

The Moral Arc of the Universe: Salvation as Emancipation

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El arco del universo moral: la salvación como emancipación

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Abstract

Many modern Christian understandings of salvation spiritualize and personalize salvation. Salvation is what makes it possible for an individual soul to spend eternity in heaven. Jewish and Christian notions of salvation are richer and more complicated, and include an understanding of salvation as emancipation from powers and principalities. To be saved is to be adopted by the rightful ruler of the universe and liberated from servitude to all other false rulers. I briefly outline the significance of the Exodus and Christian understandings of the kingdom of God for three of the major emancipation movements in the history of the United States, and arguably the world, namely the American Revolution, the abolitionist movement, and the Civil Rights movement.

Keywords: Salvation; Emancipation; Abolition; Civil Rights; American Revolution.

Resumen

Muchas interpretaciones modernas de la salvación trasfiguran y personalizan la salvación. La estancia eterna de un alma en el cielo es posible por medio de la salvación. Las ideas judías y cristianas son más profundas y complicadas e incluyen una idea de la salvación como una emancipación de “poderes y principios.” La salvación llega después de una adaptación por el dirigente legítimo del universo y una liberación de la esclavitud a otros dirigentes falsos. Yo resumo el significado del Éxodo y las interpretaciones cristianas del reino de Dios en tres de los movimientos más importantes de la emancipación en la historia de los Estados Unidos, y hasta se podría decir del mundo: la Revolución Americana, la campaña abolicionista y el movimiento por los derechos civiles.

Palabras clave: Salvación; Emancipación; Abolición; Derechos civiles; Revolución Americana.

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1. THOUGHTS ON EMANCIPATION

“In France,” wrote Alexis de Tocqueville in 1835, “the spirit of religion and the spirit of freedom” marched “in opposite directions,” while in America “they were intimately united” (Fox, 2004: 160).

One of the great tensions of the Enlightenment was the tension between secular and religious authority and the relationship of both to individual liberty. This tension can be seen in the social and moral theory of the Enlightenment. The long years of religious wars that followed the Protestant Reformation helped fuel calls for religious tolerance and separation of church and state. Religious authority, in both its political form as a state church, and its use to posit and evaluate truth claims, was increasingly suspect among the intelligentsia of the enlightenment.

The emancipation project of the Enlightenment can be seen as a continuation of the emancipation project begun by the Reformation. Though the Reformers sought freedom from Rome, the Enlightenment emancipation project would lead to efforts to be free of a state church altogether. Thus some are understandably wary of bringing religion into a conversation about emancipation.

Why bring a discussion of religion into a discussion of freedom movements? Is there not a real danger in understanding religious identity as more than personal, but as social and political? Is there not a real danger in understanding the impetus of the quest for freedom from oppressive social or political institutions as religious?

This Enlightenment tension can be clearly seen in the thought of one of the most influential philosophers for modern emancipation movements, John Locke (1632-1704). In his “A Letter Concerning Toleration”, written in 1689, Locke argued for a separation of church of state, and tolerance of religious differences, but also argued that religious identities that involved political allegiances, as he believed Roman Catholic identity did, could not be tolerated. Locke also argued that atheism could not be tolerated as an atheist’s rejection of God was a rejection of the foundation of morality (Milton and Milton, 2006: 45-46).

Locke’s opposition to authoritarianism, in both political and religious forms, and his emphasis on natural human rights and social contract as the only legitimate basis of government, strongly influenced the shaping documents of the United States, the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution. These in turn, have strongly influenced modern emancipation movements. Yet, it is difficult to make sense of Locke’s understanding of natural human rights without an understanding of how

Locke saw these in the context of our being God's creatures operating in the context of a natural moral law.

We can see a similar line of argument in the work of James Madison, arguably one of the most persistent and most influential of the founders in creating the political and legal framework for disestablishment in the United States. Madison argued for disestablishment to protect freedom of conscience and our freedom to act on our duty toward our creator. He considered this religious duty a duty with precedence over our civil duty as can be seen in the following quote from Madison: "Before any man can be considered as a member of civil society, he must be considered as a subject of the Governor of the Universe" (Wills, 1990: 376).

