterogeneous groups into a nation. Bernhard Anderson concludes, “Undoubtedly, the story of the Event at the Sea is not pure fiction; it rests upon something that actually happened, something that aroused ecstatic jubilation and became the undying memory of the people.” Anderson adds, however, that it is not possible to penetrate beyond the faith language of the biblical account to ascertain the historical details of this event.

The exodus tradition profoundly shaped Israel’s perception of the character of God. In the extended speech of God in Exodus 6:2-8, there is a seminal self-disclosure in which God identifies God’s self as the One who had entered into covenant with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. Witnessing the plight of the people, God remembers the covenant and promises to act on behalf of this oppressed people: “And now that I have heard the groaning of the Israelites, whom the Egyptians are treating as slaves, I am mindful of my covenant. Therefore, say to the Israelites: I am the LORD. I will free you from the forced labor of the Egyptians and will deliver you from their slavery. I will rescue you by my outstretched arm and with mighty acts of judgment. I will take you as my own people, and you will have me as your God” (Exod 6:5-6). Thus, to Moses is revealed the God of compassion, the One who is faithful to the divine promises. In commenting on this passage, Walter Brueggemann says, “As much as any text in the Exodus tradition, this one invites reflection upon the character of the God of Israel.” The character of God disclosed in this text, and in the primal event of the exodus, “is to make relationships, bring emancipation, and establish covenants.”

The memory of the exodus also formed the basis for the ethical life of ancient Israel. As God had acted toward the people, so were they to behave toward one another and toward the foreigners in their midst. The experience of salvation from God was not something to be merely received; it had to be actualized in human conduct in order to be effective. This is made clear in the code of laws that is part of the Sinai covenant tradition: “You shall not molest or oppress an alien,
for you were once aliens yourselves in the land of Egypt. You shall not wrong any widow or orphan. If you ever wrong them and they cry out to me, I will surely hear their cry” (Exod 22:20-22). The liberating God who had restored the dignity of an enslaved people commanded these people to act in liberating ways in their relations with others. In particular, they were to demonstrate compassion toward the poor and vulnerable of society:

If you lend money to one of your poor neighbors among my people, you shall not act like an extortioner toward him by demanding interest from him. If you take your neighbor’s cloak as a pledge, you shall return it to him before sunset; for this cloak of his is the only covering he has for his body. What else has he to sleep in? If he cries out to me, I will hear him; for I am compassionate. (Exod 22:24-26)

Brueggemann observes that the commandments relating to treatment of one’s neighbor in the book of Exodus “have their warrant, impetus, and urgency in the character of this particular God. . . . Thus it is important to ‘get it right’ about Yahweh, in order to ‘get it right’ about neighbor.” The Hebrew Scriptures teach us that a people’s image of God indelibly marks their understanding of proper conduct in interpersonal and social relations. In the case of Israel, the living memory of the exodus served as an impetus to compassion and to a justice characterized by abiding concern for the weakest of society.

The enduring memory of God’s saving action at the exodus also served as a catalyst for the hope of Israel at later times of crisis. To the exiles in Babylon, Second Isaiah speaks a word of hope that draws on this tradition. Through his instrument Cyrus, God will again act to set God’s people free. In his portrayal of this new deed of God, the prophet draws freely on the exodus and wilderness traditions: the flight from Egypt, the deliverance at the sea, the march through the wilderness, and the journey toward the Promised Land. He blends this exodus language with imagery drawn from creation myths, so that the “new exodus” represents a new creative act of God. God’s redemption of the exiles is, in this prophet’s mind, a new act of creation. The waters of the sea that Israel traversed represent the waters of chaos, over which God is victorious.
Awake, awake, put on strength,
   O arm of the LORD!
Awake as in the days of old,
   in ages long ago!
Was it not you who crushed Rahab,
   you who pierced the dragon?
Was it not you who dried up the sea,
   the waters of the great deep,
Who made the depths of the sea into a way
   for the redeemed to pass over?
Those whom the LORD has ransomed will return
   and enter Zion signing,
crowned with everlasting joy. [Isa 51:9-11]

Anderson aptly summarizes the critical significance of the experience and tradition of the exodus for the faith of Israel: “The Exodus was regarded as the clue to who God is and how God acts to deliver the downtrodden and oppressed; more than that, it provided the model for how the people of God should seek justice in society as the appropriate response to the liberation they had experienced [Mic 6:1-8].” The saving God who had liberated the slaves of Egypt was present in the midst of God’s people, acting to liberate anew and calling the people to act in the same way toward one another. To live in communion with this redeeming God implied living in communion with one another.

