Matthew I. Ayars

Mainstream Christianity tends to define salvation exclusively in terms of substitutionary atonement (Jesus died for me so that I can go to heaven when I die).

While this is not incorrect, nor unbiblical, this definition of salvation is incomplete.

Where does Israel fit into salvation? And what about the covenant? Most importantly, what about the kingdom of God that Jesus preached fervently? How do all of these dimensions that are central to the biblical text and its message fit into the bigger picture of salvation?

Salvation in Fresh Perspective: Covenant, Cross, and Kingdom reminds readers that salvation is not centrally about the believer, but about God and his World Renewal Plan. Salvation, when properly framed by the entire text that runs from Genesis to Revelation, is not all about me and Jesus, but about God and his plan to renew the creation through the Jewish Messiah and his covenant people. Salvation in Fresh Perspective seeks to bring back into focus the often forgotten dimensions of the great story of salvation.

"It is a pleasure to commend this book to readers of all theological persuasions. Writing in a sprightly and engaging style, Ayars says things about the Biblical understanding of salvation that will irritate almost everyone in one way or another. Yet if the reader will not reject the irritation, but consider it carefully, it will like sand in the oyster, produce some pearls of fresh understanding and insight for which the author is to be thanked.”

—JOHN OSWALT, Visiting Distinguished Professor of Old Testament, Asbury Theological Seminary

"We are indebted to Matt Ayars for taking the recent, and sometimes heated, conversation on the 'New Perspective' on Paul and especially his Roman Epistle, to a novel but necessary level. That novel level is to move the discussion beyond one that is confined to the Pauline take on justification by faith, and reflect on how the contributions of the 'New Perspective' may shed light and insight on the New Testament’s reading of what the Wesleyans call the sanctified life. In the process, Matt helps us to see that the doctrine of penal substitution as an explanation of Christ’s Calvary death, while deeply enshrined in evangelical tradition, is on target but does not reflect the whole of biblical truth on this epochal event. Specifically, Matt demonstrates, magisterially in my judgment, that the penal substitution theory ends up emphasizing individual salvation (get saved and then you will go to heaven) to the exclusion of emphases such as salvation understood as also involving the reestablishment of Christ’s reign on earth. Also, he observes correctly that any understanding of salvation, using the term in its broadest sense, must emerge from a reflection not only on Christ’s priestly office (as in the penal substitution construct), but also from a reflection on Christ’s prophetic and especially his royal office. I highly recommend this text.”

—VICTOR P. HAMILTON, Professor Emeritus, Old Testament Studies, Asbury University

ISBN: 978-1-4982-0182-7 | 158 PP. | $19 | PAPER

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Salvation in

Fresh Perspective

Covenant, Cross, and Kingdom

Matthew I. Ayars

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Author’s Preface

This book was an accident. In the midst of writing my doctoral dissertation, I made the mistake of reading Justification: God’s Plan, Paul’s Vision by N. T. Wright. Many friends and colleagues had suggested that I read Tom Wright, but my doctoral studies had me under a pile of books on Hebrew poetry, linguistics, and literary theory. Finally, I downloaded a sample of Justification just to see what the hype was all about. I read the sample in about fifteen minutes, immediately downloaded the entire book, and scarfed that thing down like a Cinnabon. I was hooked.

As Wright methodically unpacked his reading of Paul while keeping the text and its first-century Judaic context central, I became convinced that he was right. Not only this, but I also began to wonder if what he was saying about Luther and his reading of Paul (through sixteenth-century eyes) could also be true of John Wesley and his reading of Paul. I began to prayerfully realize that Wesley’s reading was deeply shaped by his own personal sin crisis and is deeply concerned with the purity of the heart of the individual. Paul is concerned about this too, but was this central to what Paul was saying? What about Israel? What about covenant? What about the kingdom that the Gospel writers insist is at the center of the gospel message? I started looking for answers. My reading was centered in the New Perspective but also went beyond there.

As I was on family vacation taking a break from the mission field as well as my dissertation writing, I began processing my thoughts by putting notes to paper. After a short time I had 40,000 words. What started out as a small area of interest consumed me. I began to see with greater clarity the need in mainstream Christianity for an appeal to remember that salvation and the Gospel is about much more than substitutionary atonement and an escape from final judgment.
AUTHOR’S PREFACE

As a seminary president in Haiti, I have lots of opportunities to preach. As I would prayerfully prepare sermons, the Holy Spirit continued to bring me back to preaching and teaching this full, wholly integrated, and deeply biblical Gospel. I would sense his leading to remind folks that while substitutionary atonement and the individual sin crisis is an important aspect of the Gospel, there’s more to the story; there is covenant, there is the corporate people of God, there is God’s faithfulness to Israel, there is holiness, and there is mission and calling. I was called to remind people that the salvation of God was for a people, through a people. I reminded people that God’s salvation is not centrally about us, rather, it is centrally about him and his plan to redeem all of the creation.

As the feedback from this sort of teaching was generally very positive, I decided to craft my notes into a book. This is that book. Now just for a few comments about the New Perspective.

