

**CHRISTOPHER J.H. WRIGHT`S HOLISTIC UNDERSTANDING OF  
SALVATION IN HIS *SALVATION BELONGS TO OUR GOD*  
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“Biblical salvation impacts the whole of life and death in its scope. It affects time and eternity, this age and the age to come. It is above all salvation from the wrath of God so that we may live eternally with him in the new creation. But it includes many other dimensions of the saving blessing of God in this life. Biblical salvation is therefore holistic in its scope and in the mission it generates.” (195) Presenting a holistic understanding of salvation is Wright’s declared purpose in *Salvation Belongs to Our God*: “[T]he Bible’s description of God acting in salvation includes the whole of human life in every dimension and is not merely an insurance policy for our souls after death. We need, in other words, to have a *holistic* understanding of salvation. And that too will be a concern of this book all the way through.” (18)

We can see seven aspects in Wright’s understanding of the holistic nature of biblical salvation. Salvation is holistic because it is about the whole *creation*, the whole *Bible*, the whole *story*, the whole *world*, the whole *man*, the whole *people of God*, and all of the above being united *in Christ*.

1. *The Whole Creation*. In the beginning chapter of the book Wright gives us a survey of the biblical use of salvation language. He emphasizes that the salvation that the Bible talks about “takes in the whole of life, the whole of human need” (35). The “theme of blessing” that Wright believes to be a thread going through the entire Bible is “built into creation itself” (57). Genesis 10 speaks about the *fact* of nations, Genesis 11 about the *problem* of nations, and Genesis 12 is the beginning of the *redemption* of the nations. The redemptive scope of Genesis 12:3 with its promise of blessing for the nations is built on the “global creational perspective of Genesis 10” (61). “*The promises of blessing to the patriarchs are... a reassertion of God’s original intentions for man.*” (64 – Wright’s emphasis) According to Wright, the repeated use of the word blessing in the story of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob links their story with the creation narrative. “God’s work of redemption will take place within and for the created order, not in some other heavenly or mythological realm beyond it or to which we hope to escape.” (69) No. “Ultimately, God’s salvation is the restoration of God’s blessing to creation and humanity.” (69) It is a reassertion and redemption of everything that God originally made. “Salvation does not mean rescuing people *out of* creation to some other realm, but bringing back God’s blessing *into* creation, through God’s redeeming and transforming power.” (69) Salvation language is creational language. “Salvation, then, is God’s mission of redemptive blessing, restoring his whole creation to what was lost because of human sin and rebellion.” (69) The

covenantal blessing promised to Israel and the nations is a promise also to the whole creation (96). The cross of Christ is the means by which God is to “redeem and renew his whole creation” (182), because “God’s purpose encompasses his whole creation” (186). “God’s plan of salvation includes bringing the whole creation to a new, restored unity in Christ (Eph 1:9-10).” (186) The Christian message is closely linked to God’s intent with the creation of the world. “The gospel is good news for the whole creation.” (188)

2. *The Whole Bible*. A holistic understanding of salvation has to be built on a holistic understanding of the Bible, says Wright. “[I]t is important to allow the *whole* Bible to shape our *whole* theology.” (62 – Wright’s emphasis). This obviously means that we have to include the Old Testament as well as the New in our exploration into the meaning of salvation. One way of doing it is to understand the covenantal language of the Bible, and the interconnectedness of the covenants in the Bible. “In fact, to trace the sequence of major covenants within the Bible is a very useful way of seeing the Bible as a whole, that is, to see the coherent plot that runs through it all.” (87) Wright goes through the Noahic, Abrahamic, Mosaic, Davidic, and the New Covenants to prove his assertion. “All the covenants together proclaim the mission of God as his committed promise to the nations and the whole of creation.” (96) “That is why it is so important, as I have repeatedly emphasized, that we use our whole Bible in coming to an understanding of salvation, and not rely solely on a few isolated verses of doctrinal teaching from Paul’s letters.” (97) Wright warns us to “resist the suggestion, popular in some quarters, that we may substitute the Scriptures of other faiths for the Old Testament” (114). “Without the Old Testament”, says Wright, “the story of Jesus and of salvation loses its beginning, its sense of direction and its ultimate plot. A biblical perspective of salvation needs the perspective of the *whole* Bible.” (114 – his emphasis) We have to teach converts from other religions the whole Bible, including the Old Testament (115).