**Covenant**

The tradition of God establishing a covenant (berith) with the people of Israel is interwoven with the narrative of the exodus. The biblical author tells us that when the Israelites arrived at the desert of Sinai, Moses ascended the mountain and encountered God. The text that follows pierces right to the heart of the faith of ancient Israel:

Moses went up the mountain to God. Then the LORD called to him and said, “Thus shall you say to the house of Jacob; tell the Israelites: You have seen for yourselves how I treated the Egyptians and how I bore you up on eagle wings and brought you here to myself. Therefore, if you hearken to my voice and keep my covenant, you shall be my special pos-
The rhythmic quality of this passage suggests that it existed as an ancient poetic piece before it was incorporated into the narrative of the book of Exodus. It may have been used for catechesis in the fundamentals of the faith of Israel, particularly because of its message about Israel having been specially called (elected) by God. The God who had liberated Israel from slavery in Egypt sought to enter into an enduring relationship with this people, making them God’s very own. God is depicted here as an eagle, mighty in power and tender in care so as to bear an oppressed people on his wings. This compelling image of the eagle “holds together majestic power and protective nurturing.” The universal and the particular are brought together in this passage: though all the earth belongs to God, Israel has been particularly chosen to belong to God. Israel’s “belongingness” to the holy God is the reason that it can be called a “holy nation.” It is a holy nation because it is God’s special possession.

There is, however, a resounding “if” in this proclamation about Israel’s relation to God: this people must hearken to God’s voice and keep the covenant. The future of Israel is conditioned upon its response to the God of liberation. The demands of this covenantal pact are spelled out beginning in chapter 20, with the Ten Commandments, or Ten “Words” (debarim), followed by a set of stipulations usually called the “Covenant Code.” Before enumerating the Ten Commandments, there is another reminder of God’s saving action in Exodus: “I, the LORD, am your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, that place of slavery” (20:2). Anderson observes that the gracious initiative of God evokes a response from the people, their liberation has placed them in a situation of decision, “summoned them to a task within the divine purpose.” They are to be faithful in their worship of the one God and just and compassionate in their relations with one another. As Brueggemann puts it, “While Yahweh’s
initial rescue is unconditional and without reservation, a sustained relation with Yahweh is one of rigorous demand for covenant. Indeed, the long Sinai text that follows is a statement of condition whereby this rescued people can be a community of ongoing covenant.”

The biblical concept of covenant was related to the establishment of political treaties in the ancient Near East. Fundamentally, a covenant is “an agreement between two parties in which one or both make promises under oath to perform or refrain from certain actions stipulated in advance.” Covenant agreements were integral to the social and political life of the ancient Near East. Parity covenants were bilateral agreements between equals characterized by reciprocity. Suzerainty, or vassal, covenants were pacts made between a superior and an inferior party. There is evidence of such agreements from Hittite sources of the late second millennium BCE. In these treaties, the superior ruler gives a covenant and within that agreement the vassal—the head of a subordinate state—finds protection and security. These pacts usually highlight the benevolent deeds of the superior ruler on behalf of the vassal. The vassal is required to swear an oath of loyalty to the king and to assist him in a time of war. Witnesses to the covenant include the gods of both parties, though preference is given to those of the superior ruler.

The covenant between God and Israel was most definitely a pact between unequals. This is clear in the exodus narratives, where the covenant is given and ratified in the context of a theophany. The utter holiness of God is signified in thunder and lightning. Careful instructions about who can and cannot draw near to God are given. God freely and graciously initiates the covenant with the people God has liberated; the only fitting response is one of gratitude for God’s benevolence toward them. Obviously, the witnesses to this pact are not other gods, since YHWH does not recognize any other deities. The people are the witnesses to the covenant, placing their future on the line in their response to it.

