

God as Savior and Salvation in the Old Testament

In the Old Testament God is presented not only as the Redeemer, paying a price to bring His people back to Himself, but also as their Savior. Salvation in the Old Testament has both a physical sense and a spiritual sense. The physical sense is that of freeing from trouble and distress, e.g., from the hand of enemies, and also bringing into a safe place and a condition of wealth. The spiritual sense is that of preparing the way for the New Testament revelation of God's full salvation. God is both the direct agent and the ultimate source of salvation, working behind indirect (human) agents of salvation. This article looks at words for *salvation* in the Old Testament and the imagery used in their context, focusing particularly on God as the agent of salvation and on the preparation for the New Testament experience of salvation.

Words Denoting Salvation

The primary word root for *salvation* is *ysh'*. It is rich in meaning in Hebrew. It primarily has the notion of "delivering," "saving," "liberating (especially from evils and troubles)," and "giving victory (in battle)." *Ysh'* may have come from the biconsonantal root *sh'* or *shw'*, perhaps meaning "noble," "free," or "wealthy" (cf. Isa. 32:5; Job 34:19). *Ysh'* may also be related to the Arabic root *wasi'a*, meaning "being capacious," "making wide, spacious," "making sufficient," and "being or living in abundance." Therefore, in its fullest sense *ysh'* may mean "delivering from oppression and trouble and saving into a state of security, nobility, wealth, and spaciousness."

There are other verb roots with similar meanings that sometimes occur in parallel with *ysh'*, such as *ntsl* ("snatch away," "deliver"), which occurs about two hundred thirteen times as a verb, most frequently as a causative hiphil and a passive reflexive niphil, meaning "deliver" or "rescue." The next most common root is *mlt* ("escape," "slip away," "rescue," "deliver"), which occurs about ninety-six times as a verb, most frequently as either a niphil passive reflexive (mostly meaning "escape") or as a piel factitive (meaning "make escaped" or "deliver"). The root *plt* ("escape," "bring into security," "deliver") occurs about twenty-seven times as a verb, mostly as a piel factitive meaning "make escaped" or "rescue." It occurs mostly in the Psalms (nineteen times). In addition, there are two roots meaning "redeem" and "buy back"—*pdh* and *g'l*, which also occur in

parallel with the root *ysh'*; e.g., at the Red Sea Jehovah "saved them [the children of Israel] from the hand of him who hated them, / And redeemed [*g'l*] them from the hand of the enemy" (106:10; cf. Isa. 63:9).

Frequently, God is the agent and ultimate source of these actions of salvation or deliverance, but they are also frequently accomplished through a human agent, such as a judge or a king (Judg. 6:36). For example, "Jehovah has spoken of David, saying, By [lit., "in the hand of"] My servant David I will save My people Israel out of the hand of the Philistines and out of the hand of all their enemies" (2 Sam. 3:18). In His interaction with Gideon regarding the number of men who would go and fight Midian, Jehovah made it clear that the people should realize that the source of salvation was not themselves (as the human agents) but Jehovah Himself (Judg. 7:2).

God as Savior

The noun *Moshia'*, meaning "Savior," is used eleven times in the Old Testament to refer to God, especially by His name Jehovah. David, in his song composed after Jehovah delivered him from the hand (*mikkaf*, lit., "from the palm") of all his enemies and from the hand (*mikkaf*, "palm") of Saul, calls Jehovah his crag and his fortress and his Deliverer (*mepallet*, the piel participle of *plt*, "escape"); his God, his rock, in whom he takes refuge; his shield and the horn of his salvation, his high retreat and his refuge; and his Savior (*Moshia'*), who saves him from violence (2 Sam. 22:1-3). David uses the imagery of physical protection, recalling his time in the wilderness as he was fleeing from Saul. God was the Savior of the children of Israel from Egypt and in the wilderness (Psa. 106:21; Isa. 63:8). In the coming age Egypt "will cry unto Jehovah because of their oppressors, and He will send them a Savior and Mighty One; and He will deliver them" (19:20). Jehovah the God of Israel is called the Holy One of Israel, their Savior (43:3). There is no Savior besides Him (v. 11). Jehovah, the God of Israel, a God (*'El*) who hides Himself, is the Savior (45:15). He is a righteous God and Savior, and there is no one except Him (v. 21). In the restoration both the nations and Israel will know that Jehovah is the Savior of Israel, their Redeemer, and the Mighty One of Jacob (49:26; 60:16). Jeremiah calls Jehovah the Hope of Israel, "its Savior in a time of distress"

(Jer. 14:8). The hiphil participle *moshia'* is also used at least five times to refer to Jehovah; for example, "As Jehovah lives, who saves Israel" (1 Sam. 14:39; cf. 11:13; Judg. 6:36; Jer. 30:10; 46:27; Zech. 8:7).

