

- **The Nature of Christian Salvation**
- **La Nature du Salut Chrétien**
- **Das Wesen Christlicher Erlösung**

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RÉSUMÉ

La première partie de l'article présente, de façon résumée, la nature du salut chrétien selon le Nouveau Testament. Ce salut comporte des éléments de libération du jugement pour le futur et de transformation du croyant dans le présent. Il offre ici et maintenant une vie nouvelle, basée sur un changement de nature (nouvelle naissance) caractérisée par une nouvelle relation avec Dieu (Père, Fils, et Saint-Esprit) qui se manifeste ensuite par des expériences de filiation, d'union avec Christ et de puissance de l'Esprit. Le salut est communautaire, il fait entrer les croyants dans le peuple de Dieu et les conduit à un nouveau style de vie et une nouvelle éthique. Il est basé entièrement sur la grâce divine révélée en

Christ et s'acquiert par la foi.

Une seconde partie présente rapidement les expériences de salut dans diverses formes de religion dans le monde du Nouveau Testament et les compare au salut chrétien. La relation du Christianisme à la religion de l'Ancien Testament est aussi examinée, ainsi que le genre de 'salut' offert par les différentes religions anciennes. Il est souligné que les comparaisons doivent être faites non seulement par rapport au but final d'une vie future, mais aussi par rapport à des expériences de pardon, de communion avec Christ et de la vie nouvelle communiquée par l'Esprit. Ces caractéristiques sont absentes des autres religions anciennes. La destination et la voie qui y mène sont toutes deux très différentes.

ZUSAMMENFASSUNG

Im ersten Teil der Arbeit ist das Wesen christlicher Erlösung gemäß dem Neuen Testament zusammengefaßt. Erlösung umfaßt Elemente der zukünftigen Befreiung vom Gericht und der gegenwärtigen Veränderung im Gläubigen; sie bietet hier und jetzt ein neues Leben, das auf einer Veränderung der menschlichen Natur beruht (Wiedergeburt), durch eine neue Beziehung zu Gott (Vater, Sohn und Geist) charakterisiert ist und durch nachfolgende Erfahrungen der Sohnschaft, der Einheit mit Christus und der Kraft des Heiligen Geistes seinen Ausdruck findet; sie ist gemeindebezogen, indem sie Gläubige

zum Volk Gottes hinzufügt und sie zu einem neuen Lebensstil und einer neuen Ethik hinführt; und sie basiert ausschließlich auf der Gnade Gottes, die in Christus offenbart wurde und durch Glauben angeeignet wird.

Im zweiten Teil werden die Erlösungserfahrungen in den verschiedenen zeitgenössischen Religionsformen der neutestamentlichen Welt betrachtet und miteinander verglichen. Die Beziehung des Christentums zum alttestamentlichen Glauben und zum Judentum wird untersucht, danach auch die Art von 'Erlösung', die von verschiedenen antiken Kulturen angeboten wurde. Der Aufsatz betont, daß die Vergleiche sich nicht auf

das letzte Ziel eines zukünftigen Lebens beschränken, sondern auch die gegenwärtige Erfahrung der Vergebung, der Gemeinschaft mit Christus und das neue Leben im Geist einschließen sollten.

Diese Kennzeichen fehlen sämtlich in den antiken Religionen. Sowohl das Ziel als auch der Weg zum Ziel in den antiken Religionen weisen bedeutende Unterschiede zum Christentum auf.

The purpose of this paper is twofold: to establish a basis for the discussion in the conference of Christian salvation in relation to pluralism, and to make a limited contribution to the question of salvation in relation to pluralism in the first century. I begin with some preliminary remarks that will aim to define our task.

1. Although this subject is of central importance in the Bible and is treated in the standard theological dictionaries and encyclopaedias, it has had remarkably little attention directed to it in theological monographs. The one recent work that is addressed directly and specifically to salvation is the very valuable monograph by Michael Green.¹ The question is whether the subject has been otherwise neglected because scholars think that there is nothing new to say about it and that it is not so significant as other theological concepts. I shall hope to show that it is both important and rewarding to give it our consideration.

2. We are dealing with a concept and not just a word-group, and therefore we cannot confine our attention simply to the *sōtēria* word-group, which is what articles in reference works tend to do. On the one hand, then, we shall not be looking at the uses of the 'save' group of words which are concerned with health, rescue from danger and the like. On the other hand, we shall be looking at aspects of salvation which are expressed in other terminology. We shall have to take the risk of opening the floodgates to most of the soteriological terminology in the NT. Nevertheless, we shall restrain ourselves from discussing the whole of the NT!

3. A particular concern of this conference is Christianity in relation to other

religions, and therefore ideally we should be considering Christian salvation in relation to other experiences and concepts. This is an area in which I have no competence. The most useful thing that I may be able to do is to try to consider Christian salvation in relation to other religions in the ancient world. In this connection it seems particularly important to me to ask what was involved in the *experience* of salvation, since I have the hunch that you experience certain things as a Christian believer which you don't experience elsewhere. I have in mind the fact that the language of religious devotion and spirituality may be very similar in different religions, and that people tend to think of Christianity and other religions as offering different routes to the same goal. Too often the attention centres on the final goal, in the popular idea that many different roads lead to heaven, and that it doesn't matter which one you take. I believe rather that the road itself is an experience of salvation, and I think that the NT strongly supports me.

The contribution of this paper, therefore, will be to delineate the understanding of salvation in the New Testament and to offer some comparisons with other religions of the time. From this survey it may be possible to draw some lessons for our contemporary situation.