3. *The Whole Story*. A holistic understanding of salvation does not only depend on relying on the whole Bible, but relying on it as a *whole story*, a narrative that spans a great length of time and includes our personal stories in the great narrative. The Bible is the story of the covenants. “God engaged with real people in real history, and the Bible is the story of that engagement. It is also the story of salvation, for all God’s covenants have a single unifying thread – salvation.” (87) “*Salvation is fundamentally a story – The Story*. Salvation is constituted within the all-encompassing biblical metanarrative that forms the biblical worldview.” (96 – his emphasis) All the doctrinal teachings of the Bible make sense only in this “overarching narrative framework” (96) “Salvation means entering into *this* story of *this* God saving the world through *these* events, and ultimately through *this* person, his Son, the Messiah, Jesus of Nazareth.” (124 – emphasis his) If we only tell people part of the story, we give them a truncated gospel that potentially leads to misunderstandings about salvation. Wright is urging us to get familiar with the *whole* story in order to have a holistic salvation.

4. *The Whole Man*. Salvation language in Christianity has often been reduced to the salvation of the *soul*. This is less than what the Bible teaches concerning salvation, says Wright. "The statement 'God saves' covers a huge range of realities, situations and experiences." (16) A survey of the biblical use of the Hebrew and Greek words for salvation proves his point. In both testaments "God saves people in a wide variety of physical, material and temporal ways from all kinds of need, danger and threat." (24) The biblical language is holistic. "That is, the salvation that the Bible talks about takes in the whole of life, the whole of human need." (35) "It addresses the depth of the human person", and "spans the realms of the physical and the spiritual" (35). Salvation "affects our lives and our lifestyle". "It is not just a past experience (in our 'testimony') or a future longing (for heaven when we die). It is an existential condition of our present life on earth." (102) On the other hand, Wright also argues that the Bible has its "own *priorities* within its broad salvation agenda" (emphasis his). "Some things are certainly more important than others. Certain human needs matter more than others in the end." (17) A holistic understanding of salvation still has a central focus. "The Bible itself shows that being saved from the wrath of God matters a lot more in the end than being saved from illness or injustice." (17-18) "There is, therefore, an ultimate need for God to deal with sin in the world and sin in its own people. *The biblical God who saves is the God who deals with sin*. We might call this the truly *radical* dimension of the Bible's teaching on salvation." (25 - emphasis his) Salvation first of all diagnoses the roots of the problem and "goes right to those roots and deals with them" (25) Not all problems will be solved before the consummation of the age. We have to be "careful to observe the distinction that the Bible makes between the assurance of salvation in relation to the eternal consequences of sin and the recognition that while God is certainly able to deliver from many 'dangers, trial and snares' in this life, he does not always do so." (176) "We affirm the total ability of God to save; but we affirm equally the total freedom of God to do so as he chooses." (176) This, nevertheless, should not reduce our view of the ultimate purpose of salvation. "We cannot confine the vocabulary of salvation to only one part of what the Bible means by it." (18) The Bible includes both the body and the soul, that is, the *whole man* in its ultimate vision of God's rescue work.

