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Biblical Models for Salvation and Some Implications for Today

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Biblical Models for Salvation and Some Implications for Today

A Series of Conferences for the Monks of New Camaldoli, Big Sur

By
Scott Sinclair

Preface: The Need to Honor the Problem of What Salvation is in Christianity and the Need to Begin with Scripture

- I. Christians often talk about "salvation" loosely without defining what we mean.
 - A. Many Christians assume that salvation is the rewards we get by going to "heaven" after death.
 - B. Other Christians insist that this focus is contrary to what Jesus taught, since "the kingdom of God" which Jesus proclaimed was on earth.
- II. If we define Christian "salvation" as the totality of the blessings we receive by being faithful to God's call in Christ, salvation obviously includes many things, and it is important to honor the diversity.
- III. Since the foundation of Christianity is Scripture and the realities to which Scripture bears witness, any attempt to honor the various dimensions of "salvation" must at least begin with the Bible.

Salvation in the Old Testament

- I. At the beginning of the Old Testament there is a sketch of an earthly paradise.
 - A. The first two human beings inhabit an ideal garden in which there is abundant fruit.
 - B. In the garden there is no violence; humans and even all the animals are vegetarians.
 - C. Although the couple are to tend the garden, presumably for God, work is not drudgery, since there are no thorns or thistles.
 - D. There is total innocence; the couple are naked and do not realize it.
 - E. There is no alienation between
 1. Humans and the natural world. Snakes and humans are not yet enemies.
 2. Men and women. Women are not yet under the domination of men.
 3. Humans and God. God and naked humans associate directly.
 - F. There is no death. The Tree of Life is in the garden.
- II. The text suggests that this vision is a childish fantasy due to ignorance and will never be realized in the future.
 - A. When the first humans gain knowledge (symbolized by the eating of the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil which God commanded them not to eat)
 1. They have exercised the power to disobey God.
 2. They realize that they are naked and hide from God.
 3. When God confronts them, they try to shift the blame.
 - B. God punishes them by making
 1. Snakes enemies of humans.
 2. Women subordinate to men.
 3. Work drudgery, since now the earth has thorns and thistles.
 4. Humans subject to death.
 - C. God drives humans out of the garden and makes it impossible ever to return.

- D. The primary point of the story is that visions of paradise are a childish fantasy and that human fulfillment is limited to what is possible in the present challenging world, a world that is God's will and is going last.
- III. We see a similar series of reflections in the story of Noah.
- A. Because "the wickedness of humankind was great," God decides to destroy everyone except the righteous Noah and his family and start over.
 - B. However, after destroying all other humans, God realizes that humans will always be inclined toward evil.
 - C. Therefore, God vows never again to destroy humanity.
 - D. Instead, God sets limits on human evil.
 1. God allows humans to eat meat.
 2. But to restrain unlimited violence, God institutes limited vengeance. "Whoever sheds the blood of a human, by a human shall that person's blood be shed."
 - E. The theology expressed through literary and mythic imagination is clear:
 1. Because of human sinfulness, even though we can imagine a perfect society (e.g., one in which humans are vegetarians), that society is not attainable.
 2. Therefore, God decrees an imperfect society, and we must accept that this "fallen" society is all that there can ever be.
- IV. In most of the Old Testament there is no hope for individual salvation after death.
- A. Only in a few, very late books is there belief in individual life after death.
 1. In the Hebrew Bible, only Daniel, its latest book (c. 165 BCE), looks forward to final resurrection, and only in chapter 12 and only as a special reward for a few righteous who endured persecution and as a special punishment for the persecutors.
 2. In the deuterocanonical Books, especially the Wisdom of Solomon, the doctrine of individual life after death appears or even is emphasized. Such salvation will occur either at some final resurrection of the body or at death with the departure of the spirit from the body.
 - a. Final resurrection of the body appears in Daniel 12 and elsewhere (especially, 2 Maccabees 7).
 - b. The departure of the soul appears in the Wisdom of Solomon.
 3. But even in large sections of the deuterocanonical books (e.g., Sirach) there is no belief in individual survival after physical death.
 - B. Instead, in the Old Testament as a whole, after death the individual slowly fades out.
 1. In most of the Old Testament there is no separation of soul and body as there is in some Greek Philosophy, particularly Platonism.
 2. Instead, consciousness arises from the body.
 3. Therefore, as the body decays after death, consciousness becomes increasingly dim. In "Sheol" (roughly the grave as a corporate reality) the dead subsist but only barely.
- V. Instead, individual salvation after death, to the extent that it exists at all, depends on the survival of one's heirs who ideally keep alive a memory of the deceased and fulfill the deceased's wishes (e.g., by supporting the deceased's friends and taking vengeance on enemies).

VI. Consequently, in most of the Old Testament salvation consists of the good things in earthly existence. These especially include

- A. Long and healthy life.
- B. Social honor.
- C. Wealth.
- D. Children (see above).

VII. Sometimes the spiritual fulfillment that comes from a loving relationship with God appears (e.g., Psalm 73:25-26, Hab. 3:17-19), but such fulfillment is not a major theme.

VIII. One gains the good things in life by

- A. Acting ethically and relying on the experience of the wise.
- B. Keeping God's laws. These laws include
 1. Respecting taboos (e.g., about eating only what is permissible).
 2. Worshiping in the prescribed manner (e.g., in sacrifices).
 3. Being just to all and merciful to the marginal within the holy community.

IX. The primary reason for being faithful to God and keeping his laws rather than worshiping other gods and violating the covenant is that doing God's will leads to the good things in earthly life (e.g., Psalm 1).

X. Since in empirical fact being faithful to God and keeping his laws does not always lead to earthly rewards, there is a strong undercurrent of skepticism in the Old Testament about the usefulness of obeying God (especially in Job, Ecclesiastes, some Psalms (e.g., 73)).

XI. The Old Testament, however, focuses not on the individual, but on the corporate, especially, the nation of Israel and its successor states, Samaria and Judea, and the community of Jews under foreign rulers.

XII. The primary ethical concern is that the community obey God by worshiping only YHWH and being just to every member, especially the marginal, including even the resident alien.

XIII. Here again the claim is that when the community obeys God there are earthly blessings including peace and/or victory in battle, bountiful crops, collective good health, rather than plague.

XIV. But how a small community like Judea or Jews under foreign rule fares depends more on the realities of international relations and foreign cultures rather than on obedience to God.

XV. Yet, the Old Testament text never acknowledges this reality but makes farfetched claims that good kings had successful reigns and bad kings did not.

XVI. It is also striking that the Old Testament almost never has any ethical concern for the wellbeing of other nations.

- A. The classical prophets who are so concerned about justice for those within God's holy community delight in oracles pronouncing doom on other nations (see e.g., Jer. 46-51).

- B. Extreme cruelty toward other nations, such as the slaughter of foreigners is accepted or even praised.