On a philosophical level, this tension may be seen even more strongly in the thought of the German philosopher Immanuel Kant (1724-1804). For Kant, human freedom was the basis of morality and of the dignity and respect all deserve. In his lifetime, Kant also received the nickname the "Alleszermalmer," for his refutations of the classical metaphysical arguments for the existence of God (Küng, 1981: 537). Kant argued that the rational human being, free from external authority, cannot, on grounds of reason alone or rational examination of empirical evidence, prove the existence of God.

It would seem that Kant should have argued for a purely secular account of human freedom. Instead, Kant argued that to make sense of morality, we had to posit the existence of God, human freedom, and a life after death, though we could not prove them (Küng, 1981: 537). In *After Virtue*, Alisdair MacIntyre argued that Kant was essentially correct, that "morality did in the eighteenth century, as a matter of historical fact, presuppose something very like the teleological scheme of God, freedom and happiness as the final crown of virtue which Kant propounds" (MacIntyre, 1984: 56).

Kant was led to this conclusion as he wrestled with one of the perennial human questions—what is the relationship between doing good and being happy? He argued that

If no state of well-being follows his well-doing; then there would be a contradiction between morality and the course of nature. . . . Why should I make myself worthy of happiness through morality if there is no being who can give me this happiness? Hence without God I would have to be either a visionary or a scoundrel. I would have to deny my own nature and its eternal moral laws. I would have to cease being a rational man (Kant, 1978: 110).

We can hear in Kant's words an anticipation of the abolitionist Theodore Parker's (1810-1860) language of a moral arc to the universe. Martin Luther King, Jr. would draw on this language in his own speeches in favor of civil rights. Why is the notion of a moral arc relevant? Among other reasons, it is relevant because it

addresses the profound question named by Kant. Why should we do what is good or right if doing so risks our own individual happiness? For those in the American Revolution, the Abolitionist movement, and those in the Civil Rights movement, this was not just an academic question.

Kant's resolution to this problem was similar to Locke's, who also wrestled with the question of the relationship of human freedom, a binding moral law, and human happiness. For both Kant and Locke this led to questions about the nature of God and our relationship with God. In traditional Jewish and Christian thought, questions about the ways in which God shapes the relationship between human happiness, human morality, and human freedom, lead us, inevitably, to questions of the nature of salvation.

In what follows, I will explore the ways in which Jewish and Christian understandings of salvation propelled three modern emancipation movements, the American Revolution, the abolitionist movement, and the Civil Rights Movement. I will focus on two profoundly shaping visions—that of the Exodus event and the Christian vision of the kingdom of God. I will show that one cannot make sense of the energy that led to, and sustained, the American Revolution, the abolitionist movement, or the Civil Rights Movement without an understanding of the ways in which these movements were sustained by a religious imagination profoundly influenced by these shaping visions.

1.1. Salvation as Emancipation

In the midst of a mighty struggle to rid our nation of racial and economic injustice, I have heard many ministers say: 'Those are social issues, with which the gospel has no real concern.' And I have watched many churches commit themselves to a completely other worldly religion which makes a strange, un-Biblical distinction between body and soul, between the sacred and the secular (King, 1963: 7).

There are many today who, like Martin Luther King, Jr.'s critics, find connections of salvation to emancipation troubling. However, when we examine the ways in which salvation is referenced in the Bible and the ways in which those references were used in emancipation struggles such as the American Revolution, the Abolitionist Movement, and the Civil Rights Movement it is clear that our cultural understandings of emancipation have been strongly influenced by Jewish and Christian understandings of salvation.

Why do we find this connection between salvation and emancipation troubling? One answer to this question has already been hinted at in words of Tocqueville. For some, religion, especially organized and institutionalized on the level of a state church, is oppressive rather than liberating. We see this in the work of Madison to insure that there would be no establishment of a state church.

We also find it troubling for the reasons outlined by Martin Luther King, Jr. We could argue that our common modern cultural understanding of salvation in the United States has been strongly influenced by an evangelical Christianity that emphasizes the personal nature of salvation. Salvation in this tradition is commonly understood, and depicted, as personal, moral, spiritual, and other worldly. Are you saved? To those asking the question in this way, salvation lies in a personal relationship with Jesus Christ, a relationship that saves us from the wages of sin and death, and guarantees our personal salvation, freedom from Hell, and eternity in paradise.