The people’s response to the initiative of God expressed above (Exod 19:8) is further illustrated in the ratification ceremony narrated in Exodus 24. Biblical scholars conclude that two versions of this story have been woven together. In the first, the ratification of the covenant is enacted by specially chosen representatives of the people—Moses, Aaron and his two eldest sons, and seventy elders. These leaders ratify
the covenant through a sacred meal that is celebrated at the top of the mountain where they have been privileged to gaze upon God (24:1-2; 9-11). This account of the event does not set conditions for the covenant. In another version (24:3-8), the whole assembly of Israel takes part in the ceremony at the foot of the mountain. In this account, the conditions of the covenant are implied and the people again express their assent to its demands: “We will do everything that the Lord has told us” (23:3b). The covenant ratification culminates in the sacrifice of young bulls, given as peace offerings to God. Moses sprinkles half of the blood from these sacrificed bulls on the altar and the other half on the people, naming it “the blood of the covenant” (24:8). Some scholars assert that the symbolic act of sprinkling the blood on the people points to the expected fate of the people if they are unfaithful to the covenant.27 Bernhard Anderson, on the other hand, suggests that this blood ritual reflects “the ancient belief that sacrificial blood has the sacramental power to bring together two parties in covenant.”28

The two versions of the covenant ratification in Exodus 24 reflect two conceptions of the covenant relationship between God and Israel that stand in tension within the Hebrew Scriptures. The tradition that comes to be linked with Moses and Sinai includes conditions for the permanence of the relationship. In order for the covenant relationship to continue, the people must be faithful to the covenant demands given by God, who is always faithful. Infidelity leads to a breaking of the covenant. The other tradition speaks of an “everlasting covenant” (berith olam) that can never be broken. It is reflected in the covenants with Noah (Gen 9:1-17), Abraham (Gen 17:7-8), and David (2 Sam 7:8-17). In the story of God’s promise to David, the prophet Nathan tells the king, “Your house and your kingdom shall endure forever before me; your throne shall stand firm forever.” In fact, the Davidic dynasty was marked by tragedy, and it was not restored to rule after the exile in the sixth century BCE. Some later prophets will challenge the notion of an unconditional, everlasting covenant, drawing instead on the Mosaic tradition of a relationship conditioned by the response of the people. Leslie Hoppe comments on the coexistence of these two covenant traditions in the Scriptures of Israel: “The Scriptures preserve both the Mosaic and the Davidic covenants, and the two should be seen as complementary. The former emphasizes human responsibility and the latter divine constancy.”29
At the time of the exile, the prophet Jeremiah promised the gift of a “new covenant” between God and Israel (Jer 31:31-34). Here the prophet acknowledges that the people broke the covenant that God had made with them after their deliverance from Egypt. The new covenant will fulfill the original intention of the covenant that was established at Sinai. It will be different from the Mosaic covenant, however, because the law of God will be written on the hearts of the people. All of the people, from the most humble to the most sophisticated, will be blessed with an intimate knowledge of God. In a line that epitomizes covenant theology, God promises through Jeremiah: “I will be their God, and they shall be my people” (31:33). This covenant will be based on God’s forgiveness of the past infidelities of the people: “for I will forgive their evildoing and remember their sin no more” (31:34). The early Christian community will draw on this theme of the new covenant in speaking of what God has done for all humanity in and through Jesus Christ.

Covenant, a notion drawn from political and social relations in the ancient Near East, was the primary metaphor for expressing the relationship between Israel and God in the Hebrew Scriptures. The liberation of a group of people from the oppression of slavery was not the totality of God’s saving action; rather, this act of grace was only the beginning. God had formed a new people and called them to live in close relationship with him. The transcendent God, who could say “all the earth is mine,” had drawn near to a particular people, giving of Self to them in faithful, steadfast love (hesed). Salvation for Israel meant living in communion with the living God. As the Jewish philosopher Abraham Heschel put it, the foundation of the community of Israel was “coexistence with God.” This entailed observance of Torah, a requirement that was envisioned not as an onerous burden but as a blessing, a privilege. In acting as their redeemer, God engaged the freedom of the people whom God had called. There was a sense of mutuality about this relationship that encompassed divine and human freedom. When individuals or the people as a whole rejected this relationship—forfeited communion with God—they were as good as dead. Anderson aptly summarizes the significance of covenant for the Hebrew understanding of salvation:

Israel believed that the holy God who is “far off” (transcendent) is also “near” (immanent)—indeed, that God had taken
the initiative to enter into relationship with a people and thus to become, in a special sense, “the God of Israel.” The tradition testifies that Israel’s relation to Yahweh was not that of a slave who serves God by performing menial tasks, but that of a “first-born son” (Exod 4:22-23) who has been graciously redeemed and given an inheritance. Gratitude for divine liberation was the primary motive for Israel’s response of faith. And that faith was expressed in obeying the laws of the covenant and in facing the future with confidence that Yahweh would be with, and go with, the people.34

Sacrifice

In the introductory chapter, I mentioned that the concept of sacrifice has been embedded in Christian soteriology through the centuries. In particular, the meaning of Jesus’ death on the cross has often been interpreted through sacrificial images and concepts. The Eucharist, as the memorial of Jesus’ death and resurrection, has also been understood as a sacrifice. Some contemporary thinkers, however, argue that this sacrificial imagery and terminology are no longer serviceable for Christian soteriology. We will see that feminist theologians are often critical of the language of sacrifice, especially because of the ways in which exhortations to imitate the self-sacrifice of Jesus have exacerbated the suffering of women living in oppressive situations. The well-known work of the literary critic and social anthropologist René Girard also includes a critique of the use of sacrificial imagery within Christian soteriology.35 Such an interpretation, Girard thinks, extols the mechanism of violence, particularly the dynamic of scapegoating, which he thinks lies at the foundation of culture and society. By taking out their aggression on social outsiders, human beings have found relief from the inherent conflict that arises from “mimetic desire”—the tendency to imitate others out of envy and rivalry. Human beings have a tendency to desire what they see other people desiring, and this leads to conflict. Girard thinks that the Hebrew and Christian Scriptures, especially the gospels, unmask this destructive dynamic in human society.36 They point to alternative, nonviolent ways of relating. Interpreting Jesus’ atoning work in the categories of sacrifice, then, is misleading.37

In order to address such critiques, it is important to examine the meaning of sacrifice in the Bible. Sacrifice was an essential dimension
of the religious practice of ancient Israel, as it was a feature of the religious practice of Israel’s neighbors in the Near East. It was a foundational expression of worship of God that became part of Israel’s covenant tradition. Sacrifice was a multivalent reality. There were a number of different kinds of sacrifice, and various explanations of its function existed. The first seven chapters of the book of Leviticus—part of the Priestly tradition of the Pentateuch—provide a description of the different forms of sacrifice believed to be prescribed by God. The holocaust (hola) was a whole burnt offering to God made as an expression of worship or as an atonement for the sins of the one offering the sacrifice. The cereal offering (minha) involved the gift of vegetal substances, a small part of which was burnt (with the addition of frankincense) and the rest given to the priest. This type of sacrifice was often made as an expression of thanksgiving to God and included a festive component. Very importantly, this was a sacrifice that did not involve the killing of any animal. The peace offering (sacrifice of well-being; zebah selamim) was the offering of an animal that was not completely burnt up but largely saved and eaten by those making the offering. This sacrifice was also marked by a spirit of celebration. The sin offering (hattat) was the offering of an animal made to atone for the violation of something sacred. Often such transgressions were inadvertent rather than intentional. Since the violation entailed the pollution of the sanctuary, purification needed to take place. This was done through the sprinkling of the animal’s blood around the sanctuary. Blood, understood as the life-force of a living being, was viewed as having purifying effects (Lev 17:11). The guilt offering (reparation offering; asam) was the sacrifice of an animal made to atone for a failure in something that should have been given or done. God or the covenant community had been cheated in some way, and so something “extra” had to be given by the offerer. This act involved a combination of sacrifice and a monetary payment.