1. In the admittedly fictional narratives of the conquest of Canaan God demands the extermination of the indigenous peoples and any departure from such genocide is viewed as deviant.
2. In historical narratives, the slaughter or enslavement of foreigners is

recounted without any ethical concern (e.g., 2 Sam. 8:2).

- C. Even in the occasional passages that talk about God's salvation reaching beyond empirical Israel, what is envisioned is the world worshiping Israel's God and joining his people.
 - D. Only the brief and marginal book of Jonah has any concern for the well-being of another people.
 - E. And all foreign religion is condemned without any recognition that other religions might have some positive dimensions.
- XVII. Consequently, the few visions of final salvation in the Old Testament either
- A. Have the whole world worshiping Israel's God and becoming Jewish. Note Isaiah 2:2-4.
 - B. Or have Israel as the center of the world, wholly separated from other nations. See, especially, the concluding chapters of Ezekiel. Note that Ezekiel seems to advocate the literal fulfillment of his vision. He even gives dimensions to buildings and land holdings.
- XVIII. In Ezekiel's vision of final salvation
- A. God is present in the midst of his people bringing blessings to all his people and to their natural environment.
 - B. Nevertheless, God is carefully separated from humans, since direct contact with God would be fatal. Note that there are various restricted zones of closeness to God.
 - C. Perhaps the primary purpose of priests is to come between normal people and God and NOT to communicate (dangerous) holiness to laity. Note that the priests maintained a higher degree of purity and, therefore, were ritually more pleasing to God.
- XIX. Reflection:
- A. It is clear that from a modern Christian perspective the Old Testament vision of salvation is too narrow, both in who can be saved and what salvation is.
 - B. Nevertheless, it is true that ideally salvation should include the good things of this life.
 - 1. Earthly longevity, health, respect, and adequate material things may not be what salvation is primarily, and in order to gain salvation may even have to be sacrificed under dire circumstances.
 - 2. Nevertheless, these remain blessings from God, and in normal circumstances salvation includes them.
 - C. And it is clear that salvation must come in large part from being in a community where there is justice for all and special provision for those in need.
 - D. Such a community is more likely if the society as a whole worships one God who demands justice and mercy.
 - E. The vision of a golden age, now lost or otherwise unobtainable, appears not only in Genesis 2-3 but in non-Israelite cultures including Greece (e.g., the Golden Age in Hesiod's, Works and Days) and popular American culture (the song "Somewhere over the Rainbow").
 - F. Consequently, this vision seems to arise from some universal source.
 - G. What is this source, and is it merely a childish fantasy or an intimation that somehow, somewhere ("Over the Rainbow") a golden age actually existed or could exist?

Salvation in the Teaching of the Historical Jesus

- I. Jesus believed that there would be a resurrection of the dead followed by a final judgment and the righteous would be rewarded and the wicked punished (e.g., Matt. 11:20-24, 12:41-42, 22:23-32). Very likely he got this theology from the Pharisees who were active in Galilee.
- II. He gave only a few details about life after the final judgment.
 - A. The resurrected dead would neither marry nor be given in marriage but would be like the angels in heaven (Mark 12:25). Note that this saying seems to imply that sex (and gender?) is only part of the created order and exists primarily to produce offspring who replace the dead.
 - B. He apparently believed in the ultimate restoration of the twelve tribes of Israel over which he and his chief disciples would reign (Matt. 19:28).
 - C. To describe the pleasures of paradise, Jesus used the stereotypical image of a banquet (Luke 22:30).
- III. It is striking that the historical Jesus did not as much promise paradise after death for those who followed him as threaten with damnation those who did not (e.g., Matt. 11:20-24, 12:41-42), and this odd emphasis suggests that the salvation that most concerned Jesus was in this present world.
- IV. The center of Jesus's teaching was the coming of God's kingdom.
 - A. Mark can summarize Jesus's teaching as, "the Kingdom of God has become near" (Mark 1:15).
 - B. The "kingdom" is what most of the parables explain.
 - C. The "kingdom" occurs in key texts, including the Lord's Prayer/Our Father.
- V. The kingdom was a renewed Israel under Jesus and his leading followers and was the first stage of a salvation which would prepare people for the (probably much later [Mark 4:26-29]) resurrection of the dead and final judgment.
- VI. In Jesus's kingdom
 - A. No one would be poor (Luke 6:20-21), and no one would be rich. Note Jesus's hyperbolic insistence that
 1. It was easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich person to enter the kingdom (Mark 10:25).
 2. The first would be last and the last, first (e.g., Matt. 20:16).
 - B. Leaders would act as servants.
 - C. People would have transformed hearts, and there would be no hypocrisy, especially in political and religious leaders.
 - D. People would have the power to work miracles and forgive sins.
 - E. Ritual purity would not be a concern. Note that Jesus did not maintain personal purity, associated with the impure, and condemned the temple.
 - F. People would not judge one another, and there would be mutual forgiveness.
- VII. I believe that Jesus thought that foreigners would join the kingdom (Matt. 8:11) in fulfillment of various prophecies in the Scriptures (e.g., Isa. 49:6).
- VIII. I believe that it is highly likely that Jesus sought a royal appointment from the Roman authorities in order to realize the kingdom.
 - A. Admittedly, mainline scholarship holds that Jesus expected to become a king

- through an apocalyptic intervention by God.
- B. Conceivably, Jesus could have hoped to become king by leading a successful revolt, as the Maccabees had done two centuries earlier.
 - C. Or possibly Jesus could have been an apolitical figure whose “kingdom” was a voluntary organization like a modern Christian denomination.
- IX. But it seems to me that these other options have little, if any, evidence in their favor.
- A. Upon close examination the claim that Jesus was an apocalypticist eagerly awaiting an imminent cosmic intervention from God is weak.
 - 1. The conditions in Galilee did not favor apocalyptic perspectives.
 - a. Apocalyptic speculations about the overthrow of the existing government normally arise in response to political oppression.
 - b. But during the lifetime of Jesus Galilee was under a Jewish ruler (admittedly, subservient to Rome) who was sensitive to Jewish concerns. Note the lack of forbidden images on Galilean coins.
 - 2. It is unlikely that Jesus was familiar with any apocalyptic text.
 - a. As a carpenter in the obscure village of Nazareth, the only books that he would have heard in the synagogues and perhaps read were the Law and the Prophets and the Psalms.
 - b. The only apocalypse he might have known was Daniel, and it is unlikely that he was influenced by it.
 - 1). In the gospels the only times Jesus quotes Daniel is in the apocalyptic discourse (Mark 13:14, 26; Dan. 9:27, 11:31, 12:11) and in the private hearing before the High Priest (Mark 14:62; Dan. 7:13).
 - 2). It is doubtful that the evangelists had access to reliable information about the hearing. Moreover, the quote about the triumphant coming of the Son of Humanity (usually translated, Son of Man) is a literary climax and seems likely to come from the evangelists.
 - 3). The Apocalyptic Discourse reflects events that happened after the time of Jesus, especially the persecution of the early church and the destruction of the Temple.
 - 3. When the historical Jesus talked about himself as the “Son of Humanity,” he meant that he was the first example of a new type of human being. Note, especially,
 - a. The standard meaning of the phrase “son of humanity” is a human being.
 - b. This is the same meaning even in the Daniel 7:13, where a human being who symbolizes the people of God is contrasted with fantastic beasts who symbolize the empires which have oppressed God's people.
 - c. Jesus expected that with the coming of the kingdom there would be a new type of human being. “Among those born of women no one has arisen greater than John the Baptist; yet the least in the kingdom is greater than he” (Matt. 11:11). This quote must go back to the historical Jesus, since all later tradition exalted the Baptist as much greater than an undistinguished member of the church.