If Jesus truly offered a salvation that was eternal life in a kingdom not of this earth, it is difficult to understand why Jesus was crucified. To understand the threat Jesus posed to Jewish and Roman authorities, we have to examine the teachings and actions of Jesus and the ways in which these teachings and actions resonated with Jewish understanding of salvation and of the Messiah. When we do so, we will see, as Martin Luther King, Jr. argued, that modern separations of religious, political, social, and individual identity make little sense. Understandings of salvation as personal, moral, and spiritual, can certainly be found in the Christian New Testament, but an understanding of salvation as solely personal, moral, and spiritual, is insufficient given the range of the understandings of salvation found among in the Judaism of Jesus' day or among early Christians. In addition, such an understanding fails to explain the use of Jewish and Christian religious language and religious symbols in social and political liberation movements here and around the world.

As the Exodus event is the most obvious example of a salvation that was religious, political, and social, I will begin with an examination of the Exodus event and its influence on the American Revolution, the Abolitionist movement, and the Civil Rights movement.

1.2 The Exodus

When Israel was in Egypt land...
Let My People Go;
Oppressed so hard they could not stand,
Let My People Go.
“Thus saith the Lord,” bold Moses said,
Let my people go;
If not, I'll smite your first-born dead,
Let my people go.
Go down, Moses,
Way down in Egypt land,

Tell ole Pharoah,
Let My People Go!
Go Down Moses (Jones: 1993, 44).

The story of the Exodus is the theme of the spiritual Go Down Moses. YHWH, the God of the people of Israel, through the prophet Moses, freed the Israelites from bondage in Egypt. After ten devastating plagues, Pharaoh finally summoned Moses and his brother Aaron. He then summoned Moses and Aaron in the middle of the night, and said “Rise Up, go away from my people, both you and the Israelites! Go worship the Lord, as you said” (Exodus 12:31, New Revised Standard Version).

After the Israelites began their migration from Egypt, Pharaoh changed his mind, and sent his chariots after the people. Pursued by Pharaoh’s chariots, and trapped by the Red Sea, the Israelites feared for their lives. God parted the Red Sea, and provided the Israelites passage out of Egypt and safety from the chariots of Pharaoh.

But Moses said to the people, “Do not be afraid, stand firm, and see the deliverance that the Lord will accomplish for you today; for the Egyptians whom you see today you shall never see again. The Lord will fight for you, and you have only to keep still” (Exodus 14:13).

The Hebrew word translated in this passage as deliverance, could also be translated as salvation, often is translated as salvation, and is translated as salvation in a later passage which refers to this passage, “The Lord is my strength and my might, and he has become my salvation; this is my God, and I will praise him” (Exodus 15:2).

When the children of Israel had crossed, the water crashed in on the chariots of Pharaoh. This is referenced in one of the oldest passages of the Jewish TaNaKh, the Song of Miriam, the sister of Moses, one of the ten songs of redemption in Jewish tradition (Bandstra, 2004: 145). “I will sing to the Lord, for he has triumphed gloriously; horse and driver he has thrown into the sea” (Exodus 15.1).

1.3. Salvation and the Messiah

In Hebrew, the word we translate as “messiah” is a reference to one anointed by God. It was typically used to refer to kings and was also found in references to high priests. The Book of Isaiah refers to the Persian King Cyrus by name, describing him as God’s shepherd and God’s anointed for his role in ending the Babylonian exile and restoring the Temple in Jerusalem. In Jewish tradition, the Messiah would come to be understood as an agent of God through whom God would initiate the Messianic age, an age of peace, justice, and righteousness. In short, the salvation of this age is not just an individual reality but also a social and a political reality. This is seen clearly in the description of Cyrus as a “messiah.”

By the time of Jesus, there were a number of messianic expectations. Some looked for the return of a mighty prophet, such as Moses or Elijah to lead and renew the people. Some looked for the restoration of the throne of David. Some looked for a priestly figure to renew the Temple of God. Some looked not for an individual, but a transformation of the people of Israel in such a way that that the people of God might be God's anointed. Some looked for recognition by all the nations of Jerusalem as the city of God, and the Temple as God's Temple. Some looked for a vindication of the faithful of God. In this vindication, all the nations would recognize the authority of God and the faithful servants of God. Some looked for an end to the diaspora of the Jewish people. There were general expectations that the messianic age would be an age of peace and righteousness.

