

MISSION AS LIBERATION

1. APPROACHES TO SALVATION

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1. SALVATION IS CENTRAL IN MISSION

All religion offers salvation in some form. This is true even when people don't believe they need a saviour and think that humans are to work for their salvation. Each religion is a way of salvation. It meets the deep human need for transformation. It is transformation from the current world which contains evil and pain to a new world (whether physical or spiritual) in which things are good and rightly ordered and give great joy.

The Bible is no exception. The Hebrew Bible and the New Testament are centrally about the God of salvation. If you count how often the Hebrew and Greek words for 'save', 'salvation' and 'saviour' occur in the Bible, you will find about 440, which is amazing.

The Bible tells the story of Israel being saved by God in the Exodus and then being present to Israel as the saving God on many occasions later. It looks forward to the coming of the saving Messiah and then tells how Jesus fulfills the predictions. The New Testament is about the Good News of God's saving grace. Jesus is called the Saviour—the one who saves. The main message of Christianity is that God has brought about salvation open to all in and through Jesus Christ.

Not only is salvation central to the Bible. It determines our mission.¹ The scope of salvation determines the scope of our missionary activities. If we see salvation in vertical terms, that is, mainly about restoring our relationship with God, we will concentrate on evangelism, on the saving of 'souls'. If we see salvation mainly as the transformation of humans so that they experience full humanity here on earth, we will concentrate on programs that lead to social change, justice and dignity for all.

There's been a debate over the nature of salvation between two major Christian groups at the global level, known as the ecumenical movement and the evangelical movement.

The *ecumenical movement* consists of those churches and leaders who sit in ecumenical councils, such as the Myanmar Council of Churches, the Christian Conference of Asia or the World Council of Churches (WCC). The *evangelicals* are those who, because of their suspicions of liberalism in ecumenical circles, have kept separate, and have met at events such as the Lausanne Congress on World Evangelization in 1974, Lausanne II in Manila in 1989 and Lausanne III in Cape Town in 2010. (There are some who are part of both circles, of course.)

¹ C René Padilla, *Mission between the times: Essays on the kingdom* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1985), 62.

The differences are still strong, but the last forty years have seen a growth of the common ground between them. In particular evangelicals are acknowledging the importance of social responsibility either alongside or as part of evangelism; and there is a new recognition in the WCC of the importance of proclaiming Christ universally as Saviour and Lord. Let's look at these trends in more detail.

2. ECUMENICAL UNDERSTANDINGS OF SALVATION

a. The World Council of Churches

The doctrinal basis of the WCC is as follows:

[It is] a fellowship of churches which confess the Lord Jesus Christ as God and Saviour according to the scriptures, and therefore seek to fulfill together their common calling to the glory of the one God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit.²

b. The Ecumenical Ethos

Ecumenical Christianity is quite diverse, because all sorts of Christians meet together, from radicals to liberals to Eastern Orthodox Christians.

You can see some trends, though. The WCC is very attentive to the non-Western world, or the Majority World, or the Global South. It is careful to move beyond colonialism and the old ways of Western missionaries. It talks a lot about the poor and about justice. It's open to new theology, even though it is sometimes quite controversial.

3. EVANGELICAL UNDERSTANDINGS OF SALVATION

a. The Characteristics of Evangelicalism

Evangelicalism is a broad movement marked by

- a high view of the authority of scripture,
- a belief in the need for individual conversion and therefore
- an enthusiasm for evangelism,
- an emphasis on personal devotion and the feelings associated with the Christian life, and
- a set of doctrines considered essential, such as the substitutionary atonement, the virgin birth, the physical resurrection of Jesus Christ and the historical second-coming.

There are many varieties of evangelicalism.³ *Fundamentalism* affirms that God spoke the words of the Bible and that is without any error ('inerrant'). It fights a battle against all biblical criticism, evolution, equality for women and so on. It tends to withdraw from the world and live in opposition to it. *Radical*

² Tom F Stransky, 'World Council of Churches', in *Dictionary of the ecumenical movement*, eds. Nicholas Lossky et al. (Geneva: World Council of Churches, 1991), 1083-6.