- d. Jesus called himself “*the* son of Humanity,” and Jesus gave to his disciples the power to work miracles and forgive sins. Therefore, he was the first illustration of the new type of human being that would exist when the kingdom came in power.
 - 4. The texts referring to Jesus's apocalyptic return to rule the earth presuppose the crucifixion of Jesus and reflect post-resurrection hopes that the risen Christ now in heaven would soon return to save his persecuted church on earth.
 - 5. The historical Jesus did not predict his individual resurrection after a brief time. Otherwise, the despair of his followers immediately after Jesus's death, the shock of his followers at discovering the empty tomb, and the doubt when Jesus initially appeared to them are all inexplicable.
- B. There is little support in the gospels (our only historical source!) for the claim that Jesus hoped to lead a violent revolt. Where in the gospels does Jesus ever even suggest such a thing?
- C. There is no support in the gospels for any claim that Jesus was an apolitical figure.
 - 1. The term “kingdom” of God is inherently political. A kingdom has a king.
 - 2. All of the gospels record that near Jerusalem Jesus staged a demonstration in which his disciples hailed him as a political king. “Blessed is the coming kingdom of our ancestor David” (Mark 11:10, cf. Matt. 21:9, Luke 19:38, John 12:13).
 - 3. All the gospels insist that Romans tried and executed Jesus on the charge of being “King of the Jews.”
 - 4. After the execution of Jesus, the church at various times has been apolitical, and it is easy to see how people may project back onto to Jesus their own apolitical Christianity.
- X. By contrast there is ample evidence that Jesus saw himself as a king.
 - A. He apparently was a descendant of David and so had a royal pedigree. Note that Paul already records that Jesus was descended from David (e.g., Rom. 1:3), and Paul knew James, a relative of Jesus, personally.
 - B. In his early ministry Jesus privately acknowledged to his disciples that he was a king (“Messiah”) but told them not to share this dangerous information (Mark 8:29-30). Admittedly, the messianic secret in Mark serves other purposes but it must have some historical basis in the life of Jesus.
 - C. Jesus promised the inner core of his followers (the “Twelve”) that they would sit on thrones and share his rule by judging (i.e., bringing justice to) the tribes of Israel (Matt. 19:28). Note that this saying must go back to Jesus, since it implies that Judas would be one of those designated.
 - D. As he entered Jerusalem, he staged a carefully planned demonstration in which his followers proclaimed that he was a davidic king.
 - E. He then immediately used his royal authority to “cleanse” the temple, thereby also attacking the authority of the High Priest (who under Roman rule was the leader of the Jews).
- XI. It seems most probable that Jesus hoped for a political appointment from the Romans.

- A. Both just before and after the lifetime of Jesus the only way a Jew became a ruler in Israel was by getting an appointment from Rome.
- B. Jesus grew up in Galilee where Herod Antipas ruled as a Jewish appointee by Rome.
- C. In his protest at the temple, Jesus stressed that he accepted Roman rule as the context for his mission.
 - 1. Jesus explained his shocking actions by saying that the temple was to be a house of prayer “for all nations” (Isa. 56:7) but had in fact become a stronghold for “bandits” (Mark 11:17; Jeremiah 7:11). This quote must go back to Jesus, since he had to give some explanation for his highhanded behavior.
 - 2. By emphasizing that the temple was for the Romans as well as for the Jews, Jesus was implicitly acknowledging the legitimacy of Roman rule.
 - 3. Since “bandit” was the negative word for armed revolutionaries against Rome, Jesus was also condemning violent resistance against Rome (N.T. Wright).
- D. Subsequently, when Jews challenged him about paying taxes to Rome, Jesus responded that those who use Roman money should not object to paying Roman taxes (Mark 12:13-17).
- E. Jesus also condemned the greed of the Jewish authorities (Mark 12:38-44), thereby suggesting that he would be a better leader and appealing for popular backing, especially, from the poor. Apparently, Jesus hoped that if he could gain popular support, the Romans would consider giving him a political post.
- F. Jesus's hope for a Roman political appointment also explains otherwise puzzling facts.
 - 1. The Romans did not immediately arrest Jesus after his demonstration proclaiming that he was a davidic king.
 - 2. When the high priests arrested and condemned Jesus, the Roman governor, according to all the gospels, initially resisted calls to execute Jesus and only gave in to prevent a riot.

XII. Of course, Jesus's hopes for a political appointment did not materialize.

XIII. Subsequently, as opposition from nationalistic Jews grew, he concluded that he would inevitably be executed (Mark 12:1-8) and that his death would atone for sin. Note, especially, his institution of a ceremony in which wine would represent a new covenant in his blood.

XIV. After the resurrection and the gift of the Spirit, his followers maintained the expectation that Jesus would become king, but since there was no longer any hope for a political appointment, they predicted an apocalyptic coronation. Of course, that prediction proved unfounded.

XV. Some implications of Jesus's attempt to become an earthly king.

- A. The church should get involved in political action to further equality and justice and inclusion when political action is possible and likely to achieve this result.
- B. The example of Jesus suggests that even when conditions are favorable, the church's political efforts may fail, and we must accept such failure as the price of being faithful to him.
- C. Nevertheless, I think that Jesus's final conclusion that his own execution was

God's will was correct and helpful.

1. Mohamed was successful in becoming a ruler and implementing his vision of how God wanted government.
2. Whatever one may think of that vision, it was at least modeled on how politics worked in one particular social context.
3. Because Mohamed claimed that his vision of government came from God, his subsequent followers have often tried to impose that vision on other social contexts where it did not produce justice.
4. Since Jesus did not become an earthly ruler, the Church is free to follow the leading of the Spirit and common sense and support whatever form of government is likely to produce more equality and justice and inclusion in a given context.

D. There is no individual salvation in the vision of Jesus. Salvation, whether on earth or in "heaven," is being part of a community loving God and one another.

E. The closest which we can come to corporate salvation on earth prior to the end of this present order of existence is a society in which

1. There is economic equality, and, especially, no one is enormously wealthy while others are desperately poor.
2. Leaders act as servants.
3. There is no hypocrisy, especially in political and religious leaders.
4. People are empowered in God's Name to work miracles and forgive sins.
5. Ritual purity is not a concern.
6. People would not be judgmental toward one another, and there would be mutual forgiveness.