As one whose theological education and spiritual nourishment is situated within the Wesleyan-holiness heritage, the New Perspective has gained much of my sympathy and all of my respect. This is due in large part to the New Perspective’s commitment to practice proper exegesis by giving room to the Scriptures to speak on their own terms. Serious students of the Bible are keenly aware of the risk of interpreting the Scriptures primarily in light of our own context; while this is both good and necessary, it must remain secondary to interpreting the text in its own context.

A peripheral goal of this work is to be a Wesleyan voice in the midst of the greater dialogue happening in New Testament studies. During my wonderful periods of research at the Tyndale House, I have quickly and surprisingly realized that one is hard-pressed to find a fellow Wesleyan. It surprises me that within such a rich heritage I only found out about the New Perspective on my own. This means that, at least in my experience, we Wesleyans are not talking much about it, at least as far as I can tell. This is surprising because the New Perspective, just like the Wesleyan-holiness heritage, has quite a lot to say about how to interpret Paul, especially Romans. In particular, we are all quite obsessed with Pauline soteriology. The New Perspective, also like the Wesleyan-holiness heritage, takes up issue with the Reformed interpretation of much of Paul’s soteriology. Granted, the New Perspective and the Wesleyan-holiness heritage do not always come out on the same side of the issue, but both do agree the Reformed interpretation needs, well, reformed.
AUTHOR’S PREFACE

Connected to these is the important reality that there are dividing points within the New Perspective. For instance, Dunn, Sanders, and Wright disagree on a number of items. Being aware of this there is a risk in attempting to represent a school of thought that comprises great internal diversity in a rather generalized way. There is no small amount of controversy surrounding the New Perspective, and N. T. Wright in particular. Nicholas Perrin writes:

Criticisms of this nature have also been leveled against Tom, but we must be careful. In the first place, it is important to show awareness of the context in which our author speaks. I believe that in future years, when scholars survey his corpus, as they undoubtedly will, they will likely agree that one of the most important theological threads in his writings, not least in his writings on Jesus, is in fact a two-ply cord. This cord involves a commitment not only to challenging what Davies calls the “exaggerated individualisms” among other Gnostic tendencies that today crowd various accounts of Paul and Jesus, but also to offer a compelling apologia—on both a historical and theological level—for a historically rooted and politically relevant Christian faith.  

Finally, the goal of this book, once again, is to reexamine the New Testament teaching of salvation and holiness in light of how the New Perspective shines an illuminating spotlight upon the unique context of first-century Judaism in Palestine. The method will be unconventional. The presentation will not be systematic, nor will it be unorganized. We will utilize the indispensable element of the New Perspective’s theoretical framework for understanding first-century Palestinian Judaism, the story. Stories are personal. The emphasis of this methodology is to remember precisely that salvation in fresh perspective is something very personal and even more so something very mission. That is my intention. I hope that the form reflects the message in a sort of onomatopoeic fashion. The story is God’s story, the great story of God’s World Renewal Plan. Read yourself into the story. Become a part of his story, or at least become aware that you are, in fact, a part of the story. It is to the story that we now turn.

Matthew I. Ayars

Acknowledgments

Initial thanks must go to Dr. John Oswalt. Dr. Oswalt’s work has been most instrumental in helping me to develop an integrated view of Scripture and holiness doctrine. More than this, I have to thank Dr. Oswalt for his role as a theological reader for the project. I feel as if this work is as much his as it is my own. Finally, I have to thank Dr. Oswalt for his unmatched example of intellectual vigor, strong conviction for the complete message of the Gospel, and academic excellence—truly an inspiration.

After this, special thanks must go to David G. Firth who was graciously supportive of this project even though I worked on it while simultaneously working on my PhD under his supervision. This project undoubtedly prolonged the completion of my dissertation.

Special thanks as well to the Emmaus Biblical Seminary of Haiti family, especially Phil, Emily, Ethan, and Haylie who provide ongoing support with many laughs and sandwiches. You bring life to life.

Finally, to Stacey, Lily, Sofia, and Nora my everything.
Introduction

For too long we have read Scripture with nineteenth-century eyes and sixteenth-century questions. It’s time to get back to reading with first-century eyes and twenty-first century questions.

—N. T. Wright

For centuries now the judicial metaphor for salvation has occupied center stage of mainstream Christian soteriology. This means that most Christians today define salvation in terms of the substitutionary death of Jesus that offers an escape from the judgment of God by way of grace and forgiveness of sin (atonement) so that when they die they will go to heaven rather than to eternal damnation. This way of thinking about salvation is not wrong, per se, but it is far from complete and even further from a fully integrated biblical soteriology that takes into account more developed and nuanced notions of ecclesiology, Christology, and eschatology.

Right away one can identify some issues with thinking about salvation strictly in terms of penal substitution. For starters, it is centrally occupied with resolving the sin crisis of the individual as opposed to God and the reestablishment of his reign over the creation. Furthermore, this definition of salvation fails to account for all of Jesus’ messianic offices, namely the offices of prophet and king. It also fails to account for Israel’s role in the metanarrative of God’s cosmos-redeeming plan. And what of the covenant? Certainly, the covenant as the pivotal structuring device of Scripture itself must come into play in thinking about salvation, right? And what about the kingdom of God that Jesus was constantly talking about in the gospels,

1. Wright, Justification, 38.
what part does that play in salvation? And holiness? Mission? Pentecost? Where do these pieces fit into the larger picture of Christian salvation?