Jehovah is called a Deliverer (*Mepallet*, the piel participle of *plt*) five times: first, as mentioned above, in 2 Samuel 22:2; second, in the parallel passage, Psalm 18:2; third and fourth, in Psalm 40:17 and 70:5, where He is a help and a Deliverer (40:17; 70:5); and fifth, in Psalm 144:2, which says that Jehovah is a fortress, a high retreat and a Deliverer, a shield and He in whom one can take refuge. In Psalm 35:10 Jehovah is One who delivers (*Mattsil*, the hiphil participle of *ntsl*) the poor from him who is too strong for him and delivers the poor and needy from him who robs him. *Mattsil* is mostly used for the inability of others to deliver, as in the phrase *there is no one who can deliver*, from Jehovah's hand or some calamity (Isa. 43:13; 42:22). These examples of *Savior* and *Deliverer* relate to physical imagery as well as to a future salvation and hope that may be both physical (i.e., a return from captivity and restoration to the land of Israel) and spiritual (prefiguring salvation in the New Testament).¹

Verbs Denoting Actions of Saving and God as Agent

The verb *yash'ah* occurs about one hundred eighty times and conjugates in two patterns—a passive (niphil) form ("be saved") and an active causative (hiphil) form ("cause to be safe," "save"). Very frequently Jehovah is the agent of the action of saving. In its physical sense *yash'ah* means "to save, deliver, or rescue from enemies"—for example, Jehovah's saving of Israel from (the hand of) their enemies (Deut. 20:4), enemies such as the Egyptians at the Red Sea (Exo. 14:30), Midian (Judg. 7:2), the Philistines (1 Sam. 7:8; 2 Sam. 3:18), and the Assyrians (2 Chron. 32:22). There are also the promise and hope that Jehovah will save the captive Israelites and gather them from among the nations (Psa. 146:7), saving His people from the land of the east and from the land of the going down of the sun (Zech. 8:7).

Jehovah's saving is related to His person and His presence, as indicated in the phrase *cause Your face to shine, and we will be saved* (Psa. 80:3). The Angel of His presence saved His people (Isa. 63:9). Jehovah is with them to save them (Jer. 15:20; 30:11; 42:11), even as a mighty One who saves (Zeph. 3:17). Salvation is connected to and even a result of calling on His name (2 Sam. 22:4; Psa. 34:6; 119:146; 118:25; cf. Joel 2:32) and crying out to Him (2 Chron. 20:9; Psa. 107:13; 145:19); see 22:5 ("delivered," *yemallet*). Salvation comes to those who wait for Jehovah (Prov. 20:22; Isa. 25:9). In returning to Him and rest we will be saved (30:15). Jehovah, the One who embodies the three branches of government, as Jehovah our Judge, Jehovah our Lawmaker, and Jehovah our King, will save us

(33:22). Israel has been saved by Jehovah with an eternal salvation (45:17). However, salvation came to Israel in a way that was not expected; as Zechariah states, "Exult greatly, O daughter of Zion; / Shout, O daughter of Jerusalem! / Now your King comes to you. / He is righteous and bears salvation, / Lowly and riding upon a donkey, / Even upon a colt, the foal of a donkey" (9:9), which refers prophetically to Jesus' lowly entry into Jerusalem just prior to His crucifixion, in which He was despised and rejected by men. Because of Israel's rejection of God's way of salvation, salvation became universal, open to all, as Isaiah quotes Jehovah saying, "Turn to Me and be saved, / All the ends of the earth, / For I am God and there is no one else" (45:22). Jeremiah charges Jerusalem to wash her heart from wickedness so that she may be saved (Jer. 4:14).

Salvation will come to Israel in its last battle with Antichrist and his armies, as indicated in Isaiah's prophetic description of the Lord Jesus at His return: "Who is this who comes from Edom / With red-stained garments, from Bozrah? / This One who is majestic in His apparel, / Marching in the greatness of His strength? / It is I who speak in righteousness, / Mighty to save" (Isa. 63:1); "In His days Judah will be saved, / And Israel will dwell securely; / And this is His name by which He will be called: Jehovah our righteousness" (Jer. 23:6; cf. 33:16).