In the Gospel of Luke, Jesus reads from the scroll of Isaiah. His words are a reference to the end of the Babylonian exile as described by Isaiah.

When he came to Nazareth, where he had been brought up, he went to the synagogue on the Sabbath day, as was his custom. He stood up to read, and the scroll of the prophet Isaiah was given to him. He unrolled the scroll and found the place where it was written:

'The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor.'

And he rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the attendant and sat down. The eyes of all in the synagogue were fixed upon him. Then he began to say to them, 'Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing' (Luke 16.1-21).

As described here, the year of the Lord's favor is not just a personal spiritual reality. It is also a social and a political reality. Salvation is emancipation.

2. THE AMERICAN REVOLUTION

The Exodus event was inspirational to Pilgrims and Puritans and was called upon to inspire the American Revolution. Pilgrims and Puritans saw the New World as a Promised Land in which they could make their covenant with God. The American Revolution was preceded by revivals and conversions across the colonies in the 1740s (Bellah, 1975: 62). Those wanting to inspire the American Revolution could describe King George III as a Pharaoh. In even stronger rhetoric, some described him as the Antichrist (Bellah, 1975: 28). For his role in helping to liberate the colonies from Britain and establish a new social, legal, and political order, George Washington was considered America's Moses.

The first book published on an academic printing press in the colonies was the Bible. If you were literate, and knew any book well, it was likely the Bible. If you were illiterate, you were introduced to the Bible in sermons, stories, and hymns. In short, if one book shaped anything like a shared imagination in this new world, it was the Bible.

Even those founders of more secular bent, such as Ben Franklin and Thomas Jefferson, saw the power of symbolic use of the Exodus event (Horsley, 2003: 1). This was Jefferson's edit, in 1776, of Franklin's proposal for the Great Seal of the United States.

Pharaoh sitting in an open Chariot, a Crown on his head and a Sword in his hand, passing through the divided Waters of the Red Sea in Pursuit of the Israelites: Rays from a Pillar of Fire in the Cloud, expressive of the divine Presence and Command, beaming on Moses who stands on the shore and extending his hand over the Sea causes it to overwhelm Pharaoh. (Available at: <<http://greatseal.com/committees/firstcomm/index.html>> [March 20, 2013])

Jefferson also referenced the Exodus event in his second inaugural address:

I need, too, the favor of that Being in whose hands we are, who led our forefathers, as Israel of old, from their native land, and planted them in a country flowing with all the necessities and comforts of life; who has covered our infancy with his providence and our riper years with his wisdom and power (Bellah, 1975: 24-25).

2.1 The Abolitionist Movement

Wade in the water,
Wade in the water children,
Wade in the water,
God's gonna trouble the waters (Jones, 1993: 65-66).

In one of the defining events of the Jewish TaNaKh, God liberated the children of Israel from slavery. The image of God as the great emancipator was not lost on slaves and could be seen in the spirituals such as *Wade in the Water*. Harriet Tubman, of the Underground Railroad, also described as an American Moses, is reported to have sung *Wade in the Water* and *Go Down Moses* to communicate to slaves fleeing to the north (Jones, 1993: 50).

In the experience of slaves, we see both the oppressive and the redemptive nature of Christianity. Christianity was used by slaveholders to justify slavery and by abolitionists to condemn it. Those looking for proof texts in support of slavery in the Bible could certainly find them. For slaveholders, Christianity was also seen

as superior to the many false religions slaves brought with them. As these false religions could not be tolerated by the slaveholders, it made sense to attempt to replace these with Christianity, as long as that Christianity could be used as a means of control and slaves understood that Christianity required their acceptance of slavery and obedience to their masters. Yet, as Wills observed, “Christianity, meant as an instrument of control from above, could be seen as a vehicle for rebellion from below” (Wills, 1990: 196-197). Slaves used the cover of a slaveholding Christianity to hold onto their traditional beliefs and to the promise of freedom.

The struggle over slavery was present in Christian churches, and in political conflicts, prior to the Revolution, but few Christian denominations took a clear stand against it. The earliest to do so were the Quakers, who in 1776, acted to expel slave holders (González: 1985: 250). As with the American Revolution, the time prior to the Civil War saw revivals and conversions sweep the land. Methodists and Baptist churches in particular grew in number and memberships. The Abolitionist movement was strongly influenced by both the evangelism and the millennialism of this Second Great Awakening. Conflicts over the legitimacy of slavery would lead to schisms within the Methodist, Presbyterian, and the Baptist denominations. Only the Roman Catholic and Episcopalian church avoided schism (González: 1999: 251).