Related to this system of sacrifices was the ritual of the annual Day of Atonement, carefully spelled out in Leviticus 16. This rite blended sacrifice and an “elimination ritual.” It was intended to purify the people and the land for unintentional and intentional sins and transgressions. This elaborate ritual included the sacrifice of a bull and a goat as a sin offering to atone for the sins of the priest and the entire Israelite community. Entering the sacred Holy of Holies
on this day alone, the priest sprinkled some of the blood from the bull on the golden cover (kapporet) of the ark of the covenant. Blood was also sprinkled on the altar of sacrifice and the other parts of the sanctuary for the purpose of purification and reconsecration: “Thus he [the priest] shall render it clean and holy, purged of the defilements of the Israelites” (Lev 16:19). After the sacrificial offerings, the priest placed his hands on another goat, confessed “the sinful faults and transgressions of the Israelites” (16:21), and sent the goat into the desert “to carry off their iniquities to an isolated region” (16:22). This “scapegoat” was not killed but “escaped” into an uninhabited region, taking the sins of Israel with him.

Christian Eberhart has carefully analyzed the practice and theology of sacrifice in ancient Israel and has offered some illuminating insights. Eberhart draws on the comprehensive Hebrew term for sacrifice, korban, derived from the Hebrew root “to bring near, to make approach.” Sacrifices help to bridge the gap between God and humanity, between the sacred and the profane, allowing human beings to enter into the presence of God. The dynamics of the sacrificial process entail “a gradual movement toward and through sacred space and an approach to God.” Eberhart emphasizes that, as we have seen, not all sacrificial rituals entail killing. Thus, he disputes the claim that sacrifice is essentially an act of violence. He observes, “This means that ritualized killing is not the purpose of cultic sacrifices in the Hebrew Bible, and killing alone does not qualify a given set of activities as a sacrifice.” Sacrifices that make atonement for sins and transgressions are means given by God for the removing of the pollution of sin (expiation). They are not a human means of appeasing an angry God. Eberhart argues against the view that sacrifices involve existential substitution—the punishment of the animal instead of the guilty person making the offering. He concludes that ritual sacrifices are ways of honoring God and establishing a lasting relationship between humans and God. Bernhard Anderson draws similar conclusions in his discussion of sacrifice in the Hebrew Scriptures; he thinks that sacrifice is all about restoring communion with God:

In Priestly tradition, sacrifice was not understood as a means of appeasing the divine wrath or of cajoling God to show favors. Rather, the sacrifices described in Leviticus 1–7 are
means of atonement, that is, of healing the breach of the covenant relationship and reuniting the people in communion with God. It was believed that sacrifice was efficacious in restoring broken relationship, not because there was something magical in the power of blood which contains the potency of life, but because God had provided the means of grace by which guilt was pardoned and the people could live in the presence of the holy God (see the key text in Lev 17:11).

Visions of Salvation

The main focus of Hebrew thinking with regard to the nature of salvation is centered on this-worldly flourishing. God’s saving action on behalf of Israel is closely linked with possession of the land. The land is perceived as a special divine gift to God’s elect people. Salvation means living a long life in the land and bequeathing prosperity to one’s children and grandchildren. The laws regulating social relations in the Torah are meant to create the conditions for the flourishing of the community in the land. We have already seen the way in which the demand to protect the widow and orphan—symbolizing the most vulnerable members of society—was rooted in the memory of what God had done for the people in the exodus. The land itself was also the object of protection through the institution of Sabbath rest, where the land was left fallow every seventh year (Lev 25:1-7). John Collins points out that in the Hebrew Scriptures we find “a clear insistence that the welfare of society is of the essence of salvation.” Even after the exile, the vision of “the new heavens and the new earth” given in Third Isaiah is one that focuses on fullness of life in this world where there is freedom from oppression and all people are able to flourish:

*I will rejoice in Jerusalem
and exult in my people.*

*No longer shall the sound of weeping be heard there,*
*or the sound of crying.*

*No longer shall there be in it*
*an infant who lives but a few days,*
*or an old man who does not round out*
*his full lifetime;*