Nouns Denoting Salvation, Including God as Salvation

There are three Hebrew nouns derived from the verb *yasha'*: *yasha'*, *teshu'a*, and *yeshu'a*.² They have similar meanings—"salvation," "deliverance," "rescue," and also "safety" and "welfare." *Yasha'* ("salvation") occurs about thirty-six times. It means "safety," "welfare," "salvation," or "physical rescue." *Salvation* (referring to a horn and indicating fighting strength) occurs in parallel with a crag and a fortress, a rock and refuge, and a high retreat (Psa. 18:2). The imagery of salvation is that of a high and protected fortification, a safe place, and a refuge from the attacks of an enemy. God is both the source of salvation and even salvation itself. God is frequently called the God of salvation; i.e., God is salvation (v. 46; 24:5; 25:5; 27:9; 65:5; 79:9; 85:4; 1 Chron. 16:35; Isa. 17:10; Micah 7:7; Hab. 3:18). Jehovah is our light and our salvation (Psa. 27:1). On God our salvation and our glory depend (62:7).

Teshu'a occurs about thirty-four times and most commonly means "victory in battle" (1 Sam. 11:9; 19:5). At least three times God is referred to as *teshu'a*. The Lord (*'Adonay*) is referred to as salvation (Psa. 38:22), God is the God of salvation (51:14), and Jehovah their God is the salvation of Israel (Jer. 3:23).

Yeshu'a ("salvation") is the most common noun of the three and occurs about seventy-eight times, mostly in the Psalms and Isaiah. It means "welfare," "prosperity,"

“deliverance,” and “victory” (Job 30:15). Salvation is of Jehovah (Psa. 3:8). Salvation is associated with His countenance. The psalmist will yet praise Him for the salvation of His countenance (42:5). God is also the salvation of our countenance and our God (43:5; 42:11). The children of Israel did not possess the land by their sword, nor did their arm save them; rather, it was Jehovah’s right hand and His arm and the light of His countenance that saved them (44:3).

These nouns related to salvation have both a physical sense and a spiritual sense (most examples are of *yeshu’a*). They indicate safety and deliverance from enemies, as well as welfare and prosperity (Job 30:15). In addition to their usage in the verses above, where God is referred to as the God of salvation, indicating that God is or has become salvation (cf. Exo. 15:2; Psa. 118:14; Isa. 12:2), other instances indicate that He is also the rock of our salvation (Deut. 32:15; Psa. 62:2, 6; 89:26) and that He sets up strongholds of salvation with walls and a rampart (28:8; Isa. 26:1; 60:18). Salvation is also associated with clothing, twice in the military realm—a shield of salvation (2 Sam. 22:36) and a helmet of salvation (Isa. 59:17)—and in other instances, for the priests—garments of salvation (Psa. 132:16; Isa. 61:10; 2 Chron. 6:41). The lowly are adorned with salvation (Psa. 149:4). Salvation is also a cup (116:13), and we can draw water with rejoicing from the springs of salvation (Isa. 12:3). Salvation produces great joy and rejoicing. The psalmists exulted in Jehovah’s salvation (Psa. 9:14), shouted victoriously in His salvation (20:5), and rejoiced in His salvation (35:9). Isaiah exhorted his audience to be glad and rejoice in His salvation (Isa. 25:9). David requested that Jehovah restore to him the gladness of His salvation (*yeshu’a*) after he confessed his sins (Psa. 51:12). Salvation is also made known, proclaimed, announced, and seen (67:2; 96:2; Isa. 52:7, 10). Also, David says that God would make all his salvation grow (lit., “sprout,” 2 Sam. 23:5).

Names Denoting Salvation

In addition to the verbs and nouns mentioned above, there are a number of proper names that come from the root *ysh’*, names which express the feeling of the children of Israel regarding salvation and God’s role in their experience of salvation. This can be seen especially in names that have theophoric prefixes or suffixes combined with words related to salvation. The name *Hoshe’a* (“salvation”), which resembles the causative infinitive of the verb *yasha’*, was given initially to Joshua the son of Nun (Num. 13:8; Deut. 32:44) and later given to the last king of Israel (2 Kings 15:30) and to the prophet Hosea (Hosea 1:1). One of the leaders of Judah who assisted in the rebuilding of the wall of Jerusalem was called *Hoshaiah* (or *Hosha’yah*, “salvation of Yah,” Neh. 12:32).

