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**Irrevocable nature of Salvation:
a case from the Old Testament**

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Abstract

Introduction

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Abstract

The Old Testament from the beginning indicates that God intended to save all from their sins after the fall (Genesis 3:9). God takes this action out of his own initiative and Grace to seek and find the lost humankind. From this premise, it is inconceivable that God can reverse what he has done on his own initiative without any influence and in his own wisdom. Therefore, it is in this context that I argue that there is no way God can reverse this position. This is so because His gifts and calling to Israel are irrevocable so it is to the non Jews whom God has called alike. This is the assurance we have as Christians running throughout the Old Testament and ultimately the New Testament. The question then as to whether one can lose one's salvation is related as to how one got saved in the first instance. No one can save oneself, it all comes from God as such we have the assurance that what God has done is irrevocable and will be sustained forever.

Introduction

The matter of salvation particularly in the Old Testament attracts a lot of discussion and debates in Biblical scholarship. There are

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many reasons given and one of them is the fact that when we speak of Salvation, it is only in the New Testament where the subject very clear. The New Testament categorically states that salvation is in no other name than that of Jesus.

Acts 4:12 – Salvation is found in no one else; for there is no other name under heaven given to men by which we must be saved

Therefore to speak of salvation in the Old Testament in that view does not do justice to theme of salvation as it is only in the New Testament that there is a clear way of salvation through Jesus Christ. Consequently, most scholars who have written on the matter have done so from the perspective of New Testament and specifically the books of Romans 8 and Hebrews 6. We need to state that there are other texts which scholars use to argue for their case apart from these two. The point we want drive home here is that, a clear case for salvation is made often from the New Testament perspective. The general point of view is that Old Testament must be Christocentric in that it points to and culminates or climaxes in the person and redemptive work of Christ.

The other striking issue on the subject of salvation has to do with what is the status of those who died without Jesus (before Jesus) as to whether they will be saved or not.

However, it is clear from the premise (Genesis 3:9) that God intended to save all from their sins after the fall in the Garden of Eden. God takes this action out of his own initiative and Grace to seek and find the lost humankind. From this premise, it is inconceivable that God can reverse what he has done on his own initiative without any influence and in his own wisdom. The question then as to whether one can lose one's salvation is related as to how one got saved in the first instance. No one can save himself, it all comes from God as such we have the assurance that what God has done will be sustained for ever.

In this paper, I argue that given the fact that the premise of our salvation is God, there is no way God can reverse his position. His gifts and calling to Israel are irrevocable so it is to the non Jews whom He has called as well. This is the assurance we have as Christians running through the Old Testament and ultimately the New Testament.

Given the scope of this article, I will only sample select Old Testaments texts to argue for my case. Insights will be made from the narratives, prophets and the wisdom and poetic literatures respectively.

A. Salvation from the Old Testament Perspective

In dealing with salvation from the Old Testament perspective, it is vital that we make it clear that we cannot speak of salvation without speaking of what it is that people are saved from is. It can be argued from the narrative in Genesis 3 that sin of human kind is the basis on which Salvation is being sought. Man is sinful by nature due to the fall and thus need to seek salvation from God.

Sin³ can be understood from the perspective of the covenant between God and Israel (and Israelites' descendants). When this covenant is broken, it is conceived as sin. The nature of sin is such that it affects everyone (1 Kings 8:46; Prov 20:9, Eccl 7:20). Sin is therefore clearly demonstrated in human's acts against God i.e. rebellion, disobedience, irresponsible acts, deviation from the right way. This consequently breaks the relationship with God. The question is often asked as to where did this depraved nature came from. The Heidelberg Catechism indicates that this deprave nature came from the fall and disobedience of our first parents, Adam and Eve as a result our nature became corrupt so that we are all conceived and born in sin (Psalm 51:5)⁴ This entails that since the fall all humans are corrupt and are unable to choose what is good for themselves. This position consequently, brought about curse to the whole creation. This in essence means that, humans are in bondage to sin and can only be set free by the grace of God.

For this reason, there is need for humankind to be made pure again since God will not allow disobedience and apostasy to go unpunished⁵. This is explicit in the following biblical text

³ There are many explanations of what sin is in Biblical scholarship. For example, W. Grudem, *Systematic Theology* (pp. 490-491) defines sins as any failures to conform to the moral law of God in act, attitude or nature. According to him, Sin does not only allude to individual acts such as stealing example, but also allude to attitudes that are contrary to what God requires of all humans. He also points out that there are other definitions of sins suggested by other scholars such as selfishness which to him is not satisfactory as it does not reflect clearly the position of scriptures which define sin in relationship to God's law and his moral character.

⁴ *Heidelberg Catechism*. Reprint by One Life Mission, p. 12.

⁵ *Ibid.* p.12.