*He dies a mere youth who reaches but a hundred years,*
and he who fails of a hundred shall be thought accursed.
They shall live in the houses they build,
and eat the fruit of the vineyards they plant;
They shall not build houses for others to live in,
or plant for others to eat. (Isa 65:19-22)

At the same time, the Hebrew Scriptures also attest to spiritual dimensions of salvation. Salvation also refers to deliverance from guilt and sin. This is found especially in the literature of the prophets, for whom earthly prosperity means nothing if built on a foundation of social injustice and oppression. Amos, prophesying just before the northern kingdom of Israel was destroyed by Assyria (eighth century BCE), denounces the powerful of his day because “they trample the heads of the weak into the dust of the earth, and force the lowly out of the way” (2:7). Social justice is an essential condition for experiencing God’s salvation. We saw above that Jeremiah speaks of a new covenant, where God’s law will be written on the hearts of the people and they will be renewed in their relationship with God. Ezekiel proclaims that the renewed Israel will be saved from uncleanness and apostasy: “I will deliver them from all their sins of apostasy, and cleanse them so that they may be my people and I may be their God” (37:23). These prophetic visions of salvation imply God’s creation of a people who have been spiritually renewed in their covenant relationship with God and one another.

There are countless references to God’s saving action in the psalms. In these individual and communal prayers, salvation is no abstract theological notion; rather God’s saving presence is acknowledged and desperately sought in very concrete ways. “Communal and individual laments, psalms of confidence, and psalms of thanksgiving are replete with cries for help, reminders of past deliverance and divine promises for the future, and gratitude for rescue realized.” The psalms of lament are especially compelling expressions of pleading for God’s saving presence in times of hardship or crisis. Starkly honest in their expression of pain and sorrow, these prayers are also imbued with a stubborn confidence that God will listen and act to save. In
a time of illness, the psalmist cries out, “How long, LORD? Will you utterly forget me? How long will you hide your face from me?” For ancient Israel, the hiding of God’s face—God’s turning away from the people—meant utter disaster. Further along in this same prayer, however, the psalmist confesses his deep trust in God’s fidelity: “I trust in your faithfulness. Grant my heart joy in your help” (Ps 13:2, 6). God was so utterly real to the Hebrew people—so much a vital part of their lives—they knew they could, and even should, bring everything to God in prayer. And that was precisely the way that God remained such a vital force in their lives. Trust in the God of salvation was a belief that was eminently personal for ancient Israel.

The memory of God’s saving, liberating actions in the past eventually led to the formulation of visions of future salvation. These passages envision God acting in a definitive way to fulfill the deepest hopes of God’s people. Sometimes, this salvation has a universal scope that extends beyond the salvation of Israel alone. For Second Isaiah (Isa 40–55), Israel is an instrument through which God’s salvation will reach out to all the nations. God will reveal God’s self to all people through Israel, and they will respond in obedience (e.g., Isa 45:18-25). The eschatological age of redemption would be characterized by: the return of exiles to the land of Israel, bountiful harvests, secure dwelling in the land, the rule of a just and pious leader, the reconstitution of worship and priesthood in a restored temple, and faithful adherence to the Torah by all.

In some later books of the Old Testament, there is articulated the hope that God will save the individual in death. The experience of suffering and even martyrdom for the faith, as attested in the Second Book of Maccabees, Daniel, and Wisdom, led to reflection on hope beyond death (see 2 Macc 7; Dan 12:1-3; Wis 3:1-3). In the story of the mother and her seven sons who are tortured and executed during the rule of Antiochus IV Epiphanes, the second son defiantly exclaims to his torturer: “You accursed fiend, you are depriving us of this present life, but the King of the world will raise us up to live again forever. It is for his laws that we are dying” (2 Macc 7:9). The question had to arise: Is God’s creative and saving power limited to life in this world? Does death negate this divine power? There are passages that attest to the hope that it is not so limited, that one’s relationship with God is not severed with death. Collins observes that “the apocalyptic hope
Agents of Salvation

