

THE HEBRAIC GOSPEL OF SALVATION

Esther Rosenberg, a New York transplant in California, needed a grand series of miracles. This suicidal Jewess required an immediate remedy for her despairingly difficult second marriage. She craved a cure for her pain-ridden back and direction for her three disorientated Jewish teenagers. Esther did not want more religion, professional counseling, the awaited surgical procedures, or sedation for her offspring. Esther yearned for rescue in real life; she hungered after genuine biblical salvation. Immediately prior to committing the act that would end her life, she cried out, “God, is there any hope for me?”

God answered her with one word: “Jesus.”

Esther immediately connected with our Assemblies of God Jewish ministry in North Hollywood and came to experience God’s salvation in Jesus. Her sins were forgiven, her marriage restored, her back miraculously healed, and the lives of her three Jewish children were redeemed. Esther was indeed saved.

IS SALVATION HEBRAIC OR HELLENIC?

When Paul wrote, “All Israel will be saved,” did he envision an other-worldly after-life Jewish experience? Was he alluding to an intangible belief system that included the legally decreed divine justification of “national Israel”? Or was this apostolic rabbi prophesying a pending group spiritual encounter with Christ that would climax in the corporate regeneration of the Jewish people? Paul’s concept of the “salvation of national Israel” (see Article 14 in the official Assemblies of God *Statement of Fundamental Truths*) certainly encompassed all of these but, significantly, much more.

The deliberate downsizing of the enormity of biblical salvation into the more manageable spiritual confines of a mysterious eternal future was a Hellenic imposition on the Hebraic context of Scripture. Both Testaments were inspired by the Holy Spirit within the social milieu of Hebraic religious influence with its concrete emphasis on the present real life. It was only in the early centuries of the post-apostolic period that new Christian thinkers, preconditioned by Greek philosophy, began composing theological concepts often destined to divorce common Christian conviction from Jewish apostolic perspective. While salvation meant more to sincere New Testament believers than traditional rabbinical Judaism could have ever advocated, paradoxically, common Christian teaching on salvation simultaneously came to mean less.

The Hebrew Bible conceptualizes God’s salvation as divine intervention with specific assistance to preserve society or one’s own life; communal deliverance from plague and disease; military victory over enemies without, or legal conquest over enemies within; and the maintenance of the general collective welfare by divine supply of agricultural products and related provisions. Salvation, as perceived in the Hebrew Bible, is present-life oriented and not primarily concerned with next-world issues. The Hebrew focus on “forever” is centered on the perpetuity of Israel’s seed as sheltered and preserved by compliance with God’s enlightened Word.

Salvation in the intertestamental apocryphal writings focused on deliverance from enemies, especially when life was threatened. God was viewed as the One who rescued the righteous from injustice, demonic powers, or catastrophic circumstance. God’s wisdom was the agent of redemption. The later Dead Sea Scrolls depicted God as the intervening deliverer from wicked oppression, external enemies, or internal temptations. There is little intimation of the hereafter.

The Gospels and Paul’s writings were plainly Holy Spirit-inspired within the Hebraic context of first-century Jewish understanding. While written in the Greek *lingua franca* of the era, the fully Hebraic-conditioned text of Matthew through Revelation offered an expanding illumination on the nature of God’s salvation, and embraced a strong emphasis on life in the hereafter inclusive of the resurrections of the dead, the judgments, and eternal life. In the New Testament, salvation (*soteria*) continues the same Hebraic emphases of deliverance from wickedness, preservation, recovery, restoration, cure, and well-being. The New Testament revelation enlarges upon salvation themes to offer a clearer and broader picture of the eternal benefit of salvation, and

fully identifies Christ as its exclusive source. But it is not true that the New Testament in any way negates, cancels, or downplays the Spirit's revelation of the essence of salvation, as had been earlier Spirit-inspired in the Hebrew Bible. The Spirit's teaching on salvation is progressive, but entirely consistent from Genesis through Revelation.

