



DISCOVERING THE BIBLE & OUR BIBLICAL HERITAGES

Providing factual information about our Bibles, beliefs, movements,
institutions and events of historical Christianity & Judaism.

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Salvation: A Preliminary Statement¹

By Dr. Isaac Tennison

The concept of salvation underlying the Greek words **SOZO** (the verb "save"), **SOTERIA** (the noun "salvation"), **SOTER** (the noun "savior"), and related words in the text of the Christian Scriptures may not be the same as the concept attached to the English words "**save**," "**salvation**," "**savior**," and related words. I say that the concepts "may" not be the same because any kind of definitive answer must be based on considerable research, especially since salvation is such an integral part of the Christian religion (i.e., most Christians have a very definite understanding of the word and are not very willing to consider any other idea). My preliminary statement, made in the first sentence of this paragraph, is based on at least two observations.

The first observation is that the actual **CONCEPT of salvation** among Christians throughout the centuries is known primarily from answers given to questions **ABOUT** salvation and not about the meaning or concept of the word itself. The two primary questions are these:

- (1) What is the purpose of salvation?
- (2) What is required of an individual for him/her to be saved?

Although there has been little disagreement about the answer to the first question (i.e., **to go to heaven**), *answers to the second question have proven to be one of the most divisive issues among Christians of all persuasions*. Some say that **faith alone** is required; others argue that **faith AND works** are necessary; still others add **baptism and/or communion**; and, still others say that "this" or "that" is a part of the answer, too. The point here is that the arguments over the means or method or requirements for salvation have overshadowed the meaning or concept of the word "salvation" itself. The meaning or concept of the word has, somehow, just been understood or assumed.

The second observation is that even in the generation immediately following the death of Jesus arguments about salvation took place much like the arguments we know today. Those arguments were not over the meaning or concept of salvation

or even over the reason for salvation but over the means or method or requirements for salvation. The evidence for this observation is contained in Acts 15. In Antioch, Paul and Barnabas opposed "certain men" from Judea who were teaching that **salvation required circumcision** in the manner prescribed by Moses, and the matter was referred to the "apostles and elders" in Jerusalem for resolution (Acts 15:1-2). The meaning or concept of salvation was understood or assumed (i.e., that was not the issue); *the issue was the means or method or requirements for salvation.*

Perhaps the best starting point to "get at" the meaning or concept of the word "salvation" is to consider the basic (i.e., etymological) meaning(s) of the Greek words themselves. The root word for all of the Greek words connected with salvation (whether verb, noun, or adjective) is the Greek adjective **SOS** ("safe"). **Therefore, the first step in the quest for the meaning or concept of salvation is the idea of being "safe."**

In just over one-third of the uses of the Greek verb **SOZO** in the Christian Scriptures, the meaning of **SOZO** is **"to be safe" in the sense of preserving one's PHYSICAL life.** Consider one example:

"And behold, there arose a great storm on the sea, so that the boat was being swamped by the waves; but he was asleep. And they went and woke him, saying, '**Save**, lord; we are perishing.'"²

The use of the verb "save" clearly refers to **the preservation of physical life,** or, to put it the other way around, the word refers to **the avoidance of certain physical death.** Other examples of this use of the word may be found in Matthew (9:21-22, 14:30, 27:40-49), Acts (27:31), Hebrews (5:7). This use of the word expands the concept of "being safe" to the idea of being safe "for something" and/or "from something"— i.e, in this case, for physical life and/or "from something"— i.e, in this case, for physical life and/or from physical death.

There are a couple of uses of the verb where the "from something" is actually expressed. One of these is found in the story of the appearance of the angel to Joseph, in which the angel says, ". . . and you shall call his name Jesus, for he will **save** his people **FROM THEIR SINS.**"³ Because death, the end of physical life, is said to be due to sin, this use of the verb **SOZO** is no different from the others. Another similar use is in the words of Jesus, when he said, "Now is my soul troubled. And what shall I say? 'Father, **save me FROM THIS HOUR?**' No, for this purpose I have come to this hour."⁴ These words were spoken by Jesus as he was facing his physical death. One more example is found in the following verse: "In the days of his flesh, Jesus offered up prayers and supplications, with loud cries and tears, to him who was able to **save him FROM DEATH,** and he was heard for his godly fear."⁵

The meaning or concept of salvation can be extended a little more by those few uses of the Greek verb **SOZO** which are actually followed by a direct object other than a pronoun like Hebrews 5:7 above. The first example has a direct object of the verb plus the phrase "from death" and, therefore, is a good point of transition in our quest.