In 1834, Nathan Bangs, then editor of the *Christian Advocate*, a publication of the Methodist church, responded to the British Abolitionist George Thompson’s lecture in New York on the evils of slavery, by encouraging Thompson to imitate Christ’s conduct and stay out of civil affairs. Bangs argued that Jesus was aware of the pervasiveness of the institution of slavery across the Roman Empire, yet argued that Jesus never denounced slave holders, nor did he “tell them that unless they let those oppressed go free, they could not repent and enter into the kingdom of heaven” (Fox, 2004: 205).

The Second Great Awakening also produced fiery and determined orators castigating those who held slaves and those who defended the institution of slavery. Angelina Grimké, in her 1836 *Appeal to Christian Women of the South* asked if Jesus would himself have owned slaves. She granted to those who held, as Bangs did, that Jesus did not explicitly condemn slavery, but redirected the argument. The question she asked was whether slavery could be consistent with the moral teachings of Jesus, among them, the Golden Rule.

Let every slaveholder apply these questions to his own heart. Am I willing to be a slave—Am I willing to see my wife the slave of another—Am I willing to see my mother a slave, or my father, my sister, or my brother? If not, then in holding others as slaves, I am doing what I would not wish to be done to me or any relative I have (Fox, 2004: 207).

William Lloyd Garrison, a Quaker, and editor of the abolitionist publication the *Liberator* compared the persecution of abolitionists such as himself to the sufferings of Christ and the persecution of the early Christian martyrs. Garrison was an advocate

for “immediate emancipation,” the unconditional, and uncompensated, emancipation of slaves (Fox, 2004: 210). Garrison’s call for emancipation, and willingness to suffer on behalf of this cause, was based on his conviction that in the incarnation of Christ, Jesus had ushered in not a future world freed from sin, but freedom from sin in this world. Garrison argued that true Christians, those truly freed from sin, must “immediately sever their ties with ‘slaveholders, warriors, worshippers of mammon, enemies of holiness... The axe must be laid to the root of the tree, and total abstinence from sin insisted on as the reasonable duty of every human soul, and as essential to christian character” (Fox, 2004: 210).

In Garrison’s call for a revival of Christian life, one hears concerns not only for the fate of the individual soul, but the fate of the nation. We hear this concern expressed strongly in the earlier words of Dr. Benjamin Rush, who in 1773, in his *Address upon Slave-keeping*, urged clergy to “Remember that national crimes require national punishments, and without declaring what punishment awaits this evil, you may venture to assure them, that it cannot pass with impunity, unless God shall cease to be just or merciful” (Bellah, 1975: 43).

2.2 King and the Civil Rights Movement

The strength of the story of Moses, and the Exodus, and its influence on Martin Luther King, Jr. can be seen in his mountaintop sermon, given the night before his assassination.

Well, I don’t know what will happen now. We’ve got some difficult days ahead. But it really doesn’t matter with me now, because I’ve been to the mountaintop. And I don’t mind.

Like anybody, I would like to live a long life. Longevity has its place. But I’m not concerned about that now. I just want to do God’s will. And He’s allowed me to go up to the mountain. And I’ve looked over. And I’ve seen the Promised Land. I may not get there with you. But I want you to know tonight, that we, as a people, will get to the promised land!

And so I’m happy, tonight.

I’m not worried about anything.

I’m not fearing any man!

Mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord!! (King, Jr. 1968: last paragraph)

Martin Luther King Jr.’s words continue to haunt. If George Washington was the Moses of the American Revolution, Martin Luther King, Jr. was the Moses of the Civil Rights Movement, and as Moses, he looked down from the mountaintop into the Promised Land, but did not join his people there. What Martin Luther King, Jr.

understood, and what the Civil Rights Movement illustrated, was that the freedom of individuals can only be guaranteed in the context of a social and political reality. If I am to be free as an individual, people must be free.