The point is that the justification and substitutionary atonement-centered soteriology is not the whole story. Mainstream Christianity’s thinking about salvation is quite one-dimensional, while Scripture’s conceptualization of salvation is as deep, complex and technical as the Bible itself.

So how did we arrive at a place where our soteriology has become so one-dimensional? This way of thinking about salvation finds its origins in Martin Luther’s interpretation of Paul’s Epistle to the Romans, which more or less launched the Protestant Reformation. Like many interpreters, Luther understood Paul in light of his own socio-religious and historical context, which was mid-to-late fifteenth-century Roman Catholicism. Luther read his own context into the text by assuming that fifteenth century Roman Catholic works-based righteousness was identical to that which the “Judaizers” taught and that Paul so vehemently fought against by espousing justification by grace through faith in Romans and Galatians. Luther took up reading the book of Romans, looking for a way out of his sin-guilt dilemma. Following the Roman Catholic Church’s teaching, Luther had done everything in his power to alleviate his sin-guilt by way of good works. However, at the end of the day, the guilt and shame of his sin weighed heavily upon him. In looking for a solution outside of what the Church taught, Luther read the Epistle to the Romans. In reading Romans, Luther learned that his sin-guilt could only be relieved by grace through faith in Jesus Christ thanks to Christ’s substitutionary atonement at Calvary. This revelation led to Luther finally receiving the assurance of his salvation and relief from his sin guilt that he longed for. A wonderful story indeed, one that led to the Protestant Reformation, which espoused the authority of Scripture over tradition (sola scriptura), and salvation by grace (sola gratia) through faith (sola fide).

Justification by grace through faith is unquestionably a biblical and orthodox doctrine; however, it is only one dimension of a fully developed biblical soteriology. Not only this, but is justification by grace through faith the thrust of what Paul was saying, or was Paul actually saying more than this? Furthermore, were the issues that Paul faced in first-century Palestinian Judaism really identical to that which Luther faced in fifteenth-century Roman Catholicism? In other words, what was the context in which Paul was teaching salvation by grace through faith? Perhaps there’s more to the story than what Luther was able to see in his time.
INTRODUCTION

Luther’s interpretation of Paul is understood today as the “Old Perspective.” Its name is derived from its relationship to the “New Perspective of Paul,” or simply “New Perspective” (NP hereafter), which we will unpack in just a moment. This Old Perspective of Paul is largely the reason why, when we talk about salvation today as Protestant evangelicals, we talk in large part about justification and the forgiveness of sins. It is our theological and ecclesiological heritage. Over the past few decades, however, the NP has seriously challenged this by suggested a more historically nuanced reading of both Paul and the rest of the New Testament with special emphasis lent to the Gospels.

Interpretive Results of the New Perspective

The NP started as Second Temple Judaism historians challenged Luther’s reading of Paul based on the proposition that Luther was reading his own context into Paul, thereby losing sight of some of the more nuanced dimensions of what Paul was saying to his first century audience. Proponents of the NP pointed out that while Paul does indeed teach with certain clarity that salvation can be conceptualized in terms of substitutionary atonement and penal substitution, biblical soteriology (i.e., an understanding of salvation that accounts for the entire canon’s conceptualization of redemption over and above select readings from the New Testament) is much more historically contextualized and robust than this. When we read Paul on Paul’s own terms, as defined by his first-century Jewish context and worldview, we are able to see that Paul’s central concern is not substitutionary atonement; rather, his central concern is teaching how God, in keeping his promises to Israel, successfully completed his plan to redeem the creation from the reign of sin and death through the death and resurrection of Jesus, the Jewish Messiah, and its implications for Gentile believers. Informing Paul’s soteriology was Paul’s ecclesiology, eschatology, and Christology, all of which were heavily

2. “Second Temple Judaism” refers to the period of the rebuilding of the temple of Solomon, destroyed by the Babylonians in 586 BC to AD 70 when the temple was destroyed again by the Roman Empire. Also, it is crucial to note that first-century Judaic eschatology was anything but monolithic. However, the community at Qumran, as well as the eschatological posture of believers represented in the Gospels, attests to the fact that the first century was a time of heightened anticipation for the coming of the Messiah. See Chilton and Neusner, Judaism in the New Testament.

3. The most notable and prolific NP scholars are N. T. Wright, James D. G. Dunn, and E. P. Sanders.
influenced by his first century Judaic worldview. The NP demonstrates that the apostle was deeply concerned with how the story of Jesus is continuous with the story of Israel—something that the Old Perspective fails to engage.