³ See the brief summary in Arthur Glasser, 'Evangelical missions', in *Toward the 21st century in Christian mission*, eds. James M Phillips and Robert T Coote (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993), 11-12.

evangelicals, on the other hand, often allow a degree of biblical criticism, strongly affirm social action, are often pacifists, push for the equality of women, and are often active in ecumenical councils as an evangelical voice.⁴

Evangelical mission activities tend to

- major on the individual, rather than society;
- focus on spiritual salvation rather than general physical or emotional well-being; and
- dwell more on the eternal aspects of salvation than the temporal or this-worldly dimensions of it.

As David Bosch says, although many missionaries have rendered remarkable service in education, agriculture, relief for the poor and so on, these things have usually been regarded as secondary, in order to dispose people favourably to the gospel. A strict distinction has been maintained between the horizontal and external emphasis (charity, education, medicine) and the vertical and spiritual elements of the missionary agenda (preaching, conversion, sacraments, church attendance). And only the spiritual aspect is generally seen to have a bearing on salvation.⁵

b. Its Criticisms of the Ecumenical Movement

So, since the second world war, evangelicals have been critical of the tendency of ecumenical Christians to equate salvation with well-being or wholeness. Correctly, in my view, they attacked the ecumenical movement for moving away from its missionary roots in the Edinburgh Conference in 1910, and for being captured by a liberal theology which was not grounded in the authority of the scripture and was not sufficiently concerned for the billions of people who did not acknowledge Christ as the only Saviour.

c. The Lausanne Congress (1974)

In 1974 some 2500 evangelical leaders met in Lausanne in Switzerland for an International Congress of World Evangelization, called by Billy Graham, 'to frame a biblical declaration on evangelism'.⁶

Under the guidance of John Stott, Anglican pastor from London, the Lausanne Covenant (referred to in the literature as LC) was discussed and adopted.⁷ It was a major milestone for evangelicals, bringing a certain unity, and stating clearly in fifteen paragraphs their views on a variety of important issues.

The Lausanne Covenant affirmed that God is a missionary God (LC, #1). It affirmed the inspiration and infallibility of the Bible (#2). It affirmed the

⁴ See the good summary in Paul Merritt Bassett, 'Evangelicals', in *Dictionary of the ecumenical movement*, eds. Nicholas Lossky et al. (Geneva: World Council of Churches, 1991), 393-395.

⁵ David J Bosch, *Transforming mission: Paradigm shifts in theology of mission* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1991), 394-395.

⁶ Most Lausanne documents can be downloaded from www.lausanne.org.

⁷ Found in James A Scherer and Stephen B Bevans, eds. *New directions in mission and evangelization, 1: Basic statements, 1974-1991* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1992), 253-259.

uniqueness of Christ and his necessity for salvation (#3). It defined evangelism as the proclamation of the gospel with the invitation to respond in obedience (#4). And most importantly for our interest in the concept of salvation it came to a new affirmation of the social dimension of the gospel, saying: 'Evangelism and socio-political involvement are both part of our Christian duty.' (#5). But 'in the Church's mission of sacrificial service evangelism is primary' (#6).

4. BRIDGING THE GAP: EVANGELICALS AND A MORE HOLISTIC GOSPEL

The gap between evangelicals and the ecumenical movement was probably at its widest in the early 1970s. But there have been several developments which I find encouraging. I believe that despite some very real differences, there is increasing common ground between the two groups.

a. Following on from Lausanne

The Lausanne Congress had raised the issue of a simple lifestyle, and the importance of world poverty in Christian mission.