I. Salvation in the New Testament

First of all, then, I intend to summarise what I think are the main points in the understanding of salvation in the New Testament. My choice of comments is made with a view to future comparisons, but I hope that nonetheless it is reasonably comprehensive and not biased in any particular direction. Our starting

point must be the understanding of salvation in the early church rather than a consideration of the teaching of Jesus and the experience of people during his lifetime.

1. Future deliverance

The right place to begin is with the use of 'salvation' terminology with respect to the future state of individuals. Whether or not we regard it as being necessarily first in importance, a central element in the NT concept of salvation is the hope of being saved from condemnation at the last judgment. It has been noted that a significant number of references to being saved in Paul and elsewhere are in the future tense and refer to being delivered from the wrath to come (Rom 5:9f.; 13:11; 1 Cor 3:15; 5:5; Phil 1:28; Heb 9:28; 1 Pet 1:5). Other language points in the same direction. Entry into the kingdom of God is regularly in the future tense and the language often indicates that a future existence with God is envisaged. The concept of eternal life very clearly refers to life which is never-ending in the future. Significant thematic sections in Paul are concerned with the resurrection of the dead and heavenly existence with the Lord. The word 'saved' is used in this context because the thought is of being delivered or rescued from judgment, the wrath of God and destruction, all of which are the fate of those who do not know God or do not accept the gospel. Inevitably, the language acquires positive tones because the alternative to being 'lost' is so infinitely desirable.

2. Present status

An important corollary of this hope of future salvation is the experience of present forgiveness of sins. Using various concepts the NT writers depict the present situation of the Christian as one in which they can be sure of this future salvation because a decisive event has taken place in their lives which removes from them the fear of judgment. Already they have peace with God, they are

already justified, already redeemed, already reconciled to God. Thus salvation can be understood as a present possession, and there is an element of assurance about it, regardless of differences over the question whether a person can 'lose' salvation. It has sometimes been argued that Paul does not speak of people being in a state of salvation here and now, but this conclusion is reached only by regarding Ephesians (with its clear statement in 2:5, 8) as post-Pauline and by evacuating other texts of their clear meaning (Rom 8:24; 1 Cor 1:18, 21; 15:2; 2 Cor 6:2; Phil 2:12). What we have here, then, is an affirmation that people can already know that they are in a right relationship with God and that the final judgment will confirm this existing relationship rather than establish it for the first time.

3. Present transformation

It is now of quite crucial importance to emphasise that in various ways this present experience of salvation goes beyond merely being placed, as it were, in a new category, that of people who are forgiven and reconciled. Salvation makes a vital difference to people here and now. This is expressed in many different ways, for it is a multi-faceted experience.

One broad understanding of this experience is in terms of new birth or rebirth. Although this terminology is not all that frequent in the New Testament, it is sufficiently widespread to indicate that early Christians regarded themselves as having entered on a new kind of existence which is due to some divine action upon them. In the ancient world the language of new birth was quite common and was used to express any kind of decisive new beginning, in the way in which we might speak of the rebirth of a nation or of a dilapidated area of a town or of an interest in a particular kind of music; it did not necessarily convey the idea of a spiritual or metaphysical change. It is, however, in this more narrow sense that the concept is used in the New Testament to indicate that a real change takes place in the individual, so that they have a new

nature or are brought into existence on a new plane (spiritual as opposed to material or this-worldly). The baptism of Christian believers becomes more than a rite of initiation into a new community or an enrolment into the list of those who are forgiven; it signifies the real end of an old life and the beginning of a new. It needs to be distinguished from adoption and divine sonship with which it is connected; new birth is more concerned with the beginning of a new life than with the establishment of new parenthood whereby Christians are reckoned to be children of God.

4. *Spiritual relationships*

Alongside this new existence, however, there is also the new relationship to God which must now be separately discussed as a matter of great importance in its own right. We have to do with the establishment of links between believers and their God which go beyond merely formal relationships and involve various kinds of spiritual association. The word 'identification' is sometimes used with reference to some of these, as when people say that 'we are identified with Christ in his death and resurrection', but in view of the notorious slipperiness of the term I deliberately refrain from using it; it causes much confusion. This new relationship can be helpfully categorised in terms of the three persons in the Godhead.

(a). The first aspect of this relationship is with *God the Father*. Those who are saved now have God as their Father. I trust that I do not need to remind this audience that in the Bible as a whole the fatherhood of God is a concept that expresses his relationship to those who are his spiritual children by adoption and not his relationship to humankind in general in that he is their creator. The temptation to think of God as the father of all people by virtue of creation is a powerful one, strengthened by the fact that in so many other religions the supreme God is the universal father of the human race. But this is not the case in the Bible, and it is thus all the more impressive that the

biblical writers simply do not yield to this temptation, except perhaps in marginal instances. Overwhelmingly when God is spoken of as Father, he is the father of his faithful people. To have God as Father in biblical terms is to have a relationship which is not common to humanity as a whole and which leads on his side to a particular love and concern for his children.