"My brethren, if any one among you wanders from the truth and someone brings him back, let him know that whoever brings back a sinner from the error of his way will **save his SOUL from death** and will cover a multitude of sins."⁶

A similar use, but without the phrase "from death" is found in James 1:21. In these cases, **that which is being safe is the "soul"**—an English translation of the Greek word **PSYCHE**—which carries meanings in the English-speaking world which are not necessarily associated with the Greek word (a word which needs to be researched and studied very carefully so that some more specific meaning can be given to the word, especially as it was understood by Jews in the first century). To date, the best meaning I can attribute to the Greek word **PSYCHE** is something like "**conscious awareness**"— i.e., *that part of our human selves which makes us aware that we are not only human but also individuals, and that part is connected with our brains and/or central nervous systems* (note that the English word "psychology" comes from the Greek word **PSYCHE**). At any rate, this use of the Greek verb appears to be the same as the examples above, since the saving of our **PSYCHE** seems to mean **the saving of our physical life** (on the assumption that the loss of physical life means that the **PSYCHE** will also perish—an assumption which must be investigated).

There is another instance of a direct object with the verb, and the only one like it, which seems to be very different from the "**saving souls**" verses given above. The verse in which it is found is I Corinthians 5:5. Verses 3-5 of that passage are:

"For though absent in body I am present in spirit, and as if present, I have already pronounced judgment in the name of the Lord Jesus on the man who has done such a thing. When you are assembled, and my spirit is present, with the power of our Lord Jesus, you are to deliver this man to Satan for the destruction of the flesh that **his spirit may be saved** in the day of the Lord Jesus."

The idea here is clearly related to something other than the saving from physical death, for that is going to happen ("the destruction of the flesh"). The idea is related to the **saving of the "spirit"**— and the Greek word for spirit is **PNEUMA**, which is one of the descriptors of God Himself (see John 4:24). The apparent meaning of this use of the word is that the "spirit" which individuals

have within themselves is not like the spirit/God, who is eternal, but is subject to destruction or death.

If this interpretation is close to being right, *then the meaning or concept of salvation has now moved from being safe from physical death and/ or physical life" to "being safe from spiritual death and/or for spiritual life."* This is a significant addition to the meaning or concept of the word "salvation" and may not be far removed from another statement made by Paul to Timothy when he said: "The lord will rescue me from every evil and **save** me for his heavenly kingdom."⁷ Although Paul uses the pronoun "me" instead of the word "spirit," because he seems to be referring to a future existence, it can be assumed he is referring to that part of him which will survive death, which he elsewhere calls the "spiritual body."⁸ The idea of **being saved for a future existence** is also present in several other places. Luke gives one such account:

He went on his way through towns and villages, teaching, and journeying toward Jerusalem. And some one said to him, 'Lord, will those who are **saved** be few?'. And he said to them, 'Strive to enter by the narrow door; for many, I tell you, will seek to enter and will not be able. When once the householder has risen up and shut the door, you will begin to stand outside and to knock at the door, saying, "lord, open to us." He will answer you, "I do not know where you come from." Then you will begin to say, "we ate and drank in your presence , and you taught in our streets." But he will say, "I tell you, I do not know where you come from; depart from me, all you workers of iniquity!" There you will weep and gnash teeth, when you see Abraham and Isaac and Jacob and all the prophets in the kingdom of God and you yourselves thrust out. And men will come from east and west, and from north and south, and sit at table in the kingdom of God. And behold, some are last who will be first, and some are first who will be last."⁹

What this passage suggests is that the expression "**those who are saved**" refers to **the ones who will be a part of the kingdom of God**. But, this future reference must be tampered with the words of Jesus himself when he said, "There are some standing here who will not taste death before they seen the son of Man coming in his kingdom."¹⁰ This comment gives some credence to the idea that the kingdom of God is already present, and, if present, entrance is reserved to those who are "saved." *My conclusion to this preliminary statement about salvation as used in the Christian Scriptures is that the meaning or concept of the word is related to "one's body and/or psyche and/or spirit being safe from physical death and/or psychical death and/or spiritual death and being safe for physical life both in the new present kingdom of God and in the kingdom which is to come."* This study will continue in future issues of *DISCOVERING THE BIBLE*. ●