F. Monasteries and other religious communities have perhaps been the closest we have come to such an ideal community, and I believe that a major mission of monasteries is to display this model of community to the world for imitation.

Paul's Vision of Salvation

I. (review) Jesus primarily looked forward to social salvation.

A. For most of his life he hoped for a political appointment that would make him king of Judea.

B. As king he would implement his vision of a society in which the rulers would act as servants, and there would be justice and mercy for all.

C. There would be no more poverty (Luke 6:20-21) and, thanks to the gift of miraculous healing, perhaps there would be no more sickness.

II. Jesus's proclamation of a final resurrection and judgment was primarily a way of motivating people to do what is right now.

A. Of course, the hope for final salvation was glorious.

B. But final salvation might not be soon, and what mattered now was political and social reform.

III. During Paul's Christian life, things were very different.

A. On the negative side, Jesus's vision that governmental reform would produce an ideal society had failed. Jesus himself had been crucified by the government.

- B. Consequently, the most that Paul could hope for politically was a government that would not persecute the church and, therefore, a government that Christians need not fear (Rom. 13:1-7).
 - C. On the positive side Paul had witnessed Jesus's resurrection and received the Holy Spirit.
- IV. Consequently, for Paul salvation had two fundamental dimensions.
- A. In the present world, preliminary salvation was available in the Spirit-filled Church.
 - B. In the coming world, final salvation would occur when the risen Christ returned to judge the world and reward his followers.
- V. In the present world, salvation was paradoxical.
- A. Paul himself and his converts suffered.
 1. Paul suffered terribly both because of imprisonment and torture at the hands of government officials and the tribulations of missionary work in general (e.g., shipwreck, division within congregations, competing church leaders).
 2. His congregations sometimes suffered from persecution from outside (1 Thes. 2:14) and often suffered from division within.
 3. Paul even emphasizes the suffering of the natural world (“the whole creation groans and suffers together” (Rom. 8:22).
 - B. Yet, Paul insists that he and his congregations can be at peace and even rejoice.
 - C. Paul describes his own life and even the lives of his faithful readers as a series of deaths and resurrections which point to our final death and resurrection (2 Cor. 1:8-10).
 1. Paul admits, indeed, proclaims, that in himself he loses all ability to cope or even continue.
 2. But then the power God's Spirit lifts him up.
 3. And Paul uses his own experience as a model for his readers to consider applying to their own lives.
- VI. In this present earthly life the locus of salvation was the individual congregation in which
- A. The sufferings that people were enduring for being Christians were signs of their faithfulness to their crucified Lord and contained the promise of sharing in Jesus's final resurrection.
 - B. God's Spirit was present. Note that for Paul the Spirit was a transforming energy that makes people “a new creation.”
 - C. Through the self-sacrificing example of Jesus's crucifixion and the power of the spirit, the congregation could love one another deeply.
 - D. Each member of the congregation had a unique gift from the Holy Spirit and was to use that gift for the benefit of the whole.
 - E. Through baptism and Eucharist, each member of the congregation had died to self-centeredness and become one body with Christ and one another.
 - F. This unity transcended the conventional divisions of nationality, legal status, and even gender (“neither Jew nor Greek, neither slave nor free, neither male and female;” Gal. 3:28). Note, especially,
 1. Different ethnic groups could keep their own customs

2. And yet become sacramentally one in the Eucharist.
- VII. In the church and through the Holy Spirit the amazing love of God for each member is available (“the love of God has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit” [Rom. 5:5]) and brings joy because nothing can separate a Christian from this transforming love (Romans 8:38-39).
- VIII. Consequently, inwardly we are being gloriously transformed and are even a new creation (2 Cor. 3:18, 4:16, 5:17).
- IX. Nevertheless, because of all of the suffering, Christians primarily live in hope of final deliverance. We rejoice in hope (e.g., Rom. 12:12).
- X. A theme in Paul's Letters is that the joys of final salvation are beyond human comprehension. “No eye has seen, nor ear heard, nor the human heart conceived what God has prepared for those who love him” (1 Cor. 2:9). “The sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory about to be revealed to us” (Rom. 8:18).
- XI. Yet, paradoxically Paul claims that through the Spirit he knows what these blessings are (1 Cor. 2:9-10).
- XII. The sources of this hidden knowledge seem to be three.
- A. First, Paul's encounter with the risen Christ. Paul insists that he saw the Lord. And Paul assumes that what happened to Jesus is basically what happens to those who follow him. If we have become like Jesus in his death, we will also become like him in his resurrection (Rom. 6:5).
 - B. A second source for esoteric knowledge was at least one ineffable mystical experience (2 Cor. 12:2-4).
 - C. Finally, what must happen for the consummation of God's plan and the elimination of evil.
- XIII. Here are at least a few dimensions of the coming glory.
- A. We will be transformed into the image of the risen Christ and have “spiritual bodies” (1 Cor. 15:44).
 - B. Creation will be delivered from the bondage to corruption (Rom. 8:18-22).
 - C. Everything will be transfigured by the presence of God who will be “all in all” (1 Cor. 15:28).
 - D. There will be no more death (e.g., 1 Cor. 15:26).
 - E. This salvation apparently is on (a transformed) earth.
 - F. All good deeds will be rewarded. Note Paul's concern that if there is no resurrection, we might as well “eat and drink for tomorrow we die” (1 Cor. 15:32).
 - G. We will know all things (1 Cor. 13:12).
 - H. We will be proud of one another's virtues (e.g., 2 Cor. 1:14).
 - I. We will experience God directly and fully (“face to face;” 1 Cor. 13:12).
- XIV. This final consummation of all things will primarily happen when Christ returns in glory, and Paul expected that this return would happen within the lifetime of some people in his congregations (1 Thes. 4:17).
- XV. Nevertheless, Paul apparently believed that Christians who died before Jesus's return would somehow in their spirits be with Jesus already, experience preliminary blessings, and would return with him (1 Thes. 4:14). Then they would participate in the final resurrection which would include the physical resurrection and transformation of earthly bodies into spiritual ones. Note that when Paul was in prison, he wrote that his desire was to depart and be with Christ (Phil. 1:23; see also 2 Cor. 5:1-10).
- XVI. The relevance of Paul's vision