(b). A second aspect of this experience is that the saved people are brought into some kind of relationship with *Jesus Christ*. They are said to be 'in Christ'. This expression is used with remarkable frequency in the writings of Paul, some 160 times in the whole Pauline corpus, and also in 1 Peter, and it is of absolutely central importance in understanding his theology of salvation.² It is used in two related ways. On the one hand, it is used adverbially to express the way in which God acts towards his people, both in conveying his blessings to them and in making his demands upon them. He grants spiritual blessings 'in Christ' and he calls them to live 'in the Lord'. I am convinced that F. Neugebauer is correct in his understanding of this phrase as signifying that the life of the saved people is determined and controlled by the fact of the crucified and risen Saviour. But, on the other hand, the phrase is also used adjectivally to speak of people who are 'in Christ', and here, while Neugebauer's interpretation is correct, it is difficult not to see also some element of a close spiritual relationship between the saved people and their Saviour; some of our modern translations in fact paraphrase the wording in such a form as 'to those who are in union with Christ'. Whether or not this latter understanding is correct, there is no doubt that union with Christ is expressed in the language which refers to believers dying and rising with Christ. There is some kind of relationship on a spiritual plane between believers and their Lord. In the Johannine writings this is expressed by language which refers to Christ being in believers and believers being in him, and the same kind of thing is said about the Word and the Father

with the Greek word *menō* being especially used to express the relationship. Here, then, the language of reciprocal indwelling is used to express a profound spiritual unity.

(c). And, thirdly and inevitably, we have the relationship of the saved people to the *Holy Spirit*. This is found in various types of expression, of which I single out two.

First, there are frequent references to persons 'having' the Spirit, expressed in a way which suggests that the Spirit is some kind of transforming power which can give them the ability for these charismatic and ethical qualities. And, second, there are places where the Spirit is conceived as personal in the same way as the Father or the Son, so that the believer is not so much given what might be regarded as an impersonal power but rather comes into a spiritual relationship with a person.

It will be evident that these three sets of relationships overlap very considerably with one another, and that it is not possible to distinguish sharply between them, but some experiences are more aptly and easily expressed in terms of one relationship rather than the others.

I have developed these points rather fully because, as I said, they are of crucial importance. They lead to an important conclusion. Salvation involves the creation of a personal relationship between the saved person and the triune God. An important aspect of salvation, therefore, is the living out of this personal relationship. There is something that we can call Christian experience.

5. *Present spiritual experiences*

My next point is in effect a second conclusion drawn from what I have just said about the reality of this personal relationship with God. It is the basis for a number of experiences and other phenomena which characterise the saved people and make them different from other people who are not saved.

(a). First, the relationship with God as Father is the basis for *prayer* which takes

place 'in the name of Jesus'. There is an experience of communion with God in the actual prayer. There is also the making of petitions to him which are answered, so that various events in the world can be understood as God's response to the prayers of his people. I recognise that both of these things can be interpreted otherwise. The knowledge of God in prayer can be explained in psychological terms, and the events that occur in answer to prayer can be understood as fortunate coincidences. In other words, it is hard to provide 'hard evidence' of these spiritual experiences that would be compelling to a non-believer. I recognise also that the question of the attitude of God to the prayers of non-Christians needs further discussion.

(b). Second, there is the relationship with Jesus which is similar to that with the Father. The language of Christian piety includes references to 'knowing Christ' or having communion with Christ which again suggest some kind of spiritual experience that is very real to believers. In particular, for many Christians this experience is especially linked with the sacraments. At least, it is tied to the Lord's Supper which is interpreted as fellowship with the Lord and is regarded as a 'means of blessing'. Curiously, spiritual experience is not usually linked to the baptism of believers in the same kind of way, and the reception of the Spirit at baptism and the entry into a new relationship to God does not normally lead to a spiritual experience, although within some Christian circles baptism may be accompanied by speaking in tongues or similar indicators of spiritual experience. I note in passing that intense joy appears to have been an accompaniment of baptism in the NT.

This may be the appropriate juncture to mention the fact of mystical experiences in which a person may have some kind of direct experience of God. It is an area of which I have no close knowledge, and I shall not attempt to develop it beyond the mere observation that it needs to be included in our survey.

(c). Third, we come to the relationship with the Holy Spirit; here there arise a

number of identifiable and observable traits of character and specific activities. Being saved, in short, makes a person different here and now. First, we have reference to various '*gifts of the Spirit*' which are imparted to people, giving them various abilities which are apparently not theirs by nature—the capacity to receive revelations from God, the capacity to engage in inspired speech (whether in their own language or in '[other] tongues'), the capacity to work miracles such as healing, the capacity to take certain kinds of leadership role in the church. Second, there are various *ethical qualities* whose presence in people's lives is ascribed to the effect of the Spirit; the key reference here is Gal 5:22f. with its development of the metaphor of fruit.

In these various ways, then, the experience of salvation leads to certain things happening in people's lives which they can regard as the evidence of salvation and which they would also regard as being peculiar to saved people.

6. Corporate experience of salvation

The experience of salvation as we have described it is individual and personal. Nevertheless, it cannot be experienced in isolation from other people. The group of saved people constitute the 'church', and this fact is expressed in a number of concepts. What is significant for our purpose is that the church is not simply an association of like-minded people.

First, the church is described in ways which give it a *spiritual existence*, such as the 'body' of Christ, or Christ is the 'vine' to which believers are joined. There is thus a spiritual, corporate group brought into existence by God, which is the counterpart of the new individual. In a full development of the topic it would be necessary to emphasise that this group stands in continuity with 'Israel', the people of God that existed from the call of Abraham onwards.

Second, the church, like the individual, can have *spiritual experiences*. Paul talks of God bestowing the Holy Spirit on the community and performing signs and

wonders in their midst (Gal 3:2–5). It may be possible to analyse these events as ultimately being individual experiences, but it is hard to avoid the impression that God deals with congregations as congregations and that they can collectively experience him. (This should not surprise us when we bear in mind that ordinary human associations can have collective experiences and a common 'history'.)

