

# The Development of the Concept of Salvation in the Qumran Community and its Significance for our Understanding of Salvation in the New Testament

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It is generally held that the beginnings of the Qumran community are to be dated from 150 to 120 BC. The centre of this community had the communal facilities for study, writing, eating, domestic industries and common stores. Of this community the Essenes regarded themselves as the only true Israel and separated themselves from any contact with their fellow Jews. Further, the community at Qumran repudiated the priesthood and cultus of Jerusalem. There were supposedly two major parties, namely the sect of Qumran and the Essenes. They formed their own religious communities in the same district of the desert of the Dead Sea and lived together in effect for two centuries, performing almost identical lustrations, ritual meals, and ceremonies. The community of the Essenes referred to its priesthood as "sons of Zadok," the Keepers of the Covenant and Seekers of his will (Community Rule I, V, VI; Damascus Rule XV, XVI; Messianic Rule I). Their spiritual ideals and convictions induced them to seek truth and holiness apart from the mainstream of Judaism. A deeper and more dynamic meaning of Old Testament religion is that it rested on three fundamental ideas; namely the concepts of election, covenant and salvation.

The primary purpose of this paper is to trace the development of the idea of salvation in terms of divine intervention to establish the cause of the community, i.e., the Wicked Priest and cronies would be utterly destroyed at the hand of God and their enemies and they themselves would be re-established in a new, transfigured Jerusalem. As for the understanding of the community, the concept of salvation has two dimensions, namely, (1) salvation from human misery and sinfulness and (2) the final destiny of being with the heavenly spirits who stand in the presence of God for ever. Here the gifts of the New Age would

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be the proud privilege. The gifts of the Holy Spirit would be manifested in the community of the faithful.

### I. Salvation from Human Misery and Sinfulness

The remarkable feature of the Community's understanding of salvation is that God is the source and fountain-head of the gifts to be enjoyed by the members of the Community. It is interesting to observe that there is no note of self-righteousness in the Qumran writings but rather the individual feels impelled to think of God's blessings showered on him and expresses himself in the Hymns in tones of self-abasement. The last part of the Community Rule XI reads as follows: "Since justification is with God and perfection of way is out of His hand . . . He will draw me near by His grace and by His mercy will He bring my justification."<sup>1</sup> The principal insight inspiring this saying is the awareness that all goodness and truth proceed from God and point to dependence upon God for the blessings of salvation. It was held by the members of the Community that even the correct observance of the Rule was an act of divine grace. More important is the hope that, as they are the chosen people of the New Covenant during the age of final wickedness, the "refuge" of God is kept in store for them. Their idea of the Covenant and salvation carried with it a theology of human wholeness embodying justice, peace and reconciliation in all situations—the concept of *shalom*. What emerges clearly is that the people of the Community clung faithfully and unceasingly to truth and justice.

Further, the idea of one's justification is closely connected with God's righteousness. This is clearly brought out in the final hymn of the Community Rule: "From the source of His righteousness is my justification."<sup>2</sup> Surely the stuff of the Community's theology foreshadowed the fundamental concept of the Pauline theology, namely justification by faith alone. This connection of God's righteousness with one's justification or salvation affords a fertile and fruitful background to our understanding of Paul's idea of God's righteousness as the condition for receiving salvation.

It is significant that Paul's understanding of God's righteousness not as a quality but as a relationship can be more fully understood against the back-drop of the Community's connecting of God's righteousness with justification of the individual. It is God who pronounces the verdict of one being counted as righteous. Righteousness is a present reality. Paul's understanding of righteousness is sinlessness, not in the sense of ethical perfection, but of a relationship. The present reality of righteousness rests upon the experience of salvation. You do not become righteous

<sup>1</sup> Quoted in G. Vermes, *The Dead Sea Scrolls in English*, Penguin Books, Harmondsworth 1962, p. 40.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 41.

by being good, but by being righteous you become good. In the Pauline theology also, good works are no longer the pre-condition of salvation but the resultant activity of the one who through Christ has been redeemed and saved. For Paul righteousness is a present reality, but for the Jews it always remained a matter of hope. Moreover, Paul held that righteousness is a gift and for him grace and gift appear in combination (Rom. 5:15, 17). Righteousness depends upon faith and faith in turn depends upon grace. Righteousness then has its origin in God's grace. Grace falls to the lot of a sinner. It is in this sense also that Paul's thought of God's grace and salvation to be appropriated by the individual comes close to the thought forms of the Qumran Community in respect of the covenant and salvation.

According to the tradition of the Qumran Community, as it is in the Jewish tradition, salvation is an eschatological event which constitutes the core of the community life. The Community believed that God at the end of the days or on the day of judgement would grant the fulness of salvation, the fulness of life. Paul adapted and profoundly modified this concept of salvation when he held that God would give this new life to the believer in Christ and the blessings of salvation would be granted to him here on earth (Isa. 48:18; 2 Thess. 3:16). Paul further believed that God had chosen the Christians from the beginning to be saved through the sanctification of the Spirit, and belief in the truth (2 Thess. 2:13). For Paul salvation means peace as the consequence of being justified by God.