- A. In modern times two things have happened that invite (should force?) us to re-evaluate Paul's two step vision of life after death.
 - 1. On the negative side, Jesus failed to return, and now that two thousand years have passed it is surely time to stop waiting.
 - 2. On the positive side, thanks to medical advances, people who are clinically dead can sometimes be revived. They report that they experienced leaving their bodies, going through a tunnel, meeting deceased loved ones, and being interviewed by a Being of Light who showed them the effects of all their good and bad deeds.
 - 3. Consequently, even without “religious” evidence, it seems clear that at death the self does leave the body and see God “face to face.”
- B. It seems to me that we now have confirmation that at death we become “spiritual bodies,” as Paul taught.
 - 1. Modern science has shown that humans are a complex electronic field composed of the firing of nerve endings which we experience as thoughts and feelings and can be stored as memories.
 - 2. While humans are on earth, the physical body supports the field.
 - 3. But as e-mail demonstrates, thoughts and feelings and memories can be sent wirelessly elsewhere.
 - 4. Something similar must happen at death, and the result is that we remain an electronic field without a physical body. I cannot think of a better description of this state than we have become a spiritual body. Note that a weakness of the traditional understanding of the “soul” was that it facilitated an unbridgeable dualism between the spiritual and the material.
- C. In dire situations, we may have to give up being in control of ourselves and simply entrust ourselves to God whose Spirit can give us new power.
- D. In extreme situations the only remaining hope for salvation is life after death.
 - 1. It is not always possible to salvage meaningful individual life on earth.
 - 2. There are even social situations that are so grim that communal progress in this world is hopeless.
 - 3. Those of us who preach and teach and counsel should not be afraid to say that in the present nightmare all we can do is trust God to take us to heaven when we die.
- E. Even though we cannot know in detail what heaven will be like, we do know that the greatest joy in heaven will be in our loving relationships with God and with one another and being free from the imprisonment of self-centeredness.

Salvation in John's Gospel

- I. There is overwhelming evidence that at least two people wrote the Gospel of John.
 - A. The closing verses attest that the Disciple “whom Jesus loved” wrote the book (21:24).
 - B. Yet then follows, “we know that his testimony is true” (21:24), and the editor who added the “we” continues that he supposes that an endless number of books could be written about Jesus.
 - C. In various places in the gospel there is a clear indication that the evangelist is

concluding a section and that the editor has added something. Here are two examples:

1. At the end of chapter 14 Jesus says that he will no longer talk much and then says, "Rise; let us go." Yet, Jesus talks for two more chapters, prays for another chapter, and only then do Jesus and the disciples go (18:1).
2. Similarly, at the end of chapter 20 the evangelist tells us that Jesus did many other signs which will not be narrated "in this book" (20:30) and that what has been narrated is enough to inspire faith. Yet chapter 21 goes on to narrate another miraculous sign which inspires faith.

II. Nevertheless, if there were various published editions, as, e.g., Raymond Brown claimed, we may wonder

- A. Why only one version of the gospel survived.
- B. How someone who did not know Jesus got the authority to change a gospel written by someone who did.

III. If, however, the primary author died before finalizing the book and one of his students completed it, these problems disappear.

- A. There never was another (complete, published) version of the gospel.
- B. The evangelist's community would have readily seen the need for some appropriate person to complete the book.

IV. Consequently, the most likely origin of John's Gospel is that

- A. An elderly eyewitness to Jesus began writing a gospel but then died leaving behind an incomplete narrative and probably various notes and drafts.
- B. Then an editor completed the gospel, probably by including as much as possible of the materials the evangelist left behind and not surprisingly adding the editor's own perspective.

V. The editor rearranged the material so that it would follow the order of an ideal Christian's life.

- A. In a highly original thesis, William Countryman argued that the order of the first twenty chapters of John's Gospel reflects the order of the ideal Christian life, since the gospel first has a section on conversion, then a section of baptism, then one on Eucharist, and then sections on higher spiritual states.
- B. Building on Countryman's work, I argue that this framework is basically correct, but it was the editor who imposed it on the incomplete materials left behind by the evangelist.

1. We see the framework most clearly in chapter 21.
 - a. At the beginning of the chapter the disciples are (at least symbolically) back before their conversion. They are home in Galilee fishing. Note that they are in darkness and work without success, since Jesus is symbolically the light and without him the disciples can accomplish nothing.
 - b. Then we have a conversion scene. When the light is beginning to shine, Jesus appears on the shore, calls to the disciples, works a miraculous sign, the Beloved disciple recognizes Jesus as "the Lord," and tells Peter.
 - c. Next we have a symbolic baptism. Peter who had been naked (!) ties on a temporary covering and throws himself into the water.
 - d. A symbolic Eucharist follows with Jesus taking bread and giving

it to the disciples.

e. Jesus next challenges Peter to go on to committed discipleship. Jesus asks Peter three times if Peter loves him, and when Peter insists that he does, Jesus commands Peter to feed the flock. Note that the three times Jesus asks Peter alludes back to the three times earlier in the gospel that Peter denied being a disciple of Jesus (John 18:15-18, 25-27).

f. Jesus goes on to predict Peter's martyrdom.

g. Finally, Jesus announces that the Beloved Disciple must remain until Jesus returns. The Beloved Disciple must take Jesus's place in this world until the second coming.

2. (partly review) It is clear that the editor added chapter 21. The conclusion of chapter 20 signals an intended end of the book by saying that no further signs will be narrated and by abandoning the story and addressing the reader directly and offering salvation.

VI. John's Gospel gives two contrasting visions of when salvation occurs.

A. There are several passages which look forward to a final resurrection "on the last day" (6:39-40, 44, 54) when there will be a last judgment and the righteous will be rewarded and evil doers, condemned (5:28-29).

B. More frequently, however, salvation occurs in the present when people believe in Jesus and pass from death to life (5:24) and will never die subsequently (11:26). This "eternal life" cannot end because it come from participating in God and his Incarnate Son who supremely possess life and are themselves eternal (1:4, 17:3).

VII. Very likely the passages about resurrection on the last day were added by the editor and signal that his vision of final salvation was similar to Paul's. Note that if one omits the passages about resurrection on the last day, the flow of the material remains smooth and, in my opinion, becomes even smoother.

VIII. By contrast, the material about eternal life surely goes back to the evangelist.

IX. The editor's vision of resurrection on the last day emphasizes the drastic difference between our present life and our future post-resurrection state perhaps on a transformed earth.

X. By contrast, the evangelist's vision of salvation stresses the continuity between our present experience as Christians and the final consummation.

XI. Indeed, when the last discourses and prayer (chapters 13-17) describe the highest mystical state in the edited gospel, it almost seems that those in that state have reached final blessedness.

A. They experience fully God's love for them. Indeed, through the Spirit, the Father and the Son dwell in them. "You will know that I am in my Father, and you in me, and I in you" (14:20).

B. Those who have reached the highest spiritual state love other Christians as much as Jesus loved (13:34).

C. Through all that love they achieve total unity both with God in Christ and with one another. Those in this mystical state are perfectly one (17:22-23). Note that their unity with God and with one another are mutually dependent.

1. They are caught up in the relationship between the divine persons. The Father gives them to the Son who dies for them in obedience to the Father

(e.g., 17:6).

2. The perfect unity does not mean absorption and the loss of identity. The metaphor is mutual indwelling, and the unity is achieved and maintained by love. Hence, John's mysticism differs from the Buddhist.