So what are the interpretive results of the NP on constructing a biblical soteriology? More than anything else, the NP seeks to follow the lead of Paul’s thinking about salvation in terms of the Old Testament theological heritage. This means that there is first an emphasis on the role of the covenant in salvation. Just as in the Old Testament, the covenant is central to God’s plan for redemption. It is only the covenant people of God who live under Yahweh’s reign, and only through the covenant and the covenant people that God’s redemptive plan reaches the world.

Second, once we properly account for the covenant dimension of salvation, the focus of salvation begins to naturally shift away from the individual and onto the collective people of God.4

Third, by thinking in terms of the covenant people of God and the role of Messiah in leading and redeeming his people, the Israel piece falls naturally into place as well. The Messiah is the fulfillment of the righteousness of God to Israel and to the world through Israel.

Fourth, the NP reorients us to the central role of the kingdom of God in the Gospel narratives and to the cluster of messianic events (cross, resurrection, and Pentecost) as the pinnacle redemptive event of Scripture. Once again, the concept of kingdom, something that Jesus and the Gospel writers are very preoccupied with, is nearly forgotten in the OP (as well as in mainstream Christianity). More than any other motif, the kingship and messianic identity of Jesus is placed at the center of the message of the four gospels. This naturally challenges the OP’s method of building a biblical soteriology solely in terms of Jesus’ priestly office (substitutionary atonement).

Marching in step with the NP is an emphasis on the importance of Old Testament theology for Christians. One of the greatest problems of the church today is that it has inherited a soteriology that is entirely severed from the Old Testament story. We have a tendency to forget that the New Testament solves the problem presented in the Old Testament. The problem of the Old Testament is not where people go when they die. Sadly, so much of our twenty-first century thinking has been constructed around

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4. The implications of this point are far reaching, especially for trinitarian thought and theology, not to mention Christian philosophy at large in terms of ontology and communion.
answering that question and we use passages here and there from the New Testament to support that sort of skewed soteriology. Undoubtedly, the New Testament does answer this question; however, this is a marginal concern at best for the New Testament.

So what is the central question that the Old Testament asks that the New Testament is answering? What is the Old Testament problem that the New Testament solves for us? John Oswalt states it well with this:

There is one great question that the Old Testament proposes and which the New Testament gloriously answers: “How can a sinful, mortal, finite human being ever live in the presence of, and share the character of, a morally perfect, eternal, infinite God?” That is the overarching question from Genesis to Malachi. The Old Testament does not ask, “How can my sins be forgiven so that I can be assured of going to heaven?”

Salvation in Fresh Perspective: The Goal

So what exactly do I mean by salvation in “fresh perspective”? The NP espouses that fact that Paul himself interpreted the Old Testament in ways never done before, by making Jesus the central point of reference in his interpretive framework and theology. Because of the occurrence of messianic events (cross, resurrection, and Pentecost) Paul was able to approach the Hebrew Scriptures with a completely fresh perspective. N. T. Wright highlights the point with this:

Like many other Jewish thinkers of his and other days, he radically revised and rethought his Jewish tradition (in his case, the viewpoint of a Pharisee) around a fresh understanding of the divine purposes, thus gaining a fresh hermeneutical principle. In other words, I proceed on the assumption that, however we describe what happened to Paul on the road to Damascus (“conversion”? “call”?), its effect was not that he rejected everything about his Jewish life and thought and invented a new scheme, with or without borrowed non-Jewish elements, but that he thought through and transformed his existing Jewish worldview and theology in light of the cataclysmic revelation that the crucified Jesus had been raised from the dead.6

6. Wright, Paul and the Faithfulness of God, 611.
Paul, then, articulated a fresh perspective of salvation to his own socio-historical context of first-century-Palestinian Judaism. It is in this same spirit that this book explores salvation in fresh perspective for contemporary mainstream Christianity. The time is ripe to hit the refresh button on how we think about salvation. So much of mainstream Christian soteriology is shaped by contemporary worldview and culture, which is not altogether a bad thing however, as the information and technology age has launched a new moment of evangelicalism in the Western world, it is crucial that we recalibrate our soteriology to account for what the entire Bible says about what salvation means for us today. With the proper pieces in place, we will be able to come away with a fresh understanding of salvation beyond me-and-my-sin; a salvation that is centered on the cross as the means for establishing God’s reign on earth through his covenant people for all people; a biblical salvation.

The central goal of this book, then, is to offer a “fresh perspective” on salvation by setting a fundamental framework for developing a biblical soteriology. The method for achieving this goal, in the same spirit of the NP, is to recalibrate the interpretive lens for reading the New Testament with the two primary points of reference being the theological heritage of the Old Testament paired with the historically nuanced contours of Second Temple Judaism and the first-century Jewish worldview. Special emphasis will be lent to Paul and the thought and theology that frame his soteriology. There will also be a special emphasis on mission and holiness as the ultimate outworking of salvation according to the Christian tradition. We will see that salvation is ultimately oriented around the faithfulness of God to the creation through Israel in order to reestablish his reign over his covenant people through the Jewish Messiah (Jesus) as his chosen human agent, thereby bringing righteousness back to the created order.