In 1982 a significant Lausanne consultation on the relationship between evangelism and social responsibility was held in Grand Rapids, USA. It had to decide between various alternatives on the relationship between social responsibility (SR) and evangelism:

- 1 Is SR a distraction from evangelism? They said No.
- 2 Is SR itself evangelism? They said No.
- 3 Is SR a consequence of, or partner to, evangelism? They said Yes.
- 4 Are SR and evangelism distinct but equal parts of mission? They said Yes.⁸

I find it interesting that my position is not amongst the four. I believe that because salvation is multi-dimensional, social responsibility and evangelism can't be separated. I believe that they are intertwined—and therefore not distinct—aspects of the church's mission. And I believe that salvation consists of both spiritual and material transformation which can't generally be extracted from each other. So I would have wanted a fifth position to choose from:

- 5 SR and evangelism are interpenetrating and intertwined aspects of the one task of mission.

Anyway, at Grand Rapids social activity was seen as a consequence of evangelism (new life manifests itself in service), as bridge to evangelism (gaining a hearing for the gospel), and as its partner.⁹ The first two were not saying much, but the third relationship was likened to the action of a pair of

⁸ James A Scherer, *Gospel, church and kingdom: Comparative studies in world mission theology* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1987), 183.

⁹ See extract from Grand Rapids Consultation Report in Scherer and Bevans, eds. *New directions*, 1, 276-280.

scissors, or the two wings of a bird. The consultation report referred to Jesus both preaching and healing, hand in hand.

b. Lausanne II (Manila, 1989)

The second Lausanne Congress on World Evangelization (Lausanne II) was held in 1989 in Manila in the Philippines. Its manifesto affirmed the Lausanne Covenant (#1). But it also said that

the proclamation of God's kingdom of justice and peace demands the denunciation of all injustice and oppression, both personal and structural; we will not shrink from this prophetic witness (#9).

And it sounded a holistic note when it said that God is calling the whole church to take the whole gospel to the whole world (#21).¹⁰

c. Lausanne III (Cape Town, South Africa, 2010)

The other large world grouping of evangelicals is the World Evangelical Alliance. Lausanne and the WEA held a joint conference in 2010 in Cape Town.

While different perspectives are held together in the long 'Cape Town Commitment' that emerged from the conference, the classic Lausanne position came through, holding somehow to both the primacy of evangelism and the holistic (or integral) nature of mission. It affirms the statement from the Micah Declaration that says, 'Integral mission is the proclamation and demonstration of the gospel.'¹¹

d. Church Mission Society's Five Marks of Global Mission

Many evangelical groups are now embracing a holistic view of mission. One example is the Church Mission Society (CMS) in the UK. It has adopted a list of five marks of global mission proposed by the world Anglican communion, and in 2008 published a book on the five marks, *Mission in the 21st Century*.¹² The marks are:

1. To proclaim the Good News of the kingdom
2. To teach, baptise and nurture new believers
3. To respond to human need by loving service
4. To seek to transform unjust structures of society
5. To strive to safeguard the integrity of creation and sustain and renew the life of the earth

¹⁰ Manila manifesto, Scherer & Bevans, *New directions*, 292-305. cf. the title of Alan Nichols' report of Manila: *The whole gospel for the whole world* (Ventura, Ca.: Regal, 1989).

¹¹ Micah Network, 'Micah declaration on integral mission', http://www.micahnetwork.org/sites/default/files/doc/page/mn_integral_mission_declaration_en.pdf, 2001, Date of material 27 September 2001, Accessed 8-10-12, cited in Third Lausanne Congress on Evangelization, 'The Cape Town Commitment: A confession of faith and a call to action [Lausanne Congress, Cape Town, South Africa, 16-25 October 2010]', *International Bulletin of Missionary Research* 35.2 (April 2011): Pt 1, #10.b, p. 67.

¹² Andrew F Walls and Cathy Ross, eds. *Mission in the 21st century: Exploring the five marks of global mission* (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 2008).