D. With this unity come life, peace, and joy, and this life, peace, and joy are infinitely more satisfying and lasting than physical life and worldly happiness (14:27, 16:24).

E. With this unity also comes direct, complete knowledge of God and of his eternal plan in Christ. The Spirit leads them into all truth (16:13). They perceive the unseen God and know the truth of his revelation through Jesus. They also know Jesus's unity with the Father (14:19-20).

F. Thanks to their unity with Christ, they know that they will have eternal life, because his will for them is to see his eternal glory as it is (17:24).

G. Thanks to their unity with God and each other, they incarnate the glory of God and are an invitation and challenge to the world (e.g., 17:21) and will bear lasting fruit. Note that for John the love which Christians have for one another is their primary missionary statement.

H. Thanks to their unity and mission, they can ask for whatever we need to do God's work, and he will give it to them (15:7). Here John has adapted traditional material from Jesus (cf. Matthew 7:7).

I. Hence, they take Jesus's place in this world. Indeed, through the Spirit they will do even greater works than he did (14:12).

J. Although John does not give us many details, he seems to presuppose the possibility of divinization already in this life. Those who have reached the highest state are no longer Jesus's servants but his friends (15:15) and can rightly be described as "gods" (10:34-35).

K. Hence, it seems to me that in this highest spiritual state the primary thing that comes short of being in heaven is that on earth there will still be suffering, especially because Jesus's friends are faithful to the gospel (e.g., 16:33).

L. But along with the suffering of the faithful comes the assurance that they are living as Jesus did, and the Holy Spirit confirms that they are glorifying God and the world that persecutes them is in the wrong (16:8).

XII. My sense is that the evangelist, in contrast to the editor, did not believe in the physical resurrection of the dead and the physical return of Jesus to this earth.

A. Admittedly, the evidence is limited.

B. But there are passages which indicate that

1. Jesus's return is not the second coming but the gift of the Spirit. "I will not leave you as orphans; I am coming to you. In a little longer the world will see me no more, but you will see me" (14:19)

2. Jesus will prepare a place to which disciples will go and be with him. "In my Father's house are many abodes" (14:2).

XIII. Perhaps then John's Gospel already offers two possible models for life after death and gives us warrant for opting for eternal life which begins now and continues after physical death.

A. The primary model for salvation in John is eternal life which begins now and continues after death.

B. The evangelist was the one who both

1. Knew Jesus
 2. Reached the highest stage of spiritual growth.
- C. Therefore, in my view, John's Gospel challenges us to abandon the now long overdue expectation of a triumphant return of Jesus to earth.
- XIV. Be that as it may, what John's Gospel does make clear is that for the spiritually mature, there is great continuity between how they experience salvation in this life and how they will experience it after death.
- XV. The relevance of John's vision of the ultimate state of spiritual maturity for us who have not reached it.
- A. It nourishes hope. There is infinitely more than what we experience now.
 - B. It is a continuing challenge to growth.
 - C. It points us toward a particular path, including
 1. A spirituality in which love of God and neighbor grow together.
 2. A missionary attitude that our love for God and one another is our primary evangelistic statement.
 3. Mutual indwelling as the model for love. This avoids being patronizing or sentimental.
 4. The assurance that our salvation is the gift which the "persons" of God give to one another.
- XVI. In my opinion, the evangelist believed in three different comings of Christ.
- A. The first coming occurred when Jesus left eternity, entered the universe (which had been made through him) and became incarnate (John 1:1, 3, 14).
 - B. The second coming occurred when Jesus rose from the dead, appeared to his disciples and gave them the Holy Spirit (14:19, 20:19-23).
 - C. The third coming occurs at death when Jesus comes to take the faithful from the created world to the eternal realm where they will see the glory which Jesus had before the creation (14:2-3, 17:24).
- XVII. I believe this model of the different comings of Jesus is correct.

Salvation in Revelation: Part 1, The Origin of John's Visions; Immediate Salvation after Death

- I. Revelation gives us the most detailed picture of postmortem salvation in the New Testament, and we will, therefore, have to spend a lot of time with this book. Note that Revelation is the ultimate source for the popular picture of paradise as having streets of gold, pearly gates (21:21), and people dressed in white playing harps (e.g., 7:13, 15:2).
- II. To interpret Revelation's picture of paradise accurately and judge its truthfulness, we must have a digression on the origin of the book, since the literal content of the book is crazy.
- III. The book explicitly tells us that it is a special revelation from the risen Christ made known to John, the author, through visions (Rev. 1:1-2).
- IV. Of course, many visions do not come from God or even a spiritual source but from elsewhere.
- V. However, as mystic literature assures us, some visions do come from God.
- VI. At least one important test of whether a vision comes from God is whether the vision leads to peace, joy, and, especially, a greater love for God and for others.

VII. God is outside time and space, since these are created realities. Note that even science teaches that before the “big bang” time and space, at least as we now know them, did not exist.

VIII. When an impulse comes from God, the impulse itself is wordless and imageless, and the human mind translates it into words and images.

IX. These words and images are culturally conditioned, since a person's culture determines what is meaningful to an individual.

X. When an individual writes down a vision, there is a second translation, since the person must resort to the conventions and limitations of written communication and normally will be concerned to communicate clearly to intended readers who have their own cultural context.

XI. Often, the author will also think about the visions and add literary or theological material.

XII. All of the above applies specifically to the Book of Revelation.

A. John explicitly acknowledges that his visions did not come directly from God or even Jesus but were mediated by an angel (1:1). Note that the role of a mediating heavenly being is frequent in “apocalyptic” literature.

B. The Apocalypse is a tightly structured literary work. The groups of seven are especially striking. This structure probably was not in the actual visions but was artificially imposed on them for literary impact.

XIII. When John wrote Revelation, the situation for the church was bleak, and it seemed likely (at least to John) that things would soon be catastrophic.

A. The local authorities in Asia Minor (modern Turkey) where John and his intended readers lived were ratcheting up pressure on Christians to worship the Roman Emperor.

B. Some Christians were apparently willing to compromise. Note John's attack on a prophetess in the church of Thyatira (2:20-23)

C. John was adamant that any worship of the emperor as a god was a total betrayal of Christianity.

D. The local authorities apparently responded by exiling John to the small island of Patmos.

E. John wrote Revelation to the churches in Asia Minor in order to stiffen their resistance.

F. However, he predicted that such resistance would lead to the slaughter of the loyal followers of Jesus.

XIV. Because of the dire situation, Revelation says nothing about salvation being presently available on earth in this age. The present peace and joy that are so evident in Paul's letters and, especially, in John's Gospel are absent.

XV. Revelation states that salvation will come in three phases:

A. Immediate salvation for the spirits of the martyrs.

B. A first bodily resurrection of the martyrs.

C. A general resurrection and the descent of the New Jerusalem.

XVI. Probably because of John's insistence that his readers must accept martyrdom, Revelation provides special rewards for martyrs.

A. Revelation seems to restrict immediate life after death to those who have been killed for the faith.

1. The other dead do not come to life until a thousand years later

(Rev.20:5).