The name *Joshua* went through three steps of transformation. The original form was a long *Yehoshu’a* (“Jehovah is salvation,” Exo. 17:9). It has the theophoric prefix *Yeho-* (a shortened form of *Jehovah*) followed by *yeshu’a* (“salvation”), with the elision of the *ye-* prefix of the noun *yeshu’a*. Then the name’s theophoric prefix *Yeho-* was shortened to *Yo-*, producing *Yoshua’* (Joshua). Finally, the name was changed to *Yeshua’* (Jeshua) through the dissimilation of the *Yo-* to *Ye-* (Ezra 3:2). *Yeshua’* is also a homonym of the noun *yeshu’a* (“salvation”). This is the name that was given to the Lord Jesus at birth (Gk. Ἰησοῦς, “Jehovah the Savior,” or “the salvation of Jehovah,” Matt. 1:21). *Ish’i* or *Yish’i* (“salvation,” *yeshu’a*) is the name of one of the descendants of Judah (1 Chron. 2:31). *Elisha’* (“God is salvation,” *El-yeshu’a*) is the name of the prophet who succeeded Elijah (1 Kings 19:16). Related to the name Elisha is the name *Elishua’* (“God is salvation,” *El-yeshu’a*), the name of one of the sons of David (2 Sam. 5:15; 1 Chron. 14:5). The name of the prophet Isaiah (Heb. *Yeshu’yahu*, “salvation of Jehovah,” Isa. 1:1) has the noun *yeshu’a* (“salvation”) with the theophoric suffix *-yahu*, a shortened form of *Jehovah*. The suffix *-yahu* shortens further to *-yah* in the name Jesaiah (Heb. *Yeshu’iah*, 1 Chron. 3:21; Ezra 8:7).

God is called the God of deliverance (Heb. *mosha’ot*, “saving acts,” Psa. 68:20). The name *Mesha’*, the king of Moab, also means “deliverance” (2 Kings 3:4).³

Translation into Greek of Words Denoting Salvation

Yasha’ is usually translated into Greek using the verb σώζω and occasionally with prepositional prefixes, such as διά- (“through”); for example, “Just as you were a curse among the nations, O house of Judah and house of Israel, so will I save (διασώζω) you, and you will be a blessing” (Zech. 8:13). Perhaps the translator wanted to indicate the sense of “utterly save, save through to the end,” the state in which there will be no more curse or possibility to be a curse. The verb σώζω comes from σῶος (“safe,” “free from harm”) with the causative suffix -ίζω and means literally “to cause to be safe,” “to cause to be free from harm.” Occasionally, *yasha’* is translated “ῥύομαι” (“deliver,” Exo. 14:30). A few times *yasha’* is translated “βοηθῆω” (“help,” e.g., Prov. 20:22). The root *plt* (“rescue”) is most commonly translated “ῥύομαι” (e.g., Psa. 71:4), and ῥύομαι is also commonly used to translate *ntsl* (“deliver,” e.g., 6:4). But *ntsl* (over forty percent of the time) is most commonly translated “ἐξαίρω” (“take away,” “extract,” “remove,” “rescue,” e.g., Exo. 3:8). *Mlt* (“escape”) is mostly translated “σώζω” (for example, “Everyone who calls on the name of Jehovah shall be saved,” where *yimmalet* is translated “σωθήσεται,” Joel 2:32) and “διασώζω” (“bring safely through,” “rescue”). It is occasionally translated “ῥύομαι” (mostly in the Psalms), and rarely, “ἐξαίρω.” The fact that *mlt*, *ntsl*, and *plt* are

translated “שָׁצַו” is an indication of the semantic overlap between these roots.

The three nouns for salvation—*yeshu'a*, *yeshu'a*, and *teshu'a*—are usually translated “σωτηρία” (“salvation,” or “a freeing from real or threatening harm or loss,” “safety,” “rescue,” “deliverance”). The noun σωτηρία is related to the agentive noun σωτήρ (“savior” or “means of salvation”) and perhaps means “belonging to or coming from a savior,” or “of what is related to the means of salvation.” At least nine times the noun *yeshu'a* in the expression *God of salvation* is translated “God, Savior” (σωτήρ, “savior”), e.g., “I will wait for God my Savior” (Micah 7:7; so also Psa. 24:5; 25:5; 27:9; 79:9; 95:1; Isa. 17:10; Hab. 3:18 LXX) and “The Lord is my light and my Savior” (Psa. 27:1 LXX). *Yeshu'a* is also translated “Savior” three times (62:2, 6; Isa. 12:2). Maybe the translator was influenced by the fact that many times Jehovah is both salvation and Savior, and the translator did not have a problem using the agentive noun *Savior* instead of the abstract noun *salvation* for these Hebrew nouns for *salvation*.