Summarising the trends amongst evangelicals, then:

Their views of salvation have broadened significantly since the early 70s, through Lausanne and the following conferences. While there are real differences, and conservatives are still suspicious of the 'social gospel', the statements coming out of the Lausanne Movement are not very different from many that have come out from the WCC gatherings. Evangelism is still distinguished from social action, but the gospel is being related more and more to a holistic kingdom theology, with social dimensions to it.¹³

5. BRIDGING THE GAP: A RENEWED ECUMENICAL CONCERN FOR EVANGELISM

The ecumenical movement has been justly criticised for its focus on social and political liberation at the expense of evangelism. Sometimes it has lost confidence in the truth of the gospel in a climate of relativism. It has a strong awareness of poverty, oppression and the need for the gospel to find its context and practice amongst the poor and marginalised.

A significant document on the ecumenical understanding of mission came out in the early 1980s. It was issued in booklet form with a study guide as *Mission and evangelism: An ecumenical affirmation*.¹⁴

The Ecumenical Affirmation (referred to in the literature as ME) is remarkable for its clarity, for the passion and urgency it has for world evangelisation, and for the balance it maintains between various emphases. It has carried a lot of weight in the ecumenical movement and represents a renewed sense of the importance of proclamation.

It begins by saying:

The Church is sent into the world to call people and nations to repentance, to announce forgiveness of sin and a new beginning in relations with God and with neighbours through Jesus Christ. This evangelistic calling has a new urgency today.

In a world where the number of people who have no opportunity to know the story of Jesus is growing steadily, *how necessary it is to multiply the witnessing vocation of the church!*

¹³ On this topic, see two very good books: Ronald J Sider, *One-sided Christianity? Uniting the church to heal a lost and broken world* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1993); Timothy Chester, *Awakening to a world of need: The recovery of evangelical social concern* (Leicester, UK: Inter-Varsity Press, 1993).

¹⁴ Jean Stromberg, ed. *Mission and evangelism: An ecumenical affirmation* (New York: National Council of the Churches of Christ in the USA (NCCC), 1982). Also found in Scherer and Bevans, eds. *New directions*, 1, 36-51, and summarised in Scherer, *Gospel, church and kingdom*, 145-152; and in *International Review of Mission* 71 (1982): 427-451.

In a world where the majority of those who do not know Jesus are the poor of the earth, those to whom he promised the kingdom of God, *how essential it is to share with them the Good News of that kingdom!*¹⁵

Later it sets out the relationship between evangelism and social action in very clear terms:

There is no evangelism without solidarity; there is no Christian solidarity that does not involve sharing the knowledge of the kingdom which is God's promise to the poor of the earth. ... The 'spiritual gospel' and the 'material gospel' were in Jesus one gospel. (#33, 34)¹⁶

While there have been several Conferences on World Mission and Evangelism (CWME) since—in San Antonio, Texas, in 1989; Salvador, Brazil, in 1996; and Athens, Greece, in May 2005—the WCC has not issued any considered statements on mission and salvation since this document in 1982.

[I haven't had time to discuss Roman Catholic views of mission. But the same convergence that is happening between evangelicals on the one hand and the Protestant and Orthodox ecumenical councils on the other is also happening in Catholic thinking.¹⁷]

Question:

In Myanmar do the evangelical churches take part in ecumenical events or join organisations such as the Myanmar Council of Churches? Where does MIT sit?

6. SALVATION: THE WORD IN THE BIBLE

The most common Hebrew word translated 'salvation' is *yasha*. From the same root comes a family of words which refer to deliverance. It's from this root that we get the words Joshua and Jesus, meaning 'saviour', or 'deliverer'.

The first occurrence in the Hebrew Bible is in Exodus 14, where Moses tells the Israelites to stand firm as they are trapped on the edge of the Red Sea and Pharaoh's chariots are approaching. 'You will see the deliverance the Lord will bring you today.' (Ex 14:13). And later, in v. 30, 'That day the Lord saved Israel from the hands of the Egyptians'. This rescue from Egypt shaped the whole Jewish understanding of salvation.