7. A new way of living

Within this group salvation is experienced and expressed in a relationship of mutual love. This relationship naturally leads to a fresh understanding of ethics, the framework of the ways in which people behave towards one another. We need to explore whether the experience of Christian salvation leads to new 'standards' in that the Christian way of life sets ideals that are not recognised elsewhere in society and in that it also offers the possibility of a higher level of attainment through the power of the Holy Spirit. In any case, a distinctive Christian ethic emerges, and the adherence of people to this rather than to some other way of life may well be regarded as a specific outworking of salvation. To some extent at least it could be regarded as specifically 'learned' behaviour or behaviour that is induced through peer pressure within the group, and it could be regarded as being facilitated by membership of the group (in the way in which people in general may behave differently in groups and may find that they have the determination and capacity for behaviour that would not normally be characteristic of them).

This leads to a significant negative observation. Christian salvation is never understood in the New Testament in political terms, that is to say, as a new communal state of affairs brought about by a powerful ruler imposing peace and law and order. It exists within political situations that may be inimical to it at worst, neutral, or on rare occasions more or less Christian in inspiration. But salvation is not brought about by politics and it is not expressed in political terms. Rather, the

church is meant to show the sort of character which a political salvation might achieve. It should be the kingdom of God in a local manifestation.

8. *Physical salvation?*

A further negative point should also be made. We have noted that salvation was accompanied to a certain extent by signs and wonders of a miraculous nature. But there is never any suggestion that the human body will be free from physical limitations, illness and decay, nor that believers will be delivered from hostility and opposition. Salvation does not mean the outward transformation of the body. But it does mean that there is a kind of spiritual change going on which will be brought to completion at the awaited second coming of the Lord.

We could say that both of these negative points refer to experience of salvation in the present world-order. It will be different in the world to come, when God is all in all, when all opposition to him is quelled, and when corruption is replaced by incorruption. One could say, therefore, that the hope of political salvation and freedom from physical corruption is shifted to the world to come in the New Testament. It is not lost, but it is deferred, and all that we have are intimations, brief anticipations of the future in the life of the church and in the gifts of the Spirit which God gives according to his own will and not as a regular accompaniment of salvation.

9. *Principalities and powers*

One exception may need to be made to this statement. Because of its importance in relation to other religions in the ancient world it constitutes a specific point to be made for its own sake, although it might have been included as a passing remark under another heading. Salvation is understood to include deliverance of people from whatever spiritual powers of evil there may be active in the world. Fate and demonic powers no longer

have the power to control human life. Nothing can separate believers from the love of God. Christ has triumphed over whatever powers there may be. Christians have freedom from fear.

Yet there is some uncertainty here: Satan continues to be active and to be a foe who must be resisted, and there is a 'war' against spiritual powers. There is a foe, but he is a defeated foe. Thus we have something of the same 'already but not yet fully' tension that we have already found to be characteristic of the New Testament understanding of salvation generally.

10. *Grace and faith*

Salvation is always regarded as the gift of God to people who accept it in an attitude that is summed up as faith. Faith includes repentance and commitment, but it excludes doing things that are regarded as making the person worthy or deserving of God's gift, and it also excludes any idea that people receive salvation through heredity or through belonging to any particular group or nation. The New Testament teaching about faith is best understood as a corollary of its understanding of the character and activity of God as loving and gracious, and this could lead us into a discussion of the biblical doctrine of the nature of God which is the basis for all that has been said. But the temptation must be resisted because our aim is to focus attention on salvation rather than to survey the whole of Christian doctrine in our attempt to compare Christianity with other religions. Suffice it to say that salvation is from first to last the result of divine grace, and it is received by faith, the attitude of trust and commitment to the Saviour which excludes any suggestion that human works of righteousness, or belonging to the right group of people by birth or whatever contribute to it. To be sure, there is a paradox here in that believers are called to serve God and to work out their salvation; faith works by love. But the insistence that we can do nothing to

gain salvation by our own efforts is absolutely fundamental.

These points hopefully sum up the main aspects of salvation in the New Testament. They are concerned with the experience of believers after the Easter and Pentecost events. The situation before Easter in the lifetime of Jesus is, as I hinted, somewhat different, and I am not sure that it is profitable for us in this paper to investigate the relationship between discipleship before Easter and salvation after Easter. I think it is true to say that the disciples of Jesus were the recipients of salvation prior to his death, but for our purpose it is not sensible to discuss this rather academic question.

At the same time, it can be said that surely these points are equally characteristic of contemporary Christianity, should we want to compare our own concept and experience of salvation with that of other religions. Or, to put the point otherwise, I would hope that what I have said so far could be regarded as a criterion for our own Christian experience; the New Testament shows us what our experience of salvation should be like.

II. Other Religions in the Ancient World

The next aspect of our topic is a comparison between the Christian understanding of salvation and the understandings that were prevalent in the ancient world. Here I freely confess considerable indebtedness to the valuable study of M. Green.

1. *The Old Testament*

In order to proceed quickly to the main topic, I am going to deal fairly briefly with the concept of salvation in the OT.

(a). There is an extensive terminology of 'salvation' words in the Old Testament, and it is important to note that the word 'save' does not automatically connote spiritual salvation. Often the reference is to deliverance from enemies or to rescue from imminent death or to healing from disease; even when these things are the

object of prayer to Yahweh, whether in petition for his action or in thanks for what he has done, there is nothing specially religious or spiritual about what was granted, and the spiritual side of things lies rather in the general context of a situation where people believe that these benefits come from Yahweh and pray to him concerning them. In other words, they are seen in a religious context and thereby have a spiritual aspect to them.