Exodus 34:10 – Maintaining love to thousands, and forgiving wickedness, rebellion and sin. Yet he does not leave the guilty unpunished; he punishes the children and their children for the sin of the fathers to the third and fourth generation.

We need to state also that in the discussion on salvation, distinction is often made between two aspects; *National salvation* and *individual salvation*. Much has been written on the national salvation in which a nation is saved from bondage. For example in Exodus 14:23-31, Israel is saved from the Egyptian bondage through God's mighty hand. But we do not find much on individual salvation; For example, how an individual acquires spiritual salvation in the Old Testament.

The other matter worth mentioning here is the aspect of whether the Bible teaches of two types of salvation. The dispensationalist sometimes holds to two methods of salvation each wrought about by a particular dispensation. The distinction is often made between the Law and Grace dispensations. The era of the law required the individual to be obedient to the law and the era of Grace required faith in Christ as a prerequisite for salvation respectively.

However, we need to argue to the contrary, that the Old Testament does not teach different methods of salvation (New Testament-Grace and Old Testament Law). In both Testaments the grace of God abounds (Deut. 7:6; Isaiah 41:8-9). The choice for Israel required faith and trust in him⁶. Obedience to God allowed the people of Israel to remain within God's blessings. It was also expected that at all times they would live upright according to God's law. Even when God extend his hand to people who are non-Jews, they also receive the grace of God as a gift through faith. The choice of God to save non Israelites is based on His own wisdom. It is also a mission tool to attract none Jews to God.

Isaiah 42:6 – I, the LORD, have called you in righteousness; I will make you to be a covenant for the people and a light for the Gentiles.

⁶ Grudem, *Systematic Theology* (1994), p. 117, states that there are always questions how believers under the old Covenant could have been saved. He argues that, the answer is that those who were saved under the old covenant were also saved through trust in Christ, even though their faith was a forward looking faith based on God's word of promise that a messiah or a Redeemer would come. Even Old Testament believers had a saving faith in Christ to whom they looked forward, not with exact knowledge of historical details of Christ's life, but with great faith in the absolute reliability of God's word of promise.

Salvation in the Old Testament meant to make things right with God. In other words, to restore the broken relationship by going back to the obligations of the covenant. It also means to be healed, achieve peace, freed from danger, pain and sickness. This is done by the way of forgiveness of sins and in all these processes; the initiative comes from God himself.

In addition, to make things right with God in the Old Testament period, it was necessary to offer some sacrifices⁷ as a way to atone for sins. The Old Testament perspective therefore meant that for one to attain salvation sacrifices had to be made. In other words, the blood sacrifice of animals is important in order for humankind to maintain a right standing before God (Lev. 17:11). In essence there is no removal of sins without the shedding of blood⁸.

In terms of salvation, actions of the Old Testament are seen as a type of the New Testament. For example Old Testament references to Israel are to be understood as typological of the Church. Consequently distinctions are made between Israel and the Church respectively. This means that Sacrifices of the Old Testament are understood in relationship to Christ's sacrifice. The sacrifices were to be accepted as God's way of Salvation, a type of something to come.

In most instances, there is a unanimous consensus in Biblical scholarship on how salvation is attained both in the Old Testament and the New Testament. There is only one way and it is by faith (Ex 14:31, Heb. 11). In addition, we need to state that, the requirement for salvation is not good works (Psalm 14:3) or any religious rites but only by faith. God does this for his own ultimate purpose that is to call all people to himself (Jer. 3:1;12;14;22, 4:1, Ezek. 33:1, Hosea 12:6).

⁷ According to Bryant, *The Compact Bible Dictionary* (1973), p. 515, sacrifices were of two kinds, Animal and vegetable. Animal sacrifice: sin offering (Lev. 4:1-35; 6:24-30), Guilt offering (Lev.14-6:7), Burnt offering (Lev.1), Peace offerings (Lev. 1), Vegetable offerings: meat offering (Lev. 2:1-16; 6:14-18), Drink offerings (Num. 6:17; 15:1-12).

⁸ The argument here is that, the sacrifices were a symbol of removal of sin by the shedding of blood, but with the death of Jesus Christ on the Cross of Calvary, this act was the actual removal of sin. In other words, all the sacrifices in the Old Testament point to Jesus Christ. The gospel then does not in any way cancel the law rather it confirms it.

B. Irrevocable Nature of Salvation in the Old Testament

The Old Testament speaks of salvation in a physical sense. It talks of physical freedom from pain, bondage, hunger or famine. Therefore, to be saved means that one need to change the status of bondage to that of freedom. This applies to the individual as well as to the nation. This is clear from narratives for example in this expression in Genesis 3:9 “Where *are you?*” here we see God seeking out the lost humankind. It is God who takes the initiative to look out for Adam and Eve when they sinned against God in the Garden of Eden⁹.