As had critics of the abolitionist movement, critics of the Civil Rights Movement argued that Jesus was concerned with the individual soul and not social and political issues. In his “Letter from Birmingham Jail,” written in 1963, Martin Luther King, Jr. spoke to critics who claimed that his movement was too political, too concerned with social issues, and too little concerned with the gospel. He argued that these critics had a strange otherworldly vision of the Gospels. His vision of the Beloved Community, a vision that shaped his work in Civil Rights, was strongly influenced by his understanding of the Gospels. Though it is true that he drew inspiration from Gandhi’s movement of nonviolent civil disobedience, it is also true that Gandhi himself was influenced by Jesus’ teaching on nonviolence. In Gandhi’s nonviolent movement, King saw how nonviolence could be used to direct social change.

3. SALVATION AS EMANCIPATION: A REEXAMINATION OF JESUS

How is it that this notion of salvation as social and political emancipation, so clearly evident in the Exodus event, seems to have been lost or minimized in modern cultural understandings of salvation? This has happened in part because of the development of an ahistorical and apolitical understanding of Jesus. Ironically, as I was writing this, the loss of the politics of Jesus was illustrated concretely in the library stacks of James Madison University, in which the classic text by John Howard Yoder, *The Politics of Jesus*, was literally missing.

Consider the Lord’s Prayer, attributed to Jesus, as found in the Gospel of Matthew.

Our father in heaven,
Hallowed be your name.
Your kingdom come.
Your will be done,
On earth as it in heaven.
Give us this day our daily bread.
And forgive us our debts,
As we have also forgiven our debtors.
And do not bring us to the time of trial,
but rescue us from the evil one
(Matthew 6: 9-13).

In the Lord's Prayer, we find reference to the kingdom and to our "daily bread." This is a clear reference to the manna provided to the people of Israel from God as they wandered through the desert after liberation from Egypt. If salvation is membership in the kingdom of God, and those in the Kingdom of God rely on God for their daily bread, then salvation is not just personal and otherworldly. It is political and this worldly emancipation.

If God is the true king of the world, and a prophet speaks and acts by the power of God, then prophecy is a religious act *and* a political act. In the context of Jewish tradition, to be Jewish was to be a part of the children of Israel, of the children of Abraham. This was not just an individual reality, but a social reality. In fact, you could argue that it was your status as a member of this people that identified you as an individual and defined you as an individual. As a part of this people, you lived out of a covenant relationship with God.

The Zealot revolt in Sepphoris around 6 C.E., led by Judas and Zaddok, illustrates the power of the Judaism as a religious and political identity. Josephus referenced this in his history, *The Jewish War*.

Judas the Gaulanite [a teacher] and Saddok the Pharisee launched a rebellion. They said that the tribute amounted to downright slavery and appealed to the people to seek their independence,... saying that God would aid them until their endeavor succeeded... They agree in all other respects with the views of the Pharisees, except that they have an unconquerable passion for freedom, since they are convinced that God is their exclusive ruler and master (Horsley, 2003: 79).

Sometime during the childhood of Jesus, Judas took control of Sepphoris. Two Roman Legions were sent in to control the uprising. Several thousand zealots were crucified. At least one of the disciples of Jesus was a zealot (Simon the Zealot). Judas may also have been a zealot. Barabbas, the prisoner picked by the crowd rather than Jesus, was also a zealot (Noss, 2008: 455).

The religious significance of the acts of Jesus, his authority as a teacher of Torah, his forgiveness of sins, the miracles of feeding, healing, and resurrecting, cannot be understood fully apart from an understanding of the social and political significance of these acts. Though a full explication of this is beyond my scope here, this much needs to be said. If we examine the teachings and actions of Jesus, Jesus operated in the manner of a prophet coming to renew the people of God, in the manner of a Moses or Elijah. He would likely have been seen as such with those familiar with their stories and acts. Reference to this can be seen in what is known as the transfiguration scene in Matthew 17.1-9 and Luke 9.28-36.

I have already shown how the Lord's Prayer reference to daily bread draws on the imagery of the Exodus event. Over the course of history, the twelve tribes of Israel faced a number of annihilation and assimilation threats. Slavery in Egypt

posed a kind of annihilation threat. Through Moses, Exodus, and the covenant of the Torah, God renewed the people of Israel and led the people to the land of Canaan, the Promised Land.