The basic meaning of *yasha* is 'bringing into a spacious, uncramped environment', or 'being at ease, free to develop without hindrance', or again, 'liberating from what is narrow and oppressive'.¹⁸

¹⁵ Stromberg, ed. *Mission and evangelism*, 1 (italics in the original).

¹⁶ Stromberg, ed. *Mission and evangelism*, 58.

¹⁷ This can be tracked in Scherer and Bevans, eds. *New directions*, 1, 91-200, and Scherer, *Gospel, church and kingdom*, 196-232.

¹⁸ Roger Dowley, *Towards the recovery of a lost bequest: A layman's work-notes on the biblical pattern for a just community* (London: Evangelical Coalition for Urban Mission, n.d.), #6a. See also Alan Richardson, 'Salvation', in *Interpreter's dictionary of the Bible*, ed. George Arthur Buttrick (Nashville: Abingdon, 1962), 4: 169.

We can see this meaning coming through in Psalm 31:8:

You have not handed me over to the enemy
but have set my feet in a spacious space. (see also Ps 18:19)

So salvation is positive, concrete rather than abstract, and multi-dimensional. It is salvation into release, freedom, well-being and wholeness.

Salvation in the Hebrew Bible is variously salvation from

- trouble (Ps 34:6, Is 33:2, Jer 14:8)
- violence (2 Sam 22:3, Ps 59:2)
- reproach or contempt (Ps 57:3)
- oppression (Ps 107:13-14)
- overwhelming anguish (Ps 69:1)
- sickness (Is 38:20)
- social injustice (Ps 22:21, 7:1-5).

Salvation in the Hebrew Bible had a strong earthly application. It was salvation amidst human situations—from injustice and from oppression. Israel was community oriented, and salvation was a social matter. God's temporal saving activity (happening here in time and history) and God's eschatological saving activity (happening in the cosmic end times) were not really separated in the eyes of the Israelites.¹⁹

In the New Testament the Greek word translated 'salvation' is *soteria*, and the word for 'to save' is *sozein*. When someone is 'saved' in the Gospels, about a third of the time it means 'healed', that is 'saved from a disease'. The overlap between historical saving acts and eternal salvation at the end of time continues in the New Testament, this time centred on the person of Jesus. Paul spells out a scheme where salvation has begun but is not yet completed (2 Cor 5:5).

7. SHALOM

Shalom is one Hebrew Bible word which conveys some of the richness of salvation. We translate it as peace, and then tend to see it as inner peace. This is based on Isaiah 26:3, which says:

Those of steadfast mind you keep in peace— in peace because they trust in you.

It is from this verse that we get the beautiful old chorus (even though the language is now old-fashioned):

Thou wilt keep him in perfect peace (x3)
Whose mind is stayed on thee.

We tend to think of this as inner peace, or feeling calm or serene. But if we look at this chapter we find talk of the total well-being of Jerusalem, including security (strong walls), salvation, justice for the oppressed and poor, walking in the way of God,

¹⁹ Richardson, 'Salvation', 170.

righteousness, and, centrally, salvation and shalom as gifts from God encompassing many dimensions of life.

Shalom involves both spiritual and material wellbeing, health, welfare, security, tranquility. Whether for the individual or society, shalom is the harmonious co-operation of all human forces towards living rightly under God.²⁰ The word comes from a root meaning 'whole' or 'sound'. It is a dynamic entity, rather than static; it is social rather than individual.²¹

8. LIBERATION

Liberation is another Hebrew Bible word which contains much of what is meant by salvation.

The Hebrew word for liberation or liberty, *deror*, occurs only seven times, always in reference to the Jubilee year, the Year of Restoration or Year of Liberation.

Now the Jubilee was the law that every fifty years land was to be returned to its original owner, and slaves were to be freed. It was a structural way of keeping land ownership equalised, and it made the theological point that the land is God's and we are simply stewards of it (Lev 25:23). It was tied to religious celebration too. The word 'jubilee' comes from *yobal*, the word for ram's horn or loud trumpet, because it was announced with trumpets or loud shouting, and announced liberty to slaves and the restoration of land to the poor. What an inspiring picture of salvation—trumpets declaring freedom!