What is the Basis of your Belief?¹¹

By Dr. Isaac Tennison

Introduction

Well-meaning students of the Bible will spend literally years in the study of the Scriptures by using one of the many available translations. No one to tell these students the significance of such study; and, no one can condemn them for their dedication to the task. Nevertheless, someone must tell them about the pitfalls in studying the Scriptures in this manner. The purpose of this article is to share with you the implications of the kind of Bible to study referred to above. In order to do that, it is necessary for me to discuss in rather simple language a somewhat complicated process. The discussion is divided into two general areas, which can be called (for lack of better terms) **Form** and **Content**.

Form

Form, essentially, is *the "way" in which anything is presented*. For example, the form of the English translation of the Protestant version of the Bible consists of sixty-six books (thirty-nine in the Old Testament and twenty-seven in the New), dutifully divided into Chapters and Verses (a relatively modern invention), with word-divisions and marks of punctuation in accordance with English usage, written in prose (a few translations attempt to put some of the poetical books into a kind of poetical form), etc. These are the formal aspects of the Bible which we have come to know through exposure and experience. When people declare that the "Bible" (*meaning, of course, the form of the Bible they use*) is inerrant, infallible, the very word of God, *they are only revealing their lack of understanding of how the Bible came to be*. Let me explain this remark.

The English translations of the Bible, with which we are most familiar, *were all translated from original-language texts (Hebrew for the Old Testament and Greek for the New Testament)* which were themselves put together by an individual or group of individuals. That is, *there is no single, original text of the Bible*. Rather, *there exist many manuscripts of the Hebrew and Greek Scriptures* which were written in antiquity at different times and places — copies of copies which originally began with an "autograph" (an original; none of which exists today).

The interesting thing about these manuscripts is that no two of them agree in every particular of the text. Some have more words than others; some have different words from others. And, *these ancient Hebrew and Greek manuscripts did not contain the same "form" as English translations do*. For example, there were no Chapters and Verses nor word-divisions nor marks of punctuation. Originally, the Hebrew Scriptures contained only consonants; vowels were added by the Masoretes after the sixth century of the Christian era. The Greek translation of

the Hebrew Scriptures (which was made in the third century before the Christian era), known as the Septuagint, differs considerably from the Masoretic text, suggesting that the translators were using a different version of the Hebrew Scriptures.

The number of manuscripts and fragments of manuscripts of the Greek Scriptures number well over 5,000! Therefore, when an individual or group of individuals put together an "original-language text," they have done so on the basis of many judgments and decisions as to which manuscript provides the "best" (i.e., the nearest to what the original author wrote or dictated) reading at that point. And, based on one of these texts (many have been produced over the past two hundred years), translators have made our English Bibles.

Content

Even more important than form, however, is the content of what translators have given to us. *Content, as opposed to form, is the essence or meaning of what the author (not the translator!) intended for his readers/hearers to understand.* Although translators have done their best to convert Hebrew and Greek words into their English equivalents, they could not "carry across" (the meaning of "translation") the original meanings. *Consequently, students of the English Bible have understood English words in their English meanings, and they have developed various interpretations, doctrines, theologies, and denominations based on this understanding.*

What a pitfall when we totally miss the intended meaning of an author of the Scriptures, we certainly need to reevaluate our position. I recall the first time I read from the Living Bible (which is admittedly only a paraphrase). My first thought was this: *"If this Bible were used exclusively, within a century or less we would not recognize Christianity."*

Form is only a matter of how things are presented; *content, on the other hand, has to do with what a person means by what he says.* To understand what a person means by what he says, *we must know the time and culture in which he said it.* If "**love**" means to the English reader *a kind of hormone-produced emotion of affection toward someone*, that in itself does not explain the meaning of "love" as used in the Bible. So, too, the word "**righteousness**" means to the English reader *some kind of abstract notion to which we all aspire like sainthood*; but, in the final analysis, in the Hebrew culture in which the word was used, *it meant doing acts which are right and just in the eyes of God.*

A letter from one of our readers contained a very good question which is related to the content of this article. It is reproduced below with my response.