In the story of Elijah we see a response to the threat of assimilation into Canaanite culture and Baal worship. Such a move would have been tempting economically and politically. Ahab, ruler of Israel during the time of Elijah, openly worshiped Baal, the Canaanite god of the storm. Elijah, as a prophet of YHWH, challenged the prophets of Baal. Four hundred and fifty prophets of Baal gathered, calling on Baal to bring the storm, to no effect. Elijah called on YHWH and lightning consumed the sacrifice. The assembled crowd turned on the prophets of Baal, killing them. For this, Jezebel, wife of Ahab, vowed to kill Elijah. Elijah fled through the desert, to Horeb, a forty-day journey and the site of the covenant made with Moses. There God spoke to Elijah in a still small voice. This was seen as confirmation that YHWH was still the God of Israel and that the corrupt rule of Ahab would be overthrown. Elijah, prophet of YHWH, not only performed miracles, but openly challenged the economic and political elite of Israel and called Israel back to the Mosaic covenant with YHWH.

During the time of Jesus, Rome posed an arguably greater annihilation and assimilation threat to Israel than had been posed by Egypt or Canaan. As with the temptation to assimilate to Canaanite identity, the temptation, for economic and political reasons, to embrace a Hellenistic identity to benefit from a relationship with Rome would have been strong. The political, economic, and religious elite at the time of Jesus were tempted to accommodate to Rome, either to preserve their existing power and wealth, or to increase it, and Jewish rulers were busy remaking parts of Israel into Hellenistic style cities.

In the land of Galilee, Jews were barely in the majority. There were a number of Greek speaking residents. Sepphoris and Tiberia had been rebuilt in Hellenistic style. On the other side of the Sea of Galilee was Hippos, one of the Decapolis, or ten Hellenistic style cities. As noted by Crossan, unlike earlier transfers of power that changed rulers at the top, but did little to change the life of peasants and their relationship to the land, Rome had made land itself into a tradable commodity. The traditional link between the peasants and the land, a land that belonged to God, was challenged both by an expanding Hellenistic culture and the taxes helping to fund this expansion (Crossan, 1996: 39-40).

The symbolism of the twelve disciples of Jesus is clear. In these twelve, symbolic of the twelve tribes of Israel, Jesus was renewing the people of God. The feeding miracles resonate with the miracle feeding of the people on their Exodus journey and the miracle feedings of the prophet Elijah. The healing miracles of Jesus can be seen as a renewal of an individual to the communal life of Israel and the people of God.

What does it mean to be part of the people of God, the kingdom of God? What would life in this kingdom look like? Much of Jesus' teaching speaks to this. If we examine Jesus' teachings on these questions, these answers speak to individual, social, and political realities. Early Christians certainly understood the teaching of Jesus as speaking to individual, social, and political realities. That Jesus would address not only individual, but social and political realities can be seen in what is sometimes referred to as the Song of Mary (another Miriam), the mother of Jesus.

'My soul magnifies the Lord,
and my spirit rejoices in God my Saviour,
for he has looked with favour on the lowliness of his servant.
Surely, from now on all generations will call me blessed;
for the Mighty One has done great things for me,
and holy is his name.
His mercy is for those who fear him
from generation to generation.
He has shown strength with his arm;
he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts.
He has brought down the powerful from their thrones,
and lifted up the lowly;
he has filled the hungry with good things,
and sent the rich away empty.
He has helped his servant Israel,
in remembrance of his mercy,
according to the promise he made to our ancestors,
to Abraham and to his descendants forever' (Luke 1:46-55)

How did God intend us to live, in God's kingdom? To answer this question, we might return to the beginning, to Genesis. Scholars have long noted that there are two apparently separate accounts of creation in Genesis. In the first, human beings, male and female, are made in the image of God. We are to have dominion over the earth. In the second, the human made by God names all of the other creatures created by God. The act of naming, in ancient religious understanding, was itself seen as a kind of dominion.

Unfortunately, many today read the opening of Genesis as arguing against a certain kind of evolutionary biology. I would argue that there is a kind of argument being made in Genesis, but that it is not an argument with evolutionary biology. Even

more importantly, I would argue that reading Genesis in this way distracts us from the real argument being made in both descriptions of the creation of human beings.