The Aggregates of Biblical Soteriology: Covenant Cross and Kingdom

So how can we take on such a monumental task in a relatively concise manner? For the sake of accessibility without too much reductionism, I hope to center our approach on the three concepts of covenant, cross, and kingdom. Acting as the backdrop for these three concepts is the metanarrative of Scripture. It cannot be overemphasized that these concepts overlap and flow in and out of one another. I find the metaphor of concrete helpful
here. Concrete is made up of aggregates (cement, water, sand, and stone) that when mixed together properly form a single structure. Covenant, cross, and kingdom are the aggregates of biblical soteriology. If we fail to integrate these components, thereby preventing them from gelling, then we will come away with a soteriology that lacks unity. Once again, even though salvation is multidimensional, it is still singular. Salvation is one thing made up of many parts.

Prior to surveying these three aggregates of biblical soteriology, it is crucial that we first consider the role and function of the metanarrative of Scripture. Following that, we will survey each of the aggregates by way of introduction.

Salvation History: The Metanarrative

Salvation is best understood when analyzed in its proper context, not when it is extracted from that context and placed on the laboratory table for analysis. In talking about this very issue, Michael Bird writes:

> Beliefs and doctrines are not forged amidst a list of propositions and by logical inferences but in the telling of a story . . . As the old hymn goes, “We have a story to tell the nations,” a story that reaches back to Genesis and culminates in Christ handing the kingdom back to the Father: that is the story world of Paul, the story we must grapple with if we are to understand him properly.7

The point here is that the Bible is not a systematic theology (neither is Romans).

Salvation, at every point, is framed within a narrative (known as “re-

demption history” or “salvation history”).8 The church’s pairing of the New Testament with the Hebrew Bible to form the Christian canon is plain attestation from the authoritative Christian tradition that this is how God intends the Scriptures to be read and interpreted. The NP proposes that


8. Critics of biblical theology propose that the concept of metanarrative is a late one imposed on the Scriptures during the time of the church’s forming of the Christian canon. While there is a partial truth to this, there is no doubting that the New Testament writers, Paul and the Evangelists especially, interpreted Jesus in light of the Old Testament narrative. Most importantly, Jesus himself expressed on a number of occasions that he was the fulfillment of the story and promises of the Hebrew Scriptures. This alone provides authoritative precedence for the legitimization of the concept of biblical theology. See Balla, “Challenges to Biblical Theology,” 20–27.
Paul understood this. Paul could not think about Jesus in isolation from the Old Testament and the Old Testament in isolation from Jesus. Jesus changed everything about how Paul understood Adam and Eve, the garden, Abraham, Moses, Sinai, the Torah, David, the monarchy, the Prophets (Heb. נְבֵיִם), and the Writings (Heb. כְּתוּבִים).

An important part of this is remembering that Paul, being trained as a Pharisee, had a worldview that was shaped by the Old Testament. Paul embraced transcendent monotheism. Paul viewed the world through what he believed to be true about Israel and her patron deity, the single, sovereign Creator of the cosmos whose existence was entirely independent from the cosmos. This also means that for Paul everything that happened in history hinged on God's great plan to redeem humanity as articulated in the Jewish Scriptures. When Jesus came along Paul didn't just see a God-Man ultimately performing the act of substitutionary atonement, thereby paving a highway to heaven. Rather, when Paul looked upon the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus, he saw a story unfolding against the backdrop of the greater salvation narrative that began in the Old Testament. This means that the work of Jesus as the Jewish Messiah was something much more than substitutionary atonement for Paul. This means that the culmination of God's World Renewal Plan was Jesus and his work, his mission to redeem the world that began in the Garden.

What I mean by “God's World Renewal Plan” is God's mission to redeem the fallen, corrupt and decaying creation and to restore things back to the way they were meant to be. This translates into God's plan to usurp the reign of sin and death over the creation so that his righteous reign through his human agent can be restored. We will explore this further in chapter 1.

The Covenant

The concepts of covenant and salvation are inseparable in Scripture. We will see that the covenant is the means through which salvation comes to the world. Scripture stresses that salvation is covenant salvation for a covenant people. Salvation is something that is both collective and individual. At the same time, salvation is not only for God's covenant people, but also through God's covenant people. As the chosen people of God take on the loving character of God through being members of the Messiah-faith covenant people, their own holiness becomes the fuel for fulfilling the mission of God to the world. In much the same way that holy love drove Jesus to the
cross for the salvation of the world, so the holy love of Jesus manifest in the covenant people drives its own cross-bearing mission to continue God's World Renewal Plan—to be ambassadors to the world on behalf of Christ the king. This is the essential core of what we will explore in chapter 2.

The Cross

Normally, in the traditional interpretation of the cross, there is a focus on the cross as substitutionary atonement, or penal substitution (the priestly office of the Messiah). Oftentimes, however, what gets left out are the other messianic offices that are to be interpreted through the cross. We will bring this into perspective by interpreting the cross not only as the moment of substitutionary atonement, but also the moment of Jesus' (ironic) corona- tion as the messianic king of Israel and the cosmos. Special consideration will be given to the cross as the culmination of the mission of God in which the Davidic king fulfills the mission of God by rebelling against the powers of evil (symbolized by a Roman cross) and thereby establishing God's reign on earth. This is the central interpretation of the cross according to the four evangelists. While the evangelists are indeed concerned about the question of substitutionary atonement in the cross, it remains a secondary item for them. Central to the cross is the messianic moment, Jesus as King.