The second act in the narratives is the story of the flood in the Genesis 6-9. Having chosen Noah and his family God saves them from the flood in which the multitudes perished. And this culminates in a covenant he makes with Noah in Genesis 9:11.

I will establish my covenant with you: never again will all life be cut of by waters of the flood; never again will there be a flood to destroy the earth.

It can then be argued that from the story of the fall and the flood we see God extending his hand of grace to his people despite sin.

Within the prophetic Literature we also see a similar pattern of where God saves his people and sustains the salvation. For example, in Isaiah 2:2-3

In the last days the mountain of the LORD'S temple will be established as chief among the mountains; it will be raised above the hills, and all nations will stream to it.

Many peoples will come and say, “Come, let us go up to the mountain of the LORD, to the house of the God of Jacob. He will teach us his ways, so that we may walk in his paths.” The law will go out from Zion, the word of the LORD from Jerusalem”

The prophets are full of examples of God reaching out to Israel and as well as other nations (Isaiah 45:14, Jer. 3:17).The thrust of the language is that in all these actions, it is God who takes the initiative.

The writings also speak of the salvation as acts of redemption brought about by God (Ps.18:46; 42:5, 11; 85:4).

⁹ MacArthur, *Gospel According to Jesus*, p. 97 states that, “the nature of God is seek and save sinners. From the opening pages of the human history, it was God who sought the fallen couple in the Garden. In Ezekiel 34:16 God says, :I will seek the lost, bring back the scattered, bind up the broken, and strengthen the sick” The almighty was portrayed as a savior throughout the Old Testament (Ps.106:21; Isa 43:11; Hos 13:4).”

Salvation goes beyond the Israel covenant with God. He calls even the outsiders, Gentiles to be part of this grand plan of God's salvation (Isa 45:14, Jer. 3:17).

The most debated issue in the whole discussion on the subject is whether one can lose the salvation of God¹⁰ after being saved or put in other words can God revoke his salvation?

We have stated categorically from the beginning of our arguments that God is the one that takes the initiative to save humans. He does this without any influence whatsoever and in His own wisdom. It simply means the work of salvation starts with him and ends with Him. As the initiator, He cannot turn back and reverse an action that he has undertaken out of His own making and wisdom. For example, this explains why David and his descendants could not lose the salvation of God despite many mistakes they made in their lives. This is due to the fact that God saved them and made a promise that His salvation was to last for ever as exemplified in the following passage;

Psalm 89:3-4 – I have made covenant with my chosen, I have sworn to David my servant. I will establish your line for ever and make your throne firm through all generations

Even when David sins God kept his promises and save him for ever (2 Sam 12; 13. 2 Chronicles 2:5). We can therefore argue that the saved are sure of God's care and sustenance (Psa 89:3, Psa 55:3, Psa 51:11). This position does not change no matter what one does. True believers do not lose their salvation when they sin and believers do sin.¹¹ At all times, God sustained all the people saved in the Old Testament. This is the reason why the saints persevere through out their lives knowing that they belong to God¹².

¹⁰ The New Testament position on the matter is straight forward. One does not need to search further for facts on the matter. Believers in Jesus Christ are secure. The faith they receive is a gift from God and is irrevocable. God starts the work and will continue with it until completion (Phil.1:6). Those who fall away were not really believers in the first instance as true believers would not fall away whatever happens to their lives (1 John 2:19).

¹¹ MacArthur, *Gospel according to Jesus*, p. 274.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 275, "All of us struggle continually with sinful thoughts, sinful attitudes, sinful habits and sinful desires. It is a perpetual struggle."

Conclusion

Salvation in the Old Testament is God's own initiative. This divine initiative is necessary because of sin. We have demonstrated that sin is understood in various ways, but in all it points to a break in the relationship with God based on the covenant. When man sinned he became totally depraved and he could not seek good until he received grace.

The argument in the paper has been that the choices of God and His undertaking are done out of his own wisdom and for His own purposes. Therefore, Salvation of God is irrevocable no matter the situation the believer finds oneself. This is further demonstrated in the way God has dealt with Israel as a nation. There are not two methods of salvation contained in the Two testaments as some may argue, but one. Those under the law and those under Grace are all saved through faith and through the cleansing of blood; animals sacrifices in the Old Testament and the Blood of Jesus in the New Testament.

This explains as to why God deals with His people with compassion in a number of ways;

Firstly, as a nation Israel kept going away from God through their deed. But all times the Grace of God abounded in that He forgave them and brought them to his fold since he had chosen them.

Secondly, individuals like David whom God had chosen kept sinning, but God did not revoke their status before him. He continued to remind them through his actions that they are His.

In view of the above, God sustains his people throughout life and this explains as to why the saints persevere and this runs through out the Old Testament.

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