Though for Israel it is always God who is the ultimate savior, certain figures do emerge who serve as agents, or instruments, of God’s salvific activity. The most famous of these is the messiah, or “anointed one” (mashiach). In the broad sense of the term, “messiah” could be used to refer to any expected agent of God’s definitive salvation. In its more precise meaning, however, the term “messiah” designated the anointed king of the Davidic dynasty who would establish the enduring reign of YHWH in the world. We have already taken note of the Davidic covenant theology reflected in 2 Samuel 7 and in other passages like Psalm 89. Messianic expectation underwent a lengthy development in ancient Israel, beginning with the hope for a king who, in the near future, would rule the nation in the way that David had governed. The ideal reign of this Davidic ruler is hymned in the so-called royal psalms (e.g., Pss 2; 18; 20; 21; 72; 89; 101; 110; 132; 144). In Psalm 72, the psalmist prays that God will endow the king with wise judgment so that he may govern with justice. In particular, this ruler is envisioned as one who will “defend the oppressed among the people, save the poor and crush the oppressor” (Ps 72:4). As disillusionment with the actual experience of kingship grew, some of the prophets held on to the promise of a future ruler who would be worthy of the Davidic name. Near the end of the eighth century BCE, Isaiah promises the gift of an heir who will be a sign that God is still with God’s people in the person of the Davidic king (Isa 7:14). At the time of the Babylonian invasion, Jeremiah excoriates the corrupt leaders who “mislead and scatter the flock of [God’s] pasture” (Jer 23:1). He promises that God will “raise up a righteous shoot to David” who will “reign and govern wisely” (Jer 23:5). During the rule of this ideal leader, “Judah shall be saved and Israel shall dwell in security” (Jer 23:6). After the return from exile, this messianic hope is expressed in less definite terms. Since there were no successors in the line of David, the hope for a leader who would establish the definitive reign of God became a more idealized, messianic hope. This messianic hope is articulated in some passages in Jewish intertestamental literature (texts...
authored between 200 BCE and 200 CE). For example, the Psalms of Solomon [written in the middle of the first century BCE] express an ardent desire for a Davidic king: “Behold, O Lord, and raise up unto them their king, the son of David, at the time you have (fore)seen, O God, to rule over Israel your servant” (17:21). During the just rule of this pious king, Israel will be freed from its enemies and wickedness will be banished from the country. By the time of Jesus, the hope for a Davidic messiah represented one of the eschatological trajectories in the tradition of Israel, though it was not the only one and it was not prominent in the minds of all of the contemporaries of Jesus.

The mysterious figure of the servant of YHWH was also part of the eschatological imagination of Israel (Isa 42:1-9; 49:1-6; 50:4-11; 52:13–53:12). As the time of the exile was drawing to a close, Second Isaiah envisioned a specially chosen representative whose experience and destiny were to be emblematic of Israel. Whether this servant represents the nation of Israel as a whole, an individual within the nation, or both, is a matter of scholarly debate. This servant will not only lead the people to return to their God (Isa 49:5) but also be a “light to the nations,” enabling God’s salvation to reach to the ends of the earth (49:6). In the Fourth Servant Song (Isa 52:13–53:12), the servant is depicted as one who suffers on behalf of the people. The prophet extols the vicarious and expiatory nature of the servant’s sufferings:

Yet it was our infirmities that he bore,
our sufferings that he endured,
While we thought of him as stricken,
as one smitten by God and afflicted.
But he was pierced for our offenses,
crushed for our sins,
Upon him was the chastisement that
makes us whole,
by his stripes we were healed. (53:4-5)

Daniel Harrington observes that in the background of this theology is the logic of sacrifice as a means of atoning for sin and renewing the relationship with God. At a time in which the Jerusalem temple had been destroyed and the temple sacrifices were no more, Second Isaiah conceived of the suffering of God’s servant as making possible
The Saving God of Israel

The restoration of right relationship with God. The servant performs a singular service on behalf of the people and is given “his portion among the great” (53:12). The Fourth Servant Song influenced early Christian reflection on the person and saving work of Jesus. The important saying of Jesus in Mark 10:45 draws from it: “For the Son of Man did not come to be served but to serve and to give his life as a ransom for many.” In the story of Philip and the Ethiopian eunuch found in Acts 8, Philip proclaims the fulfillment of this text in the person of Jesus, leading to the eunuch’s request for baptism. Commenting on this passage, Richard Clifford says, “One can infer from the eunuch’s request for baptism that the text was very important in early Christian instruction, providing a way of understanding the death and resurrection of Jesus.”