2. But the spirits of the martyrs apparently already experience preliminary fulfillment even while the persecution of the church is continuing (Rev. 6:9-11, 14:1-5).

B. After Christ returns and destroys the persecuting Roman Empire, only the martyrs rise from the grave and reign with Christ for a thousand years in the “first resurrection” (20:4-6).

XVII. Taken literally, the martyred dead presently (6:9-11, 14:1-5)

A. Are clothed in white garments. White in Revelation symbolizes purity and victory.

B. Praise God.

C. Rest. Here rest does not mean relaxation. The martyrs are not idle. Instead, rest is relief from the trauma of past persecution.

D. Live in the reassurance that God will vindicate their comrades.

XVIII. Taken theologically these visions make it clear that the present fulfillment of the martyrs after death includes

A. A full awareness—confirmed by God himself—of the good an individual has done and its effect on others and the appreciation of God.

B. A deeper relationship with God which includes the acknowledgment of all that God has done and will do.

C. The end to the individual’s earthly sufferings.

D. But a continued concern for the sufferings on earth, especially the sufferings of one’s Christian comrades.

E. A hope that later all the sufferings of the righteous will end and there will be justice.

Salvation in Revelation: Part 2, The Millennium and Its Historical and Theological Significance

I. Introduction

A. Despite its enormous impact on subsequent Christian thought and life, the millennium only occurs in one place in scripture, Revelation 20:1-6. Let’s read it.

B. Perhaps one reason for its influence is that the passage is at the conclusion of the Bible, and conclusions attract a great deal of attention.

II. The millennium occurs as part of Revelation’s larger schema for the end of the world as we know it. There are basically three events in this whole:

A. The great persecution of the church.

1. The Beast from the Sea (i.e., the demonic Roman government) slaughters Christians for refusing to worship the emperor. Note that during this period the Beast from the Land (the local officials, especially, the priests who lead the worship) deceive the world into thinking that the emperor is divine (Rev. 13:13-15).

2. Then Christ returns to end the persecution by destroying the emperors and their supporters.

B. The millennium in which only the martyrs rise from the dead and reign on earth, perhaps at Jerusalem.

1. During this period the rest of history will apparently continue pretty much as it always has.
 2. And apparently the Church will proclaim the gospel to the nations of the earth (e.g., 14:6-7).
 3. At the conclusions of the period Satan will again marshal people for one last assault on the Church.
- C. The end of the world as we know it and the coming of a new order of reality.
1. The final destruction of Satan
 2. The last judgment
 3. The damnation of the wicked and the abolition of death.
 4. The coming of a new heaven and a new earth.
 5. The descent of the New Jerusalem in which the saints will dwell with God and Christ in glory forever.
- III. By way of background, it should be noted that in the previous centuries (at least since the destruction of Jerusalem in 586 BCE and the Exile) the Jews had sometimes looked forward to a radically better life. Their belief in ethical monotheism and their daily experience of suffering despite being at least relatively righteous produced the recurring conviction that soon God would intervene to save them.
- IV. It is hard to know how literally to take the details of various predictions concerning a radically better future.
- A. A previous generation scholars saw them as expressions of consistent theological positions.
 - B. Today I think lots of people--including me--would see them as poetic expressions of a fundamental hope for deliverance.
- VI. Nevertheless, these texts seem to predict two alternative understandings of the future.
- A. God would redeem Israel within the context of present reality. Perhaps there would be a great new king who would defeat the enemies of Israel, establish peace, justice, prosperity, and institute proper worship.
 - B. God would save Israel by altering fundamental reality. The wolf would lie down with the lamb (Isa. 11:6, 65:25).
- VII. In any case, in the late first century of the common era, 2 [4] Esdras and Revelation combined these hopes. First there would be a redemption within history and then a redemption beyond history. According to 2 Esdras
- A. The Messiah will appear and reign with the faithful for four hundred years of joy (2 Esdras 7:28).
 - B. All human beings will die, and there will be seven days of silence (7:29-30).
 - C. Then the world as we have known it will disappear. The dead will rise from their graves, God will judge everyone, the wicked will go to hell, and the righteous, to paradise (7:31-44).
- VIII. Accordingly, it seems to me that Revelation is affirming that Christians should believe that there will be two types of salvation.
- A. God will bring history to a positive conclusion. There will be a great period of justice and peace in a "millennium."
 - B. God will also give a salvation which is greater than would be possible within the limits of present reality. A New Jerusalem will appear.
- IX. Revelation is still being poetic, and the details of its predictions should not be

pressed. Consequently, I think it is basically consistent with Revelation to look forward both to

A. A coming period of justice and peace on earth.

B. Going to “heaven” after death.

X. In Western history there have been two great Christian heresies that have tried to opt for just one of these two.

A. Gnosticism held that the material world is evil and all that humans can hope for is deliverance from fleshly and historical reality. The soul escapes the filthy body at death and goes to a non-material realm.

B. Secular messianism (e.g., Communism) held that the material world is all that would ever exist and the most that humans can hope for is a fundamentally better world (e.g., a classless society).

XI. Of course, today it is easy to see the disturbing consequences of either approach.

A. Gnosticism and its descendants (Manicheanism, even Christian Science) have led both to psychological disorder (e.g., a disgust for sex) and a failure to benefit from progress in history (e.g., the techniques of modern medicine).

B. Secular messianism--perhaps partly because it had no hope for life beyond the grave--had an obsessive need to perfect history quickly and, therefore, violently. The policies of Stalin, Mao, and Pol Pot were one result.

XII. The millennium is the Christian affirmation that God has a purpose that will be accomplished within history and a purpose beyond it.

XIII. Of course, Revelation believes that only God can accomplish his purpose in history--not human beings working without him--and that to the extent that God will accomplish his purpose by working through people, he will work through those who are faithful in suffering love. Note that it is the martyrs--those who have died for their love of God and refused to worship human tyranny--who will reign in the millennium.

XIV. At some point, Western culture and then world culture adopted the idea of progress.

A. The dominant idea was that human beings could build a better world without having to rely on God.

B. From at least the time of Newton and, especially, Darwin, science increasingly considered God to be an unnecessary hypothesis.

C. In social planning too religion was not taken into consideration. Of course, some of the most determined attempts to produce the perfect world (whether in the Soviet Union in the 1930's or in China during the Cultural Revolution or in Cambodia under Pol Pot) were self-consciously anti-Christian and atheistic.

XV. (review) We need not dwell on the tragic results such attempts sometimes produced, but we may note in passing that they have an eerie similarity to the vision of demonic government which occurs in Revelation, and, indeed, occurs shortly before the millennium. Note, for example, that the Stalinist government also (through technological progress) worked wonders that made the regime and its leader appear superhuman. Of course, as in Revelation, the totalitarian governments of the twentieth century were destroyed. (Naturally, I am not claiming that John “foresaw” such events, but only that they are consistent with his theology.)