Six times the word *deror* occurs in relation to the year of Jubilee (Lev 25:20, Jer 34 x4, Ez 46:17). The seventh time is Isaiah 61:1, where this rare word echoes the Jubilee theme. It is a messianic proclamation that the Chosen One will bring good news to the poor, heal the broken-hearted and announce liberty (or liberation) to those in prison. The time has come when the Lord will save his people.

Jubilee is intimately linked to salvation. Mortimer Arias, in an excellent journal article on the meaning of the Jubilee, concludes that 'Liberation is the key word for Jesus' message and mission'.²² I agree with this, as long as we remember that mission is all about a total liberation—historical and eternal, material and spiritual. A total release from concrete oppression and from sin.

The other huge stream of Israelite thought which converges with the Jubilee theme is that of the Exodus. A lot of work has been done recently, particularly by liberation theologians, on how the liberation of the Hebrew slaves in Egypt was central to the identity of Israel.

²⁰ Dowley, *Towards the recovery of a lost bequest*, #7e; Perry Yoder, *Shalom: The Bible's word for salvation, justice and peace* (London: Spire, 1989), 10-16.

²¹ Quoted in Dowley, *Towards the recovery of a lost bequest*, #7d.

²² Mortimer Arias, 'The Jubilee: A paradigm for mission today', *International Review of Mission* 73 (1984): 38.

9. THE REIGN OF GOD

The third central biblical image I'd like to mention is that of the kingdom of God, or, more accurately, the kingly reign of God, or the kingly rule of God. I correct the usual expression because some people think of the kingdom as a place or realm. It is a state of gracious divine rule extended to all who choose it, and a state of obedient and joyful living as a result of living the way of God, made possible through Jesus.

The kingdom of God is referred to a massive 149 times in the New Testament, mostly in Matthew (51) and Luke (49). We only get hints at its definition.

The reign of God is something that comes of itself — it is in advance of human activity. It can be spoken of as approaching, nearly upon us or having arrived. It is associated with notions of growth, as indicated in several parables. It is present as well as future. This reign is present in the activity of Jesus of Nazareth. It is hidden and will one day come in power. Those to whom it has come are obliged to serve it in obedience.²³

The reign of God is matched by similar pictures of those 'being saved', pictures of the body of Christ and the people of God. In all cases there is dynamic life, a growth implied, a working together, an interdependence, and a dependence on God who is the king or the head or the reason-for-peoplehood. Our life in community is a sign of the kingdom. Our experience of God here and now is a foretaste of eternal life.

Question:

You're sitting with a friend in a tea shop and they say, 'You're into saving the world, aren't you?'. You say, 'Well not really. But I do pray that God will save us all.' And they say, 'What would the world look like if we were all saved?'

What would you say?

10. HEAVEN AND HELL

If asked what salvation means, many ordinary people will say 'Heaven', or 'Being saved from hell.' If asked what heaven means, many will say 'Eternal life'. How can we understand these difficult concepts?