THE FIRST PENTECOSTALS EMBRACED HEBRAIC UNDERSTANDINGS

The first-century Pentecostal Jewish believers were perfectly at home with the broader implications of their salvation in the Messiah Jesus for both eternal matters and the present reality on earth. They celebrated their spiritual wholeness in Christ and their assurance of life eternal, but did not ignore God's intended mastery of their lives and circumstances in the real world. They did not perceive Jesus as Lord only in a generic or futuristic sense but recognized Him to be presently Lord of all. Jesus claimed authority not only in eternal realms but also within the time and space of the present life of Israel, of all the redeemed, and of all the nations.

Consistent with their understanding of salvation, the early Jewish Pentecostal generations of the Early Church expected the imminent return of Christ and the immediate "salvation of national Israel." They did not hesitate to preach "healing in the atonement," as God had clearly demonstrated His concern for the earthly physical well-being of His people.

While Christian tradition is sometimes confused, history demonstrates that the gospel continued to seriously impact the Jewish world for a full century after Christ's resurrection. The gospel presented to the house of Israel signaled God's real activity in the present, and His intervention in the human experience. Israel's God was fully operational in time and space, both in His

reproving of sin and effecting wholesome salvation for the faithful. The early Pentecostal emphases on deliverance from the clutches of wickedness, supernatural healing, Spirit-empowerment, the Second Coming, and pending salvation of national Israel had great appeal to tens of thousands of Messianic Jews in the first and second centuries.

HELLENISTIC IMPOSITIONS ON HEBRAIC REVELATION

The Greek philosophical conditioning of later converts to Christianity impacted giant intellects to compose new and variant Christian theology. The Greek and Latin fathers read the New Testament through Hellenic lenses and missed much of the down-to-earth application of Christ's salvation. Their anti-Judaic predispositions caused them to filter out many present implications of salvation so evident to Hebrew-informed believers. Heresies among some Jewish Christian groups, e.g., the Ebionites, so distressed many church fathers that they categorically rejected any Jewish or Hebraic understanding of New Testament revelation. In their misguided quest for orthodoxy they even denied Israel its biblically promised perpetual role as God's chosen people.

The Church fathers' replacement of Israel theology (e.g., supersessionism) generally coincided with the doctrine of cessationism, the teaching that the charismatic manifestations of the Spirit had been discontinued after the apostolic period. Such theological elimination of divine activity from the earth to heavenly realms not only discounted the need for both Jews and Pentecostals but also pushed the real meaning of salvation off into the esoteric realm of eternity. The Dark Ages soon set in as the light of biblical salvation was dimmed.

MODERN PENTECOSTALS TO THE RESCUE

The restorationist moorings of modern Pentecostalism predisposed the movement to embrace a fully revived first-century Christianity replete with all the *charismata*, global apostolic enterprise, and the expectation of the pending salvation of Israel. For restorationist Pentecostals, salvation in Christ had immediate and life-changing implications for the present. Miraculous deliverances from the clutches of evil and divine healings of broken or diseased bodies were readily available through faith in the Savior. There was healing in the Atonement. God's salvation was a daily life experience and could include divine provisions of living accommodations and foodstuffs. The human reality in the world was incorporated back into the field of divine activity. The Savior was presently at work, not only forgiving sins against a day of judgment, but also healing the sick, rescuing the perishing, and preserving rebuilt modern lives.

The antimissionary efforts of contemporary Jewish organizations have suggested that the Christian Messiah is irrelevant to Jews since faith in Christ has not yielded the promised messianic results in the earth. The Jewish culture today is still present-reality oriented. It is no wonder then that 80 percent of all Jewish believers in Jesus are Pentecostal/charismatic. The genuine impact of the Messianic Savior is unquestionably felt in their Jewish lives as He dramatically saves and bears them up every day. The Pentecostal presentation of the gospel to the Jewish world has earthly significance. Faith in Jesus is absolutely relevant to the present. Just ask Esther Rosenberg who, still in North Hollywood, is enjoying and openly sharing complete salvation in Jesus. ■



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