There were other figures that were part of Israel’s hope for definitive salvation from God. The book of Deuteronomy preserves the promise that God will raise up from among the people a prophet who will be like Moses. This prophet will receive the word of God and instruct the people in all that God commands (Deut 18:15-18). The scrolls of the priestly, sectarian community at Qumran appear to reflect the hope for two, or even three, agents of divine salvation. These writings express the hope for a future prophet who may embody the qualities of the prophet-like-Moses of Deuteronomy 18 (1QS 9:11). Reference is also made to “the anointed one of Aaron” (a priestly figure) and “the anointed one of Israel” (a royal figure named in one text as “the Branch of David”) (4QFlor). The scrolls make it clear that the priestly messiah is the most important figure in the Qumran community’s eschatology. This community “looked forward to the times when the meaning of the Law would be fully clear and when God’s will would be obeyed completely.” While the Davidic messiah would take the lead in the cosmic battle against the forces of evil, the future high priest would be the prominent agent in the establishment of God’s rule.

Biblical scholars stress that Christians need to be careful in the way they interpret these Jewish texts about future salvation, particularly those that refer to a messiah. Christians sometimes assume that the Jews of the first century had corrupted the true meaning of messianic salvation, turning the promise of a spiritual savior into hope for a secular, nationalistic messiah. They think that Jesus and
the disciples who handed on the story of Jesus revived the authentic understanding of the messiah. In mainline Jewish thought, however, the salvation mediated by the Davidic messiah was envisioned as occurring within human history, where the ideal rule of God would be established. And while the portrait of the servant of YHWH depicted in Second Isaiah is one of a suffering servant, “none of the messianic expectations of early Judaism inherited by the Church envisioned a messiah who would suffer and die a humiliating death.” McKenzie observes that “nationalistic coloring was never absent from any stage of pre-Christian development of messianic thought” and that the Christian conception of a spiritual messiah “represented a change rather than a restoration.” While Christians believe that their confession of Jesus as the Messiah is an authentic interpretation of the eschatology of the Hebrew Scriptures, this confession does entail a transformation of Jewish messianic hopes.

Conclusion

Psalm 136 is known as the “Great Hallel” and is sung on the morning of the Sabbath and for the feast of Passover. It is a postexilic psalm that is composed in the style of a litany, designed perhaps for antiphonal singing by a cantor and chorus. This prayer enumerates the creative and saving deeds of God, with each recitation followed by the refrain, “God’s love endures forever.” God’s creation of the heavens and the earth, God’s liberation of Israel from slavery, God’s leading of the people through the wilderness and into the land are all expressions of God’s hesed—steadfast love. Carroll Stuhlmueller points out that hesed is generally understood in the Hebrew Scriptures in terms of blood relationship, or at the very least, treaty alliance. The message of Psalm 136 is that “the history of the universe and of the people of Israel develops from a bond of ‘blood’ or kinship between Yahweh and his chosen nation.” The rhythmic repetition of the refrain reflects a conviction that lies at the heart of the faith of Israel: it is the faithful, enduring love of God that is the source of life and freedom. In a variety of historical contexts and through an array of literary expressions, the Hebrew Scriptures give witness to Israel’s belief that “God’s love endures forever.” The people of Israel experienced God as One who acts in history to give freedom and new
life to people living under oppression. As the psalmist expressed it, “The LORD remembered us in our misery” (Ps 136:23). Though all the earth belongs to this Creator God (Exod 19:5), God called a people to live in covenant relationship, to live as God’s “kin.” The God of steadfast love summoned the people of Israel to be steadfast in their fidelity to the covenant and to reflect the compassion they had experienced from God in their relations with one another. It was the God of gracious, liberating love who brought this people into existence and called them to live in communion with him and with one another.