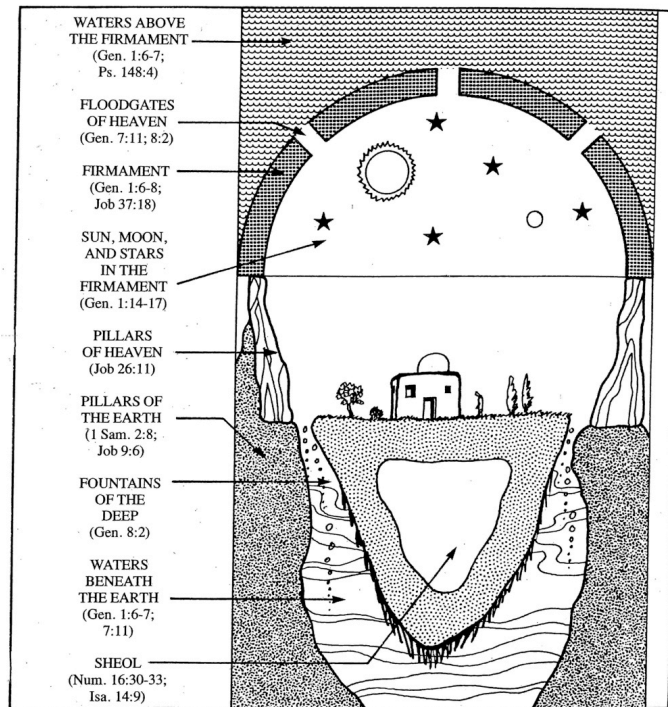
a. They Are Beyond Our Knowledge and Matters of Faith

These days we hear from time to time of near-death experiences, some of which claim to be post-death experiences from which people return. These have made scientists more open to the possibility of life after death. Many philosophers used to say that life after death doesn't make sense; if we don't have a body we can't have a life as a spirit. But more recently many philosophers have been exploring what it might mean to be an 'agent' (someone who does things) without a body. After all, our idea of God is as 'spirit' who is in some sense a person.

²³ Roy A Harrisville, 'In search of the meaning of "The reign of God"', *Interpretation* 47 (1993), 147, 150.

But still, strictly speaking, all talk of life after death, whether such life be heavenly or hellish, is speculation. I am agnostic on the question. That is, I believe that we cannot know what happens or how it happens. It is a matter of trust in the character of God.

b. We No Longer Believe the Cosmology That Gave Rise to Heaven and Hell As Places



The waters above the firmament and beneath the earth: the ancient conception of the world reflected in the Old Testament

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We don't think of the universe in the ancient Hebrew way any more. We don't accept Jesus' apocalyptic worldview, with its mistaken belief that the end was about to come amid great disasters literally any day soon.

So most of us don't believe heaven has streets of gold (Rev 21:2). In fact, most of us no longer think of heaven as a place.

Why should we feel obliged to think of hell as an eternal fire, full of gnashing of teeth, darkness and weeping, giving eternal torment to those who made a wrong choice in this life, or in some theologies, tormenting the billions who didn't even get to hear the gospel?

In the Hebrew Bible 'heaven' refers to the upper storey of the universe. It means 'up there', or perhaps the layer which separates the sky from the upper portion of the cosmic ocean (that's why we say 'the heavens opened').

²⁴ Allen C Myers, ed. *The Eerdmans Bible dictionary*, Rev. ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987), 1046. See also T H Gaster, 'Cosmogony', in *The Interpreter's dictionary of the Bible*, ed. George A Buttrick (Nashville: Abingdon, 1962), 1: 703.

In the Hebrew Bible there is no hell, just a vague assortment of ideas about Sheol, the place where the recently deceased spend some time, neither in glory nor in punishment, but in some form of sub-existence. It is only in late Judaism, just before Jesus' time, in the flush of apocalypticism, that the idea of hell as a place of torment, linking the ideas of Hades and Gehenna, developed. It died out in Judaism a century or two later and doesn't play a part now. Even the early fathers didn't give it much of a place.

c. Jesus Was Not a Hell-fire Preacher

Despite a few references to hell, which reflect the times and language of Jesus' time, Jesus was not interested in describing hell, revealing anything new about it, or preaching through fear. He concentrated on Good News, and used images of hell to make it clear that it was urgent and important to decide for God.

d. Hell Can Be Understood As a Chosen Exclusion from God

Hans Küng puts it well for me when he suggests that hell is not to be understood in mythical terms as a place in the lower world, but theologically as being excluded from the fellowship of the living God.