In both accounts, we see that human beings were not created to worship any of the creation, the sun, the moon, the stars, the animals, etc., nor were we created as slaves of the gods, as in the older Babylonian creation myth, the Enuma Elish which is similar in many ways to the garden story (Bandstra, 2004: 73-74). The opening accounts of Genesis could be seen in themselves as emancipation proclamations. We do not need to offer sacrifices to any of the created order. We are not slaves of any of this created order, but created in the image and likeness of God. What does it mean to be created in the image and likeness of God?

Consider the words of the Declaration of Independence

We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness.—That to secure these rights, Governments are instituted among Men, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed,—That whenever any Form of Government becomes destructive of these ends, it is the Right of the People to alter or to abolish it, and to institute new Government, laying its foundation on such principles and organizing its powers in such form, as to them shall seem most likely to effect their Safety and Happiness (Available at: [March 20,2013].)

Thomas Jefferson's appeal to dignity of our creation, of our inalienable rights, was of course influenced by the philosophy of John Locke, but his appeal could also be seen as calling on the symbols of Genesis. Locke himself recognized the sovereignty of God, and the sovereignty of God over human beings. Out of this sovereignty, Locke could, and did, argue for natural moral rights. Jefferson argued for emancipation from Britain on the grounds that the British government had violated these basic unalienable rights and no longer had the consent of those it would govern here. That Genesis speaks to this can be seen in the words of Anthony Burns, an ex-slave:

“God made me a *man*- not a slave, and gave me the same right to myself that he gave to the man stole me to himself” (Cone: 1975, 138-139).

We can see in the beginning of the Jewish TaNaKh an account of human beings that has shaped the human desire for emancipation. Locke's vision of a human right to property assumes that humans have dominion over the earth and that our labor is our rightful property, as we have been given our own dominion. As humans have been created to have their own dominion; governance should be a social contract, a contract between equals.

4. CONCLUSION: SALVATION AS EMANCIPATION: ARE YOU SAVED? HAVE YOU BEEN SAVED?

Now the Lord is the Spirit, and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom (2 Corinthians 3:17).

In the area of southeastern North Carolina in which I grew up, these were common questions. What does it mean to be saved? As indicated earlier, for many of those asking this question, the answer to this question is that to be saved is to have a personal saving relationship with Jesus, a relationship that saves you from the wages of sin and death. Such a reading can easily be drawn from the writings of Paul.

Yet, if we focus only on this claim on eternal life, we can lose sight of other emancipatory claims made by early Christians. To be saved was not just to be assured of eternal life, but to be assured that nothing in all of creation could separate us from the love of God. This can also be seen in the writings of Paul, as can be seen in Romans 8.

I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory about to be revealed to us. For the creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the children of God. . . . We know that the whole creation has been groaning in labor pains until now; and not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the first fruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly while we wait for adoption, the redemption of our bodies. (Romans 8.1-23)

What are we then to say about these things? If God is for us, who is against us? . . . For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord. (Romans 8.31-37)

When early Christians spoke of salvation, they spoke of it not only as a future event (victory over death), but a present reality, a freedom and power out of which one could speak and act with confidence, without fear, and a sense of peace and joy (Johnson, 1986: 93).

To be saved, Paul argued, was to be adopted by God. Adopted by God, God is now your rightful ruler, a ruler who has freed you from all other false dominions. To be saved was to be emancipated. In an age of separation of church and state, it is too easy to overlook the social and political claims made in the language of Paul. "There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus" (2 Galatians 3:28). To be saved is to be a member of a new kingdom, the kingdom of God, and emancipated from all of the other powers of this world.

We return to a question we examined earlier. What is the relationship between freedom, doing good, and human happiness? For Kant and Locke, Grimke, Garrison, Parker and Martin Luther King, Jr. we cannot make sense of this apart from some understanding of God as the ultimate legislator of the world. This, I would argue, is the importance of the religious imagination for understandings of emancipation. The Jewish and Christian visions of salvation as a social and political reality, as our inclusion in the people of God, can be seen as religious responses to threats to identity posed by assimilation and annihilation. Out of this vision of salvation by God, you can declare yourself free, though the world declares you a slave.

These narratives have resonated across history in struggles for emancipation. The struggle for freedom requires the capacity, even the audacity, to imagine that the world need not be as it is, can be other than it is, and should be other than it is. For many struggling for freedom, the religious imagination, and the individual and social identity it has shaped, has helped to provide both this capacity and this audacity.

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