(b). The word 'salvation' can come to denote the general welfare of the individual, including the benefits just referred to but also encompassing a general wholeness in life, a sense of peace, security and consciousness of God's favour. Thus the dividing line between different kinds of benefit is not hard and fast.

(c). The link with such specific benefits as forgiveness is not absent. Consequently, we can surely speak of a genuine experience of salvation on the part of some of the people of Israel, and we could probably attest the presence somewhere or other of most of the ingredients in the Christian package, while admitting that at any given point there will be more of a selection and less of the whole package and that certain elements are either absent or less developed; here one thinks obviously of the absence of a relationship to Jesus Christ and to the Holy Spirit. But the lines of continuity are such that we are speaking of the same basic experience.

(d). Where the OT differs from the NT is in the way in which it regards Israel as a saved community to which people belong 'automatically' by being racially part of it. In theory all Israel are saved. At the same time, however, some individuals cut themselves off from God by sins, and others express a close relationship to him in the language of the Psalms. The question of the relationship between outward belonging to the people of God and spiritual experience is not raised. We have to remember also that the concept of an after-life is marginal to the OT, and the decisive question of who will share in

future life in the presence of God is simply not raised for the most part.

2. *Judaism*

The question becomes the more acute when we move out of the OT itself into the Judaism of the time of Jesus.

Our problem here, which I cannot discuss with the detail that it really demands, is as follows: Granted that Judaism professed to be the direct continuation of the religion of the Old Testament, why was it that the early church reached the conclusion that it was no longer acceptable to God (Rom. 9:31f.)? The simple answer is that by and large it refused to accept Jesus as the Messiah; Jews who looked forward, in accordance with prophecy, to the coming of the Messiah did not accept that Jesus was the Messiah. This opposition was related by Paul to a lack of belief in God and to the development of a religion which went about things in the wrong way, depending on the works of the law for justification instead of on faith in Christ. Christian Jews identified themselves as the pious remnant of true believers, a remnant which was of course enlarged to include the believing gentiles. Thus they came to believe that it was faith in God, in appropriate terms for the period before the coming of the Messiah, which was the true criterion of the people of God. Those with true belief in God would take the right step forward and believe in Jesus as the Messiah, just as 'Abraham saw my day and rejoiced' (John 8:56).

We can, then, talk of a real experience of salvation on the part of devout Jews, typified by Zechariah and Elizabeth, Cornelius and others, who welcomed the coming of the Messiah, but it would seem that their experience of all the blessings of salvation was partial. Other Jews, the kind of Sadducees and Pharisees who had become worldly and self-righteous, would have cut themselves off from such blessings. In terms of entry into the final state of salvation, who can doubt that a Cornelius, had he died before he met Peter, would have been saved?

Some backing for this general view is afforded by the fact that, contrary to the widespread view that first-century Jews in general believed that all circumcised Jews would be saved, there was a number of groups which held to a remnant theology: they believed that only a smaller group within a generally apostate nation would escape divine judgment, and that this smaller group was to be identified with their own particular sect with its particular pattern of godly behaviour. This view is clearly reflected in numerous writings of the inter-testamental period, including Jubilees, 1 Enoch and 4 Ezra, as well as the Dead Sea Scrolls.³ That is to say, we have a close parallel to the way in which early Christians for their part regarded themselves as the saved remnant; there was nothing unusual about the development of yet another group which believed that it was the truly saved people and that those outside were lost.

Now the corollary of this view is, of course, that people in these sects regarded themselves, rightly or wrongly, as being saved (whatever the precise terminology they used). It would, therefore, be interesting to determine how far the characteristics of Christian salvation can be traced in the different Judaisms of the period. In view of what I have just said, there is no reason to doubt that there can have been genuine experiences of salvation within these groups by godly individuals. It is equally possible that some people may have used the right language and had a form of godliness but lacked the power thereof, just as happened in first-century Christianity (2 Tim 3:5), and just as happens today when people sing hymns or say prayers without really believing or understanding what they are doing. It perhaps should also be said that it is possible for people to be doctrinally in error or morally sinful and yet to have genuine experience of God and of salvation.

From a Christian point of view, which claims that the Messiah or Christ had come in Jesus, the test of genuine Jewish religion lay in acknowledgment of him. The decisive question is expressed in John

8:42, where Jesus is represented as saying to the Pharisees: 'If God were your Father, you would love me, for I came from God and now am here. I have not come on my own, but he sent me.' The test of whether people who claim to have God as Father really are children of God is whether, when they hear of Jesus, they love him. If the test is negative, then their claim to have God as Father is empty.

It should, therefore, not surprise us that there is a whole host of parallels to Christian salvation-language in the writings of Judaism, especially in the piety expressed in some of the Dead Sea Scrolls. I forbear from analysis, but I think that it would be true to say that there are parallels to many individual items in the Christian package but not to the package as a whole, principally because of the lack of knowledge of Jesus Christ himself.

3. Hellenistic Religion—the Search for Salvation

We now move on into the area of Hellenistic Religion in general.

(a). M. Green takes up the finding of W. M. Ramsay that lots of people in the ancient world prayed *hyper sōtērias*. What were they hoping to get? The term appears to cover a multitude of things and it could perhaps best be summarised as 'well-being', embracing good health and recovery from diseases and accidents, freedom from war and similar perils, fertility for the farmer, and in general the things that make one contented and happy with life. People believed that any and all of these things could be bestowed by the gods, just as bad things also came from the gods. We have, therefore, the basic belief that well-being and disaster are both due to divine influences, and therefore people pray and sacrifice and carry out other religious duties in order to secure divine favour. But the actual blessings for which people pray appear to be natural benefits as opposed to spiritual goods; the content of salvation is very different from what was experienced in Christianity.