XVI. The social failure of atheistic progress encourages us to ask if God and faith are necessary both for science and/or social planning.

A. Should science continue to try to explain the origin and evolution of the

universe without God? In the modern world science has proceeded on the basis of methodological atheism. Would a more neutral working assumption be preferable? And in recent years the discovery that the universe is fine tuned for life has caused some cosmologists to conclude that there must be a God.

B. Could faith be necessary for human welfare? Note that some medical studies show that faith and prayer have a positive impact on physical health.

XVII. Theologically, it is also increasingly clear that progress within history is part of the "divine plan." Despite the claims of Fundamentalists, evolution is a proved hypothesis, and I, personally, believe that some divine hand has helped guide the "progress" in the universe from the Big Bang until the present.

XVIII. Consequently, now perhaps more than ever we should adopt Revelation's concept that with the help of God there can be a radically better world within history, but only if we realize that

A. It cannot be achieved by a government or society that deifies itself.

B. It must be achieved by self-sacrificing love.

C. It must be combined with a vision of a greater salvation beyond history, especially, seeing God after physical death.

Salvation in Revelation: Part 3, The New Jerusalem

I. The literary climax of Revelation is the magnificent description of the New Jerusalem (Rev. 21:1-22:5).

A. Note that earlier passages point forward to it (e.g., 3:12).

B. This is the last sustained passage in Revelation and surpasses all others in power.

C. In this section God himself finally speaks (21:5ff.).

II. In writing 21:1-22:5 John took elements from earlier biblical descriptions of past and future paradises, including Genesis 2 and Ezekiel 47. Note especially the presence of life giving trees and water in all three paradises.

III. John welds these borrowed elements into something profoundly new. For example,

A. Whereas Genesis 2 was originally a warning against the present or future possibility of such a paradise, Revelation affirms the certainty that such a paradise will be available to the faithful.

B. Whereas in the paradise sketched in Ezekiel, God is hidden inside the temple and there is a deep separation between God and normal Israelites, in Revelation the New Jerusalem has no temple, God dwells in the midst of the city, and everyone sees God's face. Perhaps the entire city is envisioned as a new Holy of Holies. Note that the New Jerusalem is a perfect cube (Rev. 21:16) as was the Holy of Holies (1 Kings 6:20).

IV. Theologically, the picture of the New Jerusalem (and the material in Revelation that anticipates it) stresses that if we are faithful, our reward will be true life.

A. If we are faithless, we will be excluded from the New Jerusalem and inherit the "second death" which is destruction in the lake of fire (Rev. 21:8).

B. By contrast, in the New Jerusalem the faithful will drink from the water of life and eat from the tree of life (Rev. 22:1-2).

V. This true life has many dimensions including

- A. The fulfillment of all the previously disappointed hopes of God's people. Note the restoration of the Tree of Life and of the Lost Tribes.
 - B. The abolition of everything that is painful and degrading. God will wipe away every tear (21:4), and nothing will be accursed (22:3).
 - C. The recognition and honoring of all the spiritual accomplishments of God's people. The Bride (Church) is clothed with fine linen which "is the righteous deeds of the saints" (19:8).
 - D. The redemption and transformation of the natural world and the reconciliation of the natural and the urban environments. Note that the Tree of Life and the River of Life are in the City.
 - E. The reconciliation of heaven and earth.
 - 1. The New Jerusalem descends from heaven and surely is heavenly.
 - 2. But the New Jerusalem is on earth.
 - F. The transfiguration of all things by the Divine. Everything in the city is either shiny or transparent, and, therefore, God, symbolized as light, is visible in all things. However, all things retain their own identity.
 - G. Perfect fellowship between people from all cultures. Note that the redeemed come from "every nation, from all tribes and peoples, and languages" (7:9).
 - H. Final ecstatic fellowship with God in which we will find our fulfillment by being centered in him and in giving him praise and we will receive his commendation.
 - I. This blessed state will last forever.
- VI. John uses all of the resources of allusive language and symbol to make this vision have the greatest possible impact.
- VII. His goal is for us to experience this life so vividly that we will affirm that this is our ultimate hope.
- VIII. If we do so, then we will be able to reject any compromise with Babylon (Rome) and suffer for the New Jerusalem.
- IX. A philosophical assumption which John seems to make is that our deepest hope is an indication of ultimate reality (cf. Paul's doctrine of hope).
- X. When we correctly identify what we really want, we also discover that we have been using other things as poor substitutes for it, and we are able to surrender them. Note that
- A. The vision of the New Jerusalem is in ascending parallelism to the vision of the Whore (Rome). There are many parallels between Babylon (Rome) and the New Jerusalem, but the New Jerusalem always is better.
 - B. The vision of the New Jerusalem unmasks the shallowness of worldly fulfillment, especially worldly fulfillment achieved through (corporate) sin.
 - C. But it affirms the hope that the world claims to fulfill. That hope is universal and comes from our nature as beings created by God,
- XI. However, to identify what we really want, we must have someone give us a taste of it, and that is what John does.
- XII. Earlier we noted that the test of whether God inspired a vision is whether the vision leads to peace and joy and a deeper love for God and others.
- XIII. Does the vision of the New Jerusalem do that for you, or would you prefer an eternity in Hearst Castle?

A Brief Summary and Reflection

I. The Bible offers us many contrasting pictures of salvation (what we get from obeying God's call to follow Jesus) is and, therefore, any "summary" will be incomplete and to some extent be misleading.

II. Nevertheless, the following is basically true. Within the Christian Bible

A. Salvation must include a satisfactory minimum standard of living for all.

1. In the Old Testament wealth is often a sign of God's blessing.
2. The New Testament beginning with Jesus himself warns against confusing material luxury with salvation.
3. Nevertheless, Jesus insists that part of the kingdom is food for those who are hungry now.
4. And the various admonitions to provide for those in material need presuppose that poverty is contrary to salvation.

B. Salvation is primarily communal.

1. Of course, God calls each person to have a unique relationship with him, and through this relationship blessings come.
2. Nevertheless, God primarily calls people to be part of a sacred community, and through this community greater blessings are possible. The risen Jesus and his Spirit are primarily present in the gathered community.

C. Salvation especially comes when people turn from individual and group self-centeredness to being centered in God. Through God centeredness the blessings of divine love and peace become more available.

D. Salvation includes social justice and equality. These are essential parts of Jesus's kingdom.

E. When the church has political influence, God calls the church to work to increase justice and equality in imitation of Jesus seeking political power from the Roman government to realize his vision of the kingdom in which the first would be last.

F. However, because of the universality of sin both in the larger world and even in the church itself, salvation in this present society will always be partial and in times of oppression may scarcely exist.

G. Consequently, complete salvation comes after death.

H. In our present life we have only a partial glimpse of what this final salvation is.

I. Nevertheless, it at least includes becoming fully one with God and each other through love.

J. As we await this consummation, we are to live in joyful hope.