Hands and Arms and Salvation

The imagery of saving involves the use of hands and arms. Jehovah lifts up His hand to swear, or promise, to bring the children of Israel into the land of Canaan (Exo. 6:8; Num. 14:30; Ezek. 20:5). Jehovah’s judging hand smites the enemies of Israel, e.g., the Egyptians (Exo. 3:20; 7:4-5). Then His hand is strong to bring them out from Egypt (13:3, 14, 16). His mighty hand and His outstretched arm brought them out of Egypt (Deut. 5:15; 4:34); both His hand and His arm accomplished salvation for Him (Psa. 98:1; Isa. 59:16; 63:5). Jehovah redeemed His people by His great power and strong hand (Neh. 1:10). His hand is not so short that it cannot save (Isa. 59:1), redeem, or deliver (50:2). People are saved from, or out of, the hand of their enemies at least twenty-four times (e.g., Exo. 14:30; Judg. 2:16) through (Heb. *be-yad*, lit., “in” or “by”) the hand of a human agent (e.g., Moses, Acts 7:25). The enemies are also delivered into their hand (e.g., Midian, Judg. 7:7). Jehovah’s hands are also the hands of a potter, molding and fashioning the children of Israel, the work of His hand (Isa. 64:8; Jer. 18:6; Lam. 4:2), transforming them into vessels fit for His use (Rom. 9:20-23; 2 Cor. 4:7). This imagery of the hand saving or keeping is continued in the New Testament. No one can snatch us out of the Son’s hand nor out of the Father’s hand (John 10:28-29).

The Soul and Salvation

Salvation is related to the soul (*nephesh*). The soul rejoices in Jehovah’s salvation (Psa. 35:9) and waits in silence for God alone, from whom is salvation (62:1). He saves the souls of the needy (72:13). The soul faints while longing for Jehovah’s salvation (119:81). When the hipil form of

ntsl and the piel form of *mlt* occur with *nephesh*, the words formed have mostly a physical sense of delivering the soul/life from physical destruction, e.g., from the sword (22:20), from death (33:19; 116:8), or from the power of Sheol (86:13; 89:48). Sometimes “deliver the soul” has more of a spiritual sense, e.g., when Ezekiel is instructed to warn someone away from wickedness in order to deliver his soul from the condemnation, guilt, or punishment attached to that wickedness (Ezek. 3:19), perhaps preparing the ground for the New Testament spiritual sense of the salvation of the soul (1 Pet. 1:9; James 1:21; Heb. 10:39).

Conclusion

The use of the root *ysh'* (“salvation”) gives us a window into the Old Testament view of salvation (primarily physical)—to deliver from oppression and trouble in the hand of enemies and rescue into a state of security, nobility, wealth, and spaciousness. God is the primary agent of salvation, and therefore, His involvement in salvation introduces a spiritual dimension. Salvation is carried out by the hand(s) or arm of God and by God’s countenance, and it issues in being brought into God’s presence, face, or countenance. Salvation affects not only our physical body but also our soul, bringing us into a state of joy and happiness. All this is in preparation for the New Testament revelation of the spiritual application of salvation.

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Notes

¹Romans 11:26 states, “The Deliverer will come out of Zion,” quoting Isaiah 59:20, which has *Redeemer* (*Go'el*) in the place of *Deliverer*.

²*Yeshu'a* (“salvation”) is a segholate noun following the pattern *qitl* but with a final guttural (Joüon 245, 298). *Teshu'a* follows the pattern *vqulah*. This comes from the pattern *taqtol*, which with middle *waw* roots becomes *vqulah* in the feminine form and spreads to other non-middle *waw* forms, such as *tshu'ah* (“effective help,” “victory”). This may also be under the influence of the pattern of the synonym *yshu'ah*, which comes from *qtul* and in the feminine occurs as *qtullah* from the infinitive *qtol*, conveying a verbal notion, found in legal or technical terms, and more common in late books (Joüon 261, 247).

³These two names follow the pattern *maqal*, indicating “means” or “instrument”; the different initial vowels reflect initial *yod* or initial *waw* roots (Joüon 257).

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