(b). The gods have the authority and

power to confer things that cannot be gained by ordinary human effort. They control that which is beyond human control. Alongside such benefits there was also the kind of benefits that could be bestowed by political figures. A capable ruler could save his people from their foes and give them a prosperous and secure life. The Roman emperor was regarded as the Saviour of his people because he established peace throughout the empire. During the imperial period there was on the whole freedom from internal conflict by contrast with the fierce civil wars during the first century BC; I am not forgetting that there were good emperors and bad emperors and that there was civil war in AD 69, the year of the four emperors. The people within the empire were safe from external enemies, although there were border areas where conflict raged. There was an imposed unity among the peoples in the empire, and many of them enjoyed prosperity and wealth. It was thus plausible to develop a political ideology of the kind found in the Augustan poets, Virgil and Horace, who acclaimed the emperor as the bringer of peace and plenty, and for emperors to celebrate their own achievements for their subjects. The tradition of dubbing a ruler as *Sōter/Salvator/Conservator*, which goes back at least as far as Philip of Macedon, was naturally taken over for the Roman emperors. A ruler-cult, which gave divine honours to the ruler, had already developed among Hellenistic rulers, and for our purposes it is unnecessary to discuss the extent to which the element of worship was attached to it or in what precise sense the ruler was regarded as divine. It would certainly not be surprising if a person who could provide these benefits was regarded as superhuman and divine or if he or his state-machine felt entitled to claim this status for him.

But the point to be made here is that the benefits in question were political and this-worldly. They were inevitably fragile and easily destroyed, and they were of limited extent—'Caesar can give peace from war but he cannot give peace from

sorrow' (Epictetus). What is covered by the term 'salvation' in this context is purely political, and again, therefore, it stands little comparison with the spiritual salvation which Christians claimed to enjoy.

4. Some Specific Forms of Hellenistic Religion

Such national well-being depended partly on observance of religious cults. There was a national religion alongside private cults which offered other things to their devotees. The success of the ruler depended on the favour of the gods. So there was a cult aimed at winning the favour of the gods to act directly for the benefit of the citizens or to confer blessing and success on the ruler. Green makes a distinction between this *religio* and the private religious activities of individuals which are covered by the term *superstitio*. These latter were concerned with the benefits that were not covered by the political 'salvation' conveyed by the state cult, and we now turn to them.

(a). *The Mystery Religions* Pre-eminent among these private cults were the Mystery Religions. There was a whole host of these and it is usual to regard them as a family with similarities in structure, content and social function. Whatever their origins and history, which are usually traced back to primitive fertility rituals, elements of which still persisted, it appears that primarily they offered hope of a better life beyond the grave. They conferred immortality on their devotees. On occasion the vocabulary of 'rebirth' is used, although its force is debated. There is good evidence that this language was widespread in the ancient world to refer to any kind of new beginning, and therefore we should not attach too precise a force to it when we encounter it in the context of the Mysteries. Nevertheless, if it was used, it identified the devotees as those who were destined for eternal life after the grave, and thus the Mysteries do provide a significant parallel to the Christian faith. Further, there was a 'churchly' element in that there was a group of

devotees and a cult which included ceremonies of initiation and continuing membership. The cults fulfilled a social function also in that they gathered people together in a religious community which was sharply defined from society by the rite of initiation and the esoteric nature of the proceedings. It is generally said—and I know of no strong evidence to the contrary—that there was little emphasis on morality, although ritual cleanliness was certainly a requirement on the part of initiates.

The points of comparison with Christian salvation stand out fairly obviously. There does not seem to be anything corresponding to the Christian experience of present salvation. There is no corresponding spiritual change in people.

(b). *Magic, Astrology and Divination* We now come to three areas which might appear to be termed 'religious' only by courtesy. But a glance at the shelves devoted to 'religion' in any contemporary bookshop will show that our world has a broad sense of the term which will accommodate anything in the ancient world and more. The first area is that of magic. The ancient Mediterranean world has bequeathed to the archaeologist in particular a vast collection of magical materials, lucky charms, spells and invocations, descriptions of ritual practices which were used in order to get specific things like healing from diseases and the expulsion of demons. Frustrated lovers used magic to get a response from the objects of their passion, and barren couples sought to gain conception. Spells were cast on enemies to bring disaster and even death upon them. The whole thing can be regarded as religious in that it was an attempt to influence spiritual powers, and in that it called upon various gods and divine powers by name. Jewish and Christian divine names are found alongside a pantheon of non-Christian gods and heavenly and chthonic beings.

The second area, closely connected with the previous one, is that of astrology. The heavenly bodies were conceived as being either divine beings or closely linked to divine beings, and they were regarded as

having control over different aspects of human life and different people. Heavenly movements of the stars and planets were regarded as signs and portents of things happening on earth. Here we should mention the belief in Fate or Fortune (*Tychē* / (*Fors*) *Fortuna*). This word is conspicuously absent from the NT and is found only 3 times in the LXX (Is 65:11, of people who worship Fortune and Destiny; Gn 30:11, of happiness or good fortune; 2 Macc 7:37 of one's personal life); yet it is accorded 1.5 columns in the standard Greek Lexicon, which is quite lengthy by the standards of that work. The belief in chance and uncertainty became hardened for many into an impersonal power or a divine being.