It can be described in many pictures but in the end we can't imagine it. It is the absolutely final possibility of distance from God. Yes, we may miss the meaning of life; we may shut ourselves out from God's fellowship.²⁵ New Testament references to hell are meant to bring vividly to us the absolute seriousness of God's claim and the urgency of conversion in the present life.²⁶

e. Heaven Can Be Understood As a Mode of Being 'in God'

In my understanding the heaven of faith is not a place; it is not a metaphysical realm in some real sense beyond the universe. It is a mode of being, the living space of God, that way of living in which eternal values are expressed and received in gift. This is why so many say that heaven can begin now.

Karl Barth dismissed the human desire for everlasting life in these positive terms: Humanity as such has no beyond. Nor do we need one, for we die into God. God is our beyond. We are finite, which means that once we were not, now we are, and one day we will have only been. Because of God's promises, our faith is that, although we are only human, we will in death share in the eternal life of God himself. That is heaven in the future. But we can have no inkling of how this happens; we can only trust in God.²⁷

²⁵ Hans Küng, *Eternal life?* (London: Collins, 1984), 175.

²⁶ For a range of views on hell, see William Crockett, ed. *Four views on hell* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1992), or John Sanders, ed. *What about those who have never heard? Three views on the destiny of the unevangelized* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1995). For argument against universalism see Nigel M de S Cameron, ed. *Universalism and the doctrine of hell* (Carlisle, UK: Paternoster, 1992). For an evangelical argument that God might allow a post-mortem chance to repent, see Clark Pinnock, *A wideness in God's mercy: The finality of Jesus Christ in a world of religions* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1992).

²⁷ Quoted from his *Church dogmatics* in Küng, *Eternal life?*, 171.

An alternative view, put by John Macquarrie, is that just as we are called towards our full potential as persons in this life, so also heaven must consist of full selfhood going from perfection to perfection in a spiritual body which we can hardly imagine.²⁸

So for Barth (and those called process theologians) we are folded into God as a drop enters the ocean; but for Macquarrie we retain our individuality within God's existence, showing unity in diversity.

f. Or Heaven Can Be Seen As a New Life Here on Earth

More recently the British evangelical theologian, N T Wright has argued that the biblical promises of a new heavens and a new earth refer to a renewed earth here. And the general resurrection will mean that we have new physical bodies here on earth rather than somewhere else in a spiritual reality.²⁹

He writes:

Salvation, then, is not 'going to heaven' but 'being raised to life in God's new heaven and new earth.' But as soon as we put it like this we realize that the New Testament is full of hints, indications, and downright assertions that this salvation isn't just something we have to wait for in the long-distance future. We can enjoy it here and now (always partially, of course, since we all still have to die), genuinely anticipating in the present what is to come in the future ...³⁰

Heaven's rule, God's rule, is thus to be put into practice in the world, resulting in salvation in both the present and the future, a salvation that is both *for* humans and, *through* saved humans, for the wider world. This is the solid basis for the mission of the church.³¹

At this point I have to say that we are only guessing, really. We have to live in faith that God wills for us an eternity of fulfilled life, whatever shape that takes.

g. Salvation Is Therefore Ultimately Serious, a Matter of Faith, and Both Present and Future

These brief comments on heaven and hell add up to this:

- Salvation is an ultimate matter, to do with the most serious issues here in this life and into the beyond, whatever shape that may take;
- Salvation is a matter of faith, a receiving of God's gifts of forgiveness and new being in this life in the conviction that we will share in God's future existence in fullness; and

²⁸ John Macquarrie, *Principles of Christian theology*, Rev. ed. (London: SCM, 1977), 323-327.

²⁹ Tom Wright, *Surprised by hope: Rethinking heaven, the resurrection, and the mission of the church* (New York: HarperCollins, 2008).

³⁰ Wright, *Surprised by hope*, 198.

³¹ Wright, *Surprised by hope*, 205.

- Salvation is not only about what happened in the past (in the saving activity of God in history), and the transformation of our lives in the present, but also about the openness of the future to the coming of God in fullness.