We will see that through the cross and the faithfulness of Jesus, the faithfulness of God manifests to and for his covenant people—the faithfulness of God to deal once and for all with the problem of sin and thereby offer an eternal forgiveness, setting right the relationship between broken humanity and the Holy One of Israel. Now that the covenant people are forgiven through Jesus' work on the cross, they are able to be the living, breathing, and mobile tabernacle that bears the saving glory of God to the world. The cross, in other words, is the means by which the mission-centered holiness of God can manifest through the new covenant in the people of God.

Along with this, the cross is the means by which the concept of the people of God moves from being something very exclusive to something very inclusive. Prior to the cross, it was only the physical family of Abraham that had easy access to the benefits of the promises of God via the Torah and Torah observance (obedience to the Mosaic law). The “blessed life,” the life “set apart” from the cursed life of the darkened world, was only available to the biological family of Abraham. There is an obvious problem here.
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The problem is that God promised that through Abraham *all the families of the world would be blessed*. This had yet to happen prior to Jesus. This means that Israel, because of bearing both the solution and the problem to the brokenness of the world, did not fulfill the Abrahamic promise. This is where Jesus and the cross come in. With the death of Jesus, the stipulations of the first covenant are both fulfilled and put to death—forgiveness and justification become available for all people, and the promises of God to Abraham for all the families of the earth are fulfilled in Jesus the Messiah, who is the embodiment of the true Israel. With the death of Jesus the curtain that made God’s presence exclusive is torn (Mark 15:38). This means not only that through Jesus people can come in but also, through Jesus, the presence of God can go out. This is the core of chapter 3.

Chapter 4 focuses on the dimension of the cross as the second exodus, Jesus as the second Moses, and Pentecost as the second giving of the law code. We will see that Christ was not only a royal figure in the likeness of David, but also a covenant-making figure and liberator in the likeness of Moses. The Scriptures strongly attest to this dimension of Christ’s identity and ministry, which we will see. From this angle we are able to see the cross as the means by which the new covenant is made. We have the blood of the covenant shed on the cross that creates a new means through which people can become members of the family of God, or citizens of the kingdom of God, through their faith in Jesus.

**The Kingdom**

The kingdom of God is the grand finale, the ultimate culmination of the mission of God through the new creation launched in the bodily resurrection of Jesus. God’s plan from the beginning was to establish his rule on earth, to establish his theocracy through Jesus. The kingdom launched in the resurrection is the new era; it is the *age of the Spirit*. The old age of the flesh is gone (has been crucified with Christ), and the new has come (has been raised with Christ). God reigns through his people, on earth, *via* the Holy Spirit whom Jesus sends. Because of the many dimensions of this concept, we are at risk of getting too far ahead of ourselves. So let’s summarize: holiness is where the love of God reigns on earth through his chosen people, his holy possession, thereby fulfilling his World Renewal Plan.
Conclusion

So, with this, we have a 35,000-foot view of an integrated biblical soteriology. When we place Jesus and God’s World Renewal Plan at the center of our thinking about salvation, our soteriology begins to line up quite well with the Bible’s conceptualizations of what it means to be saved. With this, the goal is not to move away from substitutionary atonement as a crucial dimension of Christian doctrine; rather, the goal is to properly situate substitutionary atonement in its appropriate context as a piece of a much larger image that is God’s World Renewal Plan.
Part 1

God’s World Renewal Plan
The Salvation Narrative

God’s Story

The treatment of salvation in Exodus is all the more powerful because it is told in the context of narrative. Mahatma Gandhi reportedly told his friend, American missionary E. Stanley Jones, that he did not believe the Bible was divine because it was composed largely of stories. Apparently, he thought that divine revelation should take the form of bare, contextless pronouncements, as the Koran or many of the Hindu books do. But we believe the Bible is divinely inspired, not in spite of large sections in narrative form, but precisely because it appears in such a form.

—JOHN OSWALT

I recently encountered a well-intentioned Christian brother sporting a bright orange T-shirt. The shirt had a graphic borrowed from the popular board game Monopoly. The graphic was a Chance card that said in bold font, “Get Out of Hell Free.” This, for far too many Christians, sums up Jesus, the cross, and the resurrection. Believe in Jesus and you’ll be issued a “Get Out of Hell Free” card. Really? Is it really that one-dimensional? Does this sum up the sixty-six books of Scripture, the promises to Abraham, Israel, David, the disciples and the church today? Is this what it’s all about?