Reader's Comment

I read your article, "The Source of Biblical Texts" In looking at the chart and noticing that most texts have been by more than 50% and realizing that those same texts and others had already been altered, makes me feel like – so why isn't somebody publishing a real Bible and why should I read the one I have?

The article was very interesting and enlightening and I'm not at all discouraged because obviously God has raised men to bring these things to light. But even though I already know that much of what we read is mistranslated and misinterpreted, I still get shocked.

Response

The reason no one is publishing a "real" Bible at this time is simply because we do not know what the "real" Bible was. This is true for at least two reasons.

First, the actual words written by the original writers are not known because we do not possess their original manuscripts. What we possess are copies of copies. In the process of copying, at least in the case of the Greek New Testament, legitimate errors were made, but, beginning in the fourth century, other "intentional" errors were made—that of actually inserting materials into the text, deleting materials from the text, and/or changing materials in the text for theological or ecclesiastical reasons. The task of textual critics is to re-establish the original text in so far as that is possible. Many scholars work on this problem all the time.

The Hebrew Scriptures pose a very different kind of problem. The source of the currently accepted Hebrew text of the Old Testament is the Masoretic text which came into existence somewhere after the sixth century A.D. The Septuagint, however, which is the Greek translation of the Hebrew text which was made in the third century B.C. and of which we have manuscripts dating as early as the fourth century of the Christian era, was apparently based on a Hebrew text quite different from the Masoretic text. I don't know if anyone has unraveled this problem.

The best texts of the Greek New Testament available today, in my opinion are the third edition of the United Bible Societies' THE GREEK NEW TESTAMENT and the twenty-sixth edition of Nestle-Aland's NOVUM TESTAMENTUM GRAECE. Therefore, accurate translations based on this text are the nearest thing to a "real" New Testament that I have. *The difficulty here is that many (if not most or all) translators understand the Greek words in the usual western way of thinking and not from the point of view of the Hebrew culture out of which the words came.*

The Greek text itself will be improved upon as time goes by, for scholars, who have concentrated primarily on the *uncials* and *papyri*, are now making major strides in a careful study of the *minuscule* and the early translations made from Greek manuscripts. *This in itself is only half of the problem; the other half is in how people understand the words that they read — Hebrew, Greek, or English.*

Second, the process of "canonizing "the Scriptures — Hebrew (Old Testament) and Greek (New Testament) — is at least suspect in terms of what should be included or excluded from the Bible. I realize this question may be viewed by some as heretical, but, the truth of the matter is that, even though some argue strongly about the inspiration of the Scriptures, does this mean that the men who decided which Scriptures were inspired and which not were themselves inspired?

Or, does it mean that the men who decided what would and what would not go into the "official" or "authorized" version of the Bible made their decision on the basis of the existing official position of the church at the time (a time when the Jews had already been rejected, and the church was dominated by western Europeans!). This, I think, is a fair question, and should make all interested Bible students at least look at the other books which were in existence at that early time and decide for themselves whether or not they shed any light on the subject.

Points to Consider

- (1) Do you have the same feelings as the reader above?
- (2) Do the facts about the Bible alter your basic beliefs?
- (3) Has this article been presented clearly, fairly, and without bias?
- (4) Does this article answer the question posed by its title?

Send your response to the above questions, or your comments and questions to the address at the bottom of the page or email them to jim@biblicalheritage.org

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¹ Originally published in Discovering the Bible, Volume One Number 23, 1989

² Matthew 8:24-25

³ Matthew 1:21

⁴ John 12:27

⁵ Hebrews 5:7

⁶ James 5:19-20

⁷ II Timothy 4:18

⁸ I Corinthians 15:44

⁹ Luke 13:22-30

¹⁰ Matthew 16:28

¹¹ Originally published in Discovering the Bible, Volume One Number 26, 1989

Religious beliefs affect many of the decisions people make and those decisions affect the real world – just take a look at terrorism, political races, what should be taught in public schools, same sex marriages, etc.

For those of us who consider the Bible an important part of our world, we know that having factual cultural, historical and linguistic to help us accurately understand the meanings of the words of our Bible is not optional – it is an absolute necessity.

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