Astrology was the science of determining what was to happen by observing the celestial signs. I am writing these words on an afternoon in May on a day when I know that there will be a partial eclipse of the sun at 1830 BST, and I do not regard it as supernaturally influencing my life. One can imagine the wonder of ancient people at such a rare event and the tendency to assign significance to it. I do not know whether astrology extended to trying to influence the heavenly bodies and their rulers. It is certainly the case that people felt themselves to be under their control.

Along with astrology we should link a third very characteristic element in ancient superstition, divination, which was the art of foretelling the future and determining whether the gods would prosper or impede a person's action by all kinds of portents, the ancient equivalent of reading fortunes from tea leaves; sacrificing an animal and examining its entrails, especially its liver, for unusual signs, was a well-attested Roman practice.

We may seem to have rather moved away from salvation at this point, but in effect we are looking at the kind of things which in the ancient world, as in the modern, functioned as a kind of substitute and had a strong following.

(c). *Gnosticism and the Hermetica* In his survey of the ancient world Green

includes a brief section on Gnosticism. I have been uncertain whether or not I should follow his example, since Gnosticism properly so-called is a group of religious systems clearly attested only from the second century AD and we do not know how wide a following they had. I suspect that it was considerably less than that of the Mysteries. Nevertheless, the attitudes that flowered as Gnosticism in the second century are in fact older, and therefore the phenomenon is worthy of mention here.

Gnostics in general sought to attain final union with the divine through knowledge of a cosmological myth. They regarded salvation as release from this material world and the powers which held it in thrall, so that the soul could make its way upward to God. The Gnostics were those who had this knowledge and thus had the certainty of ultimate salvation. They had come to know their true identity and thus to escape from the darkness of ignorance. They regarded the body as evil and therefore salvation included escape from it. Their beliefs could include a Redeemer who descended to the earth from above and then returned.

What is not clear is how far this led to present spiritual experience of any kind. A major problem is separating off the elements in Gnosticism which were derived from Christianity or Judaism. Elements that resemble the characteristics of the Christian experience of salvation as we have delineated it above may well spring from the Christian base of so many of the Gnostic systems in the second century. So, for example, when we find teaching about freedom from wickedness in the *Secret Book of John*,⁴ this may well be Christian. There is a very Christian colour to the *Gospel of Truth*, which speaks about knowing the Father and commends love. But when we set aside the Christian elements, what we are left with time and again is simply an account of a myth, and it would seem that the religious activity of the Gnostics lay in the composition of these myths and presumably in recitation and meditation based on them.

So far as I can tell, Gnostic salvation is to be understood in terms of redemption and this does not take place until the death of the individual.⁵ What precedes redemption is probably better understood as a religion, i.e. a set of human beliefs and practices, rather than as salvation, in the sense of the reception and experience of a divine transformation and entry into a relationship with God. Gnostic behaviour is all too scantily attested; we hear a little of various cultic rites and the use of psalms and prayers. But again we do not know whether we are hearing Christian material or purely Gnostic. Thus Rudolph quotes the *Odes of Solomon* as examples of Gnostic hymns, and they speak of fellowship with God in a striking way.⁶ But this is surely Christian material. It is thus extremely difficult to isolate any strictly Gnostic material to compare with the Christian.

W. Foerster discusses the use of the salvation word-group in Gnosticism. He notes that the term 'Saviour' does not appear apart from Christian influence, in documents where Christ is the Saviour. He comments '... the personal element in *soter* is less prominent in Gnosticism; the Redeemer is the bearer of a redeeming summons. When the activity of the Redeemer goes beyond the bringing of the call we are usually in the vicinity of a magically understood sacrament, as may be seen from Act. Thom. At this point Gnosticism becomes part and parcel of the mystery religions'.⁷ Likewise the verb *sōzō* is not common. Terms indicative of release and deliverance are used with reference to the setting free of the soul from the hostile powers.

So far as we can tell, then, there appears to be a world of difference between the Gnostic understanding of salvation and the Christian. Gnostic salvation is final deliverance for those who have knowledge. To the extent that they have this knowledge they are destined for salvation, and they participate in a religion, but there is little evidence of the decisive change brought about by being saved in the Christian religion except where Gnostic and Christian motifs have been welded together.

A special problem is posed by the *Corpus Hermeticum* which falls within the general category of Gnosticism.⁸ Here there is much more explicit teaching about a present knowledge of God and an experience of rebirth through which a person can be already 'divine' (CH 1:26; 10:9) and immortal (CH 4:5; 10:4). 'Nobody can be saved before rebirth' (CH 13:1). The knowledge of God alone is salvation (CH 10:15). This knowledge appears to be largely concerned with learning a cosmological myth, as in Gnosticism (CH 1), but it seems to go beyond this in the way in which knowledge about a person and knowledge of a person may tend to merge with each other. Initiates enter into life and light (CH 1:32). And the result of the rebirth is an ethical transformation with the departure of the twelve afflictions or evil passions and their replacement by ten new qualities (knowledge; joy; continence; steadfastness; justice; fellowship; truth; goodness; life; light) which bear a remarkable resemblance to the fruit of the Spirit in Gal 5 (CH 13:8—10). There is a sense in which God is in certain people in the form of mind, so that they are in effect gods (CH 12:1f.) 'Rebirth in fact is the identification of a man with God through the indwelling of the *logos*'.⁹ Without going into detail, it seems clear that here we have something much closer to the biblical idea of present rebirth and salvation than we have found elsewhere in the ancient world. The question of the relationship between this teaching and that of the NT naturally arises: is there dependence in either direction? We shall, of course, note that the documentation is later than the New Testament (second-fifth centuries), and that, if critical biblical scholars are extraordinarily hesitant to ascribe ideas found in the late first century to early Christians and Jesus himself, we should perhaps be equally cautious about reading back Hermetic ideas into the period before AD 100. Scholarly opinion on the matter is divided, but the hypothesis of a common religious milieu in which Christianity, especially Johannine Christianity, and