To borrow the phrase that Paul repeats again and again in Romans, “By no means!” (Rom 3:4, 6, 3; 6:2, 15; 7:7, 13; 9:14; 11:1, 11). How have we

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ended up in a place where our theology warrants propagating the Gospel of Jesus Christ as being synonymous with a “Get Out of Hell Free” card? I’m sure the answers are many, but the bottom line, I believe, is that we have tragically lost sight of the salvation narrative. This is what Sandra Richter means when she says, “most Christians have not been taught that the story of the Old Testament is their story . . . The church does not know who she is, because she does not know who she was.”\textsuperscript{2} Thankfully, Paul did not make this mistake. It is when we read Paul (as well as the entire New Testament) without the Old Testament in sight that we end up with bad theology T-shirts (and bumper stickers).

The church must remember who she was. This means recognizing that salvation is not centrally about me-and-my-sin-crisis, it is about Jesus and God’s World Renewal Plan. N. T. Wright says, “The theological equivalent of supposing that the sun goes round the earth is the belief that the whole of Christian truth is all about me and my salvation.”\textsuperscript{3} We have to remember that the New Testament authors were interpreters of the Old Testament and understood their stories to be intimately connected with that of the Old Testament.

Not only must we have knowledge of the characters, events, and places of the Old Testament, but we must also have an integrated view of the Old Testament, its message and its theology. We must be able to go beyond knowledge of what the Old Testament says to arrive at a place where we know what the Old Testament means. We must broaden our lens so as to see the whole picture of the Old Testament in order to understand how the New Testament links up with it, and how the history of God carrying out his single plan to redeem creation takes shape throughout.

We get into interpretive trouble when we forget that in reading Scripture we are dealing with a single story that runs through all of Scripture. It is when we separate ourselves from this history, from our heritage, that we end up with an understanding of holiness and salvation that knows only of me-and-my-sin-crisis and going to heaven. God forbid!

The gospel, the full gospel, is much deeper, richer, and more profound than this. It is about so much more than where we spend life after death—it’s about so much more than God alleviating me of my sin-guilt so that I can go on living a happy and peaceful life in communion with God. This is merely a part of the story. The full gospel is a complex thing that cannot,

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{2} Richter, \textit{Epic of Eden}, 17.
\item \textsuperscript{3} Wright, \textit{Justification}, 23.
\end{itemize}
and should not, be flattened out or deflated by removing or neglecting the story of God’s faithful plan to redeem all of the creation through his chosen people. The full gospel is a far cry from being summarized in a “Get Out of Hell Free” card.

When we lose the complex backdrop of God’s World Renewal Plan while reading the New Testament and interpreting God’s salvation into our daily lives, it will greatly impact the way we think about salvation. From the perspective of me-and-my-sin-crisis, salvation becomes something that’s primarily about me. Salvation certainly concerns the individual, but when we read the story of Scripture properly, we begin to see that my salvation is for a purpose that goes beyond my peace of heart and mind. We can be moved by the idea of a perfected will and fully devoted heart, but we must not end there. God forbid! We will see that salvation, and holiness in particular, is something very missional. When we get this piece right we then begin to move into embracing and understanding the full gospel.

So what is the full gospel? The full gospel can only be properly placed in perspective when read as a story. The full gospel is the metanarrative of Scripture. Now we turn to define what we mean by the “metanarrative of Scripture.”

**Defining Salvation Narrative: God’s World Renewal Plan**

In a phrase, *the salvation narrative is the story of God’s single plan to rescue the creation from the oppression of sin and death by reestablishing his righteous governance (the kingdom of God) over creation through his chosen human agents.* What we are talking about is God’s World Renewal Plan—the coming of the kingdom of God on earth as it is in heaven. We are talking about God’s plan to rescue the creation from its condemnation, corruption, and decay, which are the consequences of human disobedience and moral autonomy. This Plan is multifaceted, and its various dimensions are integrated and have overlapping layers. We will see this as we progress through God’s World Renewal Plan as the crucial framework for understanding salvation.

This single mission to the world through Israel is precisely what shapes New Testament theology. What we’re talking about is monotheistic covenant theology. The New Testament understands the death and resurrection of the

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4. Note to the reader: I will use the phrases “God’s World Renewal Plan,” “salvation narrative,” “metanarrative,” and “salvation history” interchangeably.
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Messiah strictly through the lens of God’s covenant with Israel, reaching clear back to Genesis. The new covenant that is launched with the death and resurrection of Jesus is a continuation of God’s greater Plan. This is true in much the same way that the Mosaic covenant established at Sinai is continuation and fulfillment of the covenant God made with Abraham in Genesis 15. Thinking about Sinai without Abraham would be a mistake. Such a mistake would lead to misinterpreting the theological and historical implications of what happened at Sinai. Moses and Abraham are characters in the same, continuous story. Abraham’s story prepares for Moses’ story, which prepares for Israel’s story, which prepares for Jesus’ story, which prepares for the church’s story.

Further still, reading the prophets without Sinai in view would be, for the same reason, a major interpretive fallacy. Without being mindful of the covenant and its stipulations established at Sinai, we would be entirely unable to understand the basis of God’s judgment and hope pronounced through the prophets.

All this to say that there is only one proper way of framing our thoughts about the kingdom of God and the new covenant that Jesus preached and taught, and that is around God’s World Renewal Plan. This is precisely why we can’t read Paul without hearing about Abraham, Israel, and even Adam. This is also why we can’t read the Gospels without reference to the kingdom, the Messiah (Christ), the Son of Man, and David (we will unpack this further in later chapters).