In Paul's scheme of thinking Christians are said to be standing between two decisive movements in God's work of redemption. On the one hand, they are justified, made righteous and reconciled to God. On the other hand, because they have been reconciled to God, they will finally be saved when God brings history to a close. Also, the writer of the Pastorals, especially the Epistle to Titus, is interested in listing a set of historical facts that led to the Church's understanding of God's salvation: "The grace of God has appeared for the salvation of all men awaiting our blessed hope, the appearing of the glory of our great God and Saviour Jesus Christ . . . When the goodness and loving kindness of God appeared, he saved us, not because of deeds done by us in righteousness, but in virtue of his own mercy by the washing of regeneration and renewal in the Holy Spirit" (Tit. 2:11, 13; 3:3-4). One cannot help feeling that there is a striking similarity between the New Testament writers' understanding and that of the Qumran Community in respect of the individual's experience of salvation.

Furthermore, the firm belief of the Qumran Community was that at the end of the Old Age, "the world would be renewed; the elect would inherit the 'glory of Adam,' every blessing and eternal joy in life without end, a crown of glory and a garment of majesty in unending light."<sup>3</sup> This element of eternal joy remains

<sup>3</sup> Community Rule IV quoted in G. Vermes, *op. cit.*, p. 48.

attached to divine intervention into history throughout the literature of the Qumran Community. Again, in the mind of the writer of the Epistle to Titus nothing is more certain than the fact of becoming heirs in hope of eternal life (Tit. 3:7b). So much is the common ground between the Qumran Community's concept of salvation and that of the writers of the New Testament.

More to the point is the Community's understanding of God as the source of man's righteousness. "I will say to God, 'My Righteousness' and 'Author of my goodness' to the Most High . . ."<sup>4</sup> Exactly in the same manner Paul never tired of pointing out that God is justifier of him that has faith in Jesus (Rom. 3:26). For Paul justification implies an act of undeserved love on God's part—the very reverse of giving a man his merits or deserts. It is to be noted that, insofar as the gift of God through Christ Jesus does make man righteous, Paul gives to the process the name of "sanctification" rather than that of justification. Paul makes an emphatic note that justification is not of debt but of grace. The same note is struck time and again in the Community Rule, for example: "As for me, my justification is with God. In His hand are the perfection of my way and the uprightness of my heart: He will wipe out my transgression through His righteousness . . . ; From the source of His righteousness is my justification, . . . He will draw me near by His grace, and by His mercy will He bring my justification and in the greatness of His goodness He will pardon all my sins."<sup>5</sup> In Paul's thinking justification means release from sin and therefore it can be nothing less than the change from such a despair to hope of the brightest radiance or to a certainty of victory. Paul emphasises in unequivocal terms the completeness of Christ's gifts to the believer now and the even greater nature of those that lie in future.

The Fourth Evangelist also expressed his eschatological understanding of salvation by saying that the entire Christian community also shares with Christ the present release from the evil ruler of this world who has no power over Christ and his own because Christ had already overcome the world and its prince of darkness (Jn. 16:33). This understanding of release from the power of the evil one has been a source of strength to the Church. John with his characteristic penetration sums up the idea that light, eternal life, love, and truth have already been given to the Church through the Son who is one with the Father. The Church, believing in the Son, possesses these gifts. To make it accord with John's thought forms we can safely assert that, since the Father and the Son are one in unity of thought, purpose and work since

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 90.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 92-93.

<sup>6</sup> F. M. Cross, Jr., *Canaanite Myth and Hebrew Epic: Essays in the History of the Religion of Israel*, Harvard University Press, 1976, p. 331.

the Son's own are also God's own, the Church receives God's promised salvation through the Son.

## II. The Gifts of the New Age

Thus far we have tried to set forth our proposition in clear terms that the Qumran Community's understanding of salvation lent support to the New Testament writers' general framework of eschatology. As already remarked, one of the chief theological emphases of the Qumran Community concerns the gifts of the New Age. We may safely assert that the Qumran Community, as well as the Essenes, regarded themselves as a community of "eschatological existence." (Incidentally it will be noted that an eminent scholar like F. M. Cross, Jr. with the support of the necessary weight of scientific argument propounded a theory of the identification of the sectarians of Qumran with the Essenes. Once this theory is accepted we may go on to say that the Community at Qumran was organised precisely as a new Israel.) From this point of view of community there developed an apocalyptic understanding of history. It is a commonplace of New Testament research today that the "eschatological existence" of the early Church, was shaped in terms of the anticipation of the kingdom of God and this was uniquely Christian. It must however be affirmed that it is "in the Essene communities that we discover antecedents of Christian forms and concepts."<sup>7</sup> It will suffice here to point out that the late visionaries of the Old Testament, especially the author of Daniel, and the early Christian communities discovered themselves to be living in the last days of the Old Age and looked forward to the dawning of the kingdom of God. There would be an upsurge of evil forces in history and the gifts of the Holy Spirit would be manifested in the community of the faithful who firmly believed that in the final war the Spirit of Truth and his heavenly armies would put an end to the rule of the powers of darkness. Life in the New Age of God's rule would be ushered in. The people of the Community, being the heirs of the kingdom, would be the beneficiaries of the first-fruits of the end-time.