the Hermetic religion developed is perhaps the most widely held opinion.¹⁰

III. Conclusions

In summary, what I have done is to place the Christian 'package' alongside its competitors in the ancient world. I hope that the impact of my discussion of Christianity has been to show that the package is a coherent and integrated one and that its principal characteristic is that salvation is a present, transforming experience of the love and power of God which anticipates future life with him. I am a firm believer in the unity of the New Testament, in the sense that the different authors witness to the same basic understanding of salvation, and I would hold that this common basis is far from being a narrow list of common beliefs and experiences. The New Testament writers testify to a remarkably rich and broad understanding of salvation.

Alongside this understanding of salvation we have seen the broad character of salvation in Judaism and in the broader Hellenistic world. For me the interesting fact is that, with the exceptions of Judaism and the Hermetica, we have found nothing that is really comparable with Christian salvation. Non-Christian conceptions of salvation are remarkably narrow and superficial compared with Christianity. The thing that struck me most in making this survey of the Hellenistic world was the almost complete absence of so much that characterises the Christian pilgrimage in this world; the things that Christians experience, or claim to experience, for the most part are simply not there. That is why I have used the word 'experience' quite a lot, because I have been trying to show that not just the theory or theology is different, but also the actual 'life' of the saved person. The difference is not simply that Christianity offers a different route to the same desirable end, namely by putting forward Christ as the way to salvation; rather the destination is different, and the journey to the destination is itself very different in

character. The evidence has accumulated that a vital part of the distinctiveness of Christianity lies in its 'realised eschatology', its present anticipation of the joys of heaven.

We have also seen incidentally that Christianity existed in a pluralist world with a wide range of possible religious attitudes. There were many groups which claimed exclusivity. At the same time, there was a good deal of syncretism, and there was also the kind of pluralism which can allow an individual to belong to several religions at once and not simply maintain that any one religion may be as valid as any other, so that it does not matter too much which one you choose. Christianity clearly falls into the exclusive, non-syncretistic category. Second, Christianity stands apart from the syncretism of the ancient world generally. Despite suggestions often made that it succeeded precisely because it was syncretistic, I can see no evidence of this for the New Testament period. There is no indication that Christians somehow amalgamated their beliefs with those of other religions, even though there was inevitably influence in the use of language and the development of concepts. There is certainly no evidence of New Testament Christianity allowing believers the option of continuing to follow other religions simultaneously. Moreover, as I argued at a FEET conference several years ago, I see no evidence that early Christians entered into the sort of dialogue with other people in which they hoped to learn more and even alter their own beliefs: New Testament evangelism was the proclamation of a given message.¹¹ Or rather, it was the proclamation of a historical person, Jesus Christ, as Saviour, and that historical basis determined the message through and through.

In short, the most significant feature that has come to light for me in preparing this paper is undoubtedly the uniqueness of Christianity among first-century religions in its understanding of salvation and its experience of it. This is not at all surprising, given the figure of Jesus Christ and Christian experience of him as

Saviour. But it would require another paper to do justice to 'The Christian Saviour compared with other saviour-figures'.

- 1 E. M. B. Green, *The Meaning of Salvation*, London, 1965. Other bibliography for the topic includes: F. Bovon, 'Le salut dans les écrits de Luc', *RThPh* 23, 1973, 296–307; A. George, *Etudes sur l'oeuvre de Luc*, Paris, 1978, 307–320; D. Hill, *Greek Words and Hebrew Meanings*, Cambridge, 1967; W. C. van Unnik, *Sparsa Collecta*, Leiden, 1973, I, 16–34; D. F. Wells, *The Search for Salvation*, Leicester, 1978; W. Foerster and G. Fohrer, *TDNT* VII, 965–1024; W. L. Liefeld, *ISBE* IV, 287–295; A. B. Luter, Jr., *DPL*, 967–869; L. Morris, *DPL*, 858–862; W. Radl, *EWNT* III, 766–770; J. Schneider and C. Brown, *NIDNTT* III, 205–221. For my own previous surveys of the topic see I. H. Marshall, *DJG*, 719–724; *NDT*, 610f.
- 2 K. P. Donfried and I. H. Marshall, *The Theology of the Shorter Pauline Letters*,

Cambridge, 1993, 138–144; F. Neugebauer, *In Christus: eine Untersuchung zum paulinischen Glaubensverständnis*, Göttingen, 1961.

- 3 See especially M. Elliott, 'The Survivors of Israel', Diss. Aberdeen, 1993.
- 4 R. M. Grant, *Gnosticism: an Anthology*, London, 1961, 83.
- 5 K. Rudolph, *Gnosis*, Edinburgh, 1983, 113–71.
- 6 K. Rudolph, op. cit., 221, citing Od Sol 21.
- 7 *TDNT* VII, 1020.
- 8 See the texts in R. M. Grant, op. cit., 209–233.
- 9 C. H. Dodd, *The Interpretation of the Fourth Gospel*, Cambridge, 1953, 48; cf. 10–53.
- 10 J. A. Trumbower, *Anchor Bible Dictionary* III, 156f.; cf. R. Schnackenburg, *Das Johannesevangelium*, Freiburg, 1965, I, 118–120.
- 11 'Dialogue with Non-Christians in the New Testament', *Evangelical Review of Theology* 16:1, January 1992, 28–47.