5. *The Whole World*. It is absolutely crucial in Wright's understanding of the biblical view of salvation that from the very beginning it includes the nations. The cultural diversity of the nations is part of God's original purpose with creation (60), and saving the nations by bringing them under the blessing of the Abrahamic covenant is the core of God's redemptive mission throughout human history. "Salvation is the miraculous extension to people from all nations of the great covenant truths of the Old Testament Israel, now made available to all those who trust in the Lord Jesus Christ - Jews and Gentiles alike, equally and together." (35) "This universal vista that is intrinsic to the Abrahamic covenant is central to our biblical understanding of salvation" (59). Wright believes that the

nations were always in God's heart, and the promise given to Abraham will certainly result in the great multitude from every tribe and every nation glorifying the Lamb. "[A]ll nations' was what God promised, so 'all nations' it shall be." (146) This does not involve universalism, however. "[W]e must not emphasize the universal sovereignty of God in such a way as to dissolve the uniqueness and particularity of his saving action for Israel and his people in Christ. That would lead to a kind of universalism that is certainly not biblical" (140). But it is equally wrong to forget about God's "cosmic ownership" and "cosmic sovereignty" in saving people from all nations (140). "We can be so accustomed to thinking of salvation in purely individualistic terms that we neglect this fully biblical dimension of it." (146)

6. *The Whole People of God.* A key concept in Wright's thinking is the wholeness of the people of God, that is, a holistic view of "Israel". Wright's understanding of "Israel" is Messianic: "Jesus is *the Christ* – the Messiah, who embodied Old Testament Israel in his own person. So all those in him are by that very fact included in the Israel of God in Christ." (84) There is no ultimate ontological distinction between Israel and the Church. The Church is Israel. The nations are not outside or beside Israel, it is not correct to say "Israel *plus* the nations", but "the nations *as* Israel – one people belonging to God" (156). "Because salvation is covenantal, we are saved as part of the people of God as a *whole*." (121 – emphasis mine) "We are saved by entering into the story of salvation along with all God's people, knowing ourselves to be among the people whom God has chosen, called, redeemed and covenanted." (122) Part of Wright's thesis is that the wholeness of the people of God potentially includes people who are outside the reach of special revelation, those who have never heard the gospel. "That is, those who will have responded to explicit Christian evangelism will be a subset of the finally elect and redeemed." (169) Some reject this as unbiblical "inclusivism", but Wright's response is that "let God be God", and let Him decide the eternal destiny of people.

7. *The Whole United in Christ.* It is indispensable for Wright's vision that a holistic salvation is an achievement of the saving work of Christ. Everything is united in Christ, the Lamb of God. "So the New Testament shows how the story of salvation in the Old Testament points beyond itself, to the *fullness* of salvation accomplished by Christ on the cross." (74 – emphasis mine) "[T]he *totality* of God's saving power is revealed in both testaments. Only in Christ, however, can we possess that *totality*." (74 – emphasis mine) The Passover in the Old Testament and the Lord's Supper in the New Testament "combine for us the whole biblical narrative of salvation into a single dramatic (yet essentially very simple) action." (127) In the last chapter of his book, Wright emphasizes that biblical salvation is "utterly Christ-shaped". "Jesus embodies in his own person the truth of his own name: 'Yahweh is salvation'." (180) The source and ground of our salvation is 'the historical, once-for-all atonement achieved by Jesus on the cross' (181). "Christianity without the cross would be Christianity without salvation." (181)

The salvation of the whole creation is accomplished in Christ. "Paul explicitly links the cross with this cosmic, creational purpose of God in a remarkable passage [Colossians 1:15-20] in which he uses the phrase 'all things' five times to describe the whole creation." (186) Wright comes back to this point over and over again: "It is vital that we see the cross as central to every aspect of holistic, biblical mission – that is, at the center of all we do in the name of the crucified and risen Jesus. (188) Why is Christ's role so significant? "Bluntly, we need a holistic gospel and a holistic mission because the world is in a holistic mess." (189) "[I]t is my passionate conviction", says Wright, "that a holistic mission must have a holistic theology of salvation, centered on a holistic theology of the cross." (189)

Wright's holistic vision of salvation through the cross finds its fulfillment in the coming age. "Christ is the firstfruits of the new creation." (191) Everything that will be in the new creation will be there because of the cross. "And conversely, all that will *not* be there (suffering, tears, corruption, decay and death) will not be there because they will have been destroyed by the cross." (189 – emphasis his) "The whole universe will then acknowledge the rule of God through Christ." (142) In this vision salvation in its wholeness belongs to our God and to the Lamb.