The Hymns Scroll, published by E.L. Sukenik in 1954-55, contained two fundamental themes running through the whole collection, namely salvation and knowledge. In Hymn 2 the author, who is said to be the Teacher of Righteousness, gives thanks to God in these words: "Thou hast established my heart (on) Thy teaching and truth, directing my steps into the paths of righteousness that I may walk before Thee in the land (of the living), into paths of glory and (infinite) peace which shall (never) end."<sup>8</sup> Further, the author goes on to say: "(For) Thine, Thine is righteousness, and everlasting blessing be upon Thy Name.

<sup>7</sup> F.M. Cross, Jr., *The Ancient Library of Qumran and Modern Biblical Studies*, London, 1958, p. 151.

<sup>8</sup> G. Vermes, *op. cit.*, p. 173.

(According to) Thy righteousness, let (Thy servant) be redeemed (and) the wicked be brought to an end.”<sup>9</sup> To judge from the indications in the texts, it becomes obvious that the author is literally interested in the end of the wicked.

It may be convenient at this point to draw attention to the teaching of Paul who believed that God’s purpose had failed even after man’s rebellion against his creator. There seems little doubt in Paul’s own mind that God had already begun to put the situation right. Paul believed that men in Christ are set right with God. Then the creation in its turn would be renewed and share in the glory of the new age which God’s children have already begun to enjoy (Rom. 8:18-25). The creation “waits with eager longing” (Rom. 8:19). Christians also should wait eagerly for the new age. Paul compares the groanings in travail of the earth with the birth pains of a woman (Rom. 8:22). Paul wants to teach Christians that, in the same manner, our present sufferings are a sure sign of blessings to come. Paul’s main line of argument is that God has given us the Spirit as the first-fruit of the New Age and for Christians the new age has already begun. This age is often called the “Age of the Spirit” or of the last days. Paul, on the other hand, taught that there is a future judgement yet to come (Rom. 2:5), a future verdict of justification (Rom. 2:11), a future redemption of the body (Rom. 8:23). In Paul’s understanding the Spirit is the sign that the New Age has come and we already belong to God’s new age. Paul “looks forward to the return of the world to conditions as they existed in Paradise before the Fall (Rom. 8:22),”<sup>10</sup> as Lucetta Mowry puts it.

Paul goes on speaking about the subject of hope and the assurance of that hope. He lists the activities of the Spirit and assurances (Rom. 8:20-23). The first assurance is that the Spirit helps man in his infirmities, i.e., when he is even unable to pray for himself. So the Spirit prays through the individual and for him, making intercession on his behalf. The second assurance is that his salvation is anchored in God’s providence and therefore Paul concludes that man need no longer be afraid of any hostile force.

The author of Hymn 2 goes on expounding a profoundly religious view of life anchored in the saving power of God when he says, “Violent men have sought after my life because I have clung to Thy Covenant. For they, an assembly of deceit, and horde of Satan, know not that my stand is maintained by Thee, and that in Thy mercy Thou wilt save my soul since my steps proceed from Thee.”<sup>11</sup> This tone of vengeance against the enemies of the Essenes of Qumran looms large in the writings of the Qumran sects which, radical themselves, waited for the imminent

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 198.

<sup>10</sup> *The Dead Sea Scrolls and the Early Church*, Notre Dame, Indiana, 1966, p. 151.

<sup>11</sup> G. Vermes, *op. cit.*, p. 155.

judgement upon their enemies and hoped that God's elect would be given final victory in accordance with the prediction of the prophets.

This idea of final victory for the children of God appears also in the writings of the New Testament, especially in Paul. He reminds the Christians in Corinth that this world is passing away (1 Cor. 7:29); he declares that the time is fulfilled (Gal. 4:5), that new creation is a present reality in Christ (2 Cor. 5:17) and that "the end of the age" has come upon believers (1 Cor. 10:11). Paul taught the Corinthians that they had become exceedingly enriched in Christ, therefore they await his future revealing (1 Cor. 1:4ff.). One can safely assert that eschatology has left a deep impression on Paul's gospel. For Paul, the hour of deliverance is the hour of God's free grace. From this it becomes clear that the eschatology of Paul comes quite close to the Qumran Community's understanding of God giving them the final victory in the holy warfare of Armageddon. This conclusion cannot be modified by saying that Paul's eschatology was a sort of framework taken over, though perhaps with modification, from Jewish and primitive Christian apocalyptic. It will be fair to say that the eschatology which Paul took over he conscripted into the framework of the Gospel rather than that he interpreted the Gospel in the light of tradition. It is from this point of view that we may safely assert that the eschatology in the writings of the New Testament may have been shaped by the Qumran Community's eschatological concept of God's salvation.