The idea here is that the Bible is a single salvation narrative of God’s World Renewal Plan that begins in Genesis and ends in Revelation. Paul was an excellent interpreter of Scripture because he properly took into account salvation history. As a first-century Jew with a vocation to expand the kingdom among Gentiles, it was the only way he could interpret Jesus, the cross, the resurrection, and Pentecost. Paul’s calling to preach the gospel among the Gentiles is seated in the context of the coming of a new age situated in the greater timeline of God’s redemptive plan (i.e., Jewish covenant eschatology). This all-encompassing lens is what makes Paul’s theology so multifaceted (and often times hard to understand). Paul’s thought and theology properly accounted for salvation history, the Roman Empire, the Jews, and most importantly Jesus, as characters in an epic drama that began all the way back in Genesis. Each of these key players had their specific place within the fulfillment of God’s promises to Israel and to the world for renewal.
THE SALVATION NARRATIVE

This means that the story of Jesus, the cross, and the resurrection is not a new story. N. T. Wright speaks to this by saying:

The “reinterpretation” or “reworking” in which Paul engaged was seen by him not as a new, quirky or daring thing to do with ancient traditions, but as the true meaning of those ancient traditions, which had either gone unnoticed or been distorted by more recent readings of Israel’s Scriptures and the movements of life and culture in which those readings played a key part.

The story of Jesus, the story of Adam and Eve, Abraham, Moses, Israel, David, Nehemiah, and Isaiah the prophet are all the same story, and Paul read it that way. He understood salvation and holiness in light of the people, places, and events of the greater story.

As is reflected in bumper-sticker theology, this concept is far removed from the thought life of the average Christian interpreter of Paul. Historically, the church has come away with what seems to be at times a rather obscured interpretation of Paul, or at best, an interpretation of Paul that doesn’t seem natural to what Paul may be saying. The serious neglect (and misinterpretations) of Romans 9–11 (and I would even add Romans 7 to this) is proof of this. Perhaps this is why we sometimes struggle so much with some of the passages in Paul’s letters. Perhaps we have been reading Paul within an interpretive context that is foreign to Paul’s context.

What we need to do is to enter the world of the New Testament. As impossible as this seems, we can at least attempt to do so by taking a step back and describing the greater landscape of the World Renewal Plan as told through the story of Israel, the story of Scripture. We must not, however, describe the story as a fractured story with various chunks that fit together in a cumbersome or haphazard way. We do not wish to simply list the famous characters, places, and events of the Old Testament without taking into account their connection, their interrelatedness. We must have an integrated view of both Testaments. Let’s turn to that story now with the priority in front of us to understand it as the single story of God’s World Renewal Plan.

5. Wright, Paul and the Faithfulness of God, 46.

6. At the same time we have to remember that Paul was a bit of an enigma to Peter as well (see 2 Pet 3:16). This being the case, we cannot chalk up all of our confusion in reading Paul to ignorance of Paul’s worldview. Paul is just plain challenging, which is why we need a fuller, more developed window into the worldview that shaped his theology.
Creation, the Image of God, and God’s Reign Over the Creation through His Human Agents

The first chapter of Genesis is one of the most studied passages of the Bible, thanks to contemporary creationism debates. In the midst of those debates we must be careful about how we handle the sacred text of Scripture. It is quite dangerous to force a passage of Scripture to speak to dilemmas that it never intended to solve. The first chapter of Genesis, while certainly inspired for a contemporary audience, was not written to a contemporary audience. In other words, while Genesis 1 may offer us answers in the midst of a debate about the age of the earth, we can be almost certain that the inspired ancient authors did not have such a debate in mind when writing.

The question we must ask, then, is what did they have in mind when writing? What are the questions that Genesis 1 is answering? In other words, what is the theological thrust of the creation accounts? Is Genesis 1 really trying to answer a when question? Even if it does answer that question, is that the primary question it is answering for its readers? I suppose that could be possible. However, it’s more likely, as is evidenced by features of the text, that Genesis is much more concerned about who than when. The theological thrust of Genesis 1, I believe, is not primarily about how old the earth is; it is about who the Creator is.

So, what does Genesis 1 have to say about the Creator and how he relates to his creation? The text makes it clear that the God of the creation is sovereign, he is one, and he is good. These three things do not always go together. Many times, in fact, goodness is absent from power. The rising and falling of human empires throughout the course of human history bears witness to this. Genesis, on the other hand, tells us that God is, yes, a powerful king, but also a good king. God is not a dictator. God is, instead, an empowering and freeing God. The jussive verb phrase “let there be” (or some variation of this) appears approximately six times throughout the passage. In order to bring order out of chaos God does not issue a series of commands as if he were a hard-nosed monarch forcefully subduing his enemies. God does not use imperative, commanding language; he uses permissive, freedom language. In fact, the only thing that God subdues in creation is the chaos, the darkness.

7. For an excellent treatment of this topic see John H. Walton, The Lost World of Genesis One.