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978-1-107-00328-6 - The Doctrine of Salvation in the First Letter of Peter

Martin Williams

Excerpt

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INTRODUCTION

1. Salvation in 1 Peter

David Ford in his book *Theology: A Very Short Introduction*, observes that '[b]ecause of its many dimensions, salvation is a topic where most key theological issues can be seen to converge'.¹ As Ford demonstrates, a number of key issues come into focus when we address the theme of salvation: the way we think about God, creation and providence, evil and sin, the person and work of Jesus Christ, the church and sacraments, the Christian life and ethics, and the future consummation of all things.² *Soteriology* is thus inseparably related to *theology* (the doctrine of God), *anthropology* (the doctrine of humanity and sin), *Christology* (the doctrine of the person and work of Christ), *ecclesiology* (the doctrine of the church and sacraments), and *eschatology* (the doctrine of last things). Joel Green suggests that '[i]f we take seriously that "theme" expresses "a relation of being about," that the "theme" of a text has to do with unifying the many and often distinct and sometimes discontinuous elements of a text, then there is an important sense in which we are justified in speaking of salvation as the theme of Scripture. Here is the integrating center of Scripture, just as it is the coordinating center of theology'.³

However, in 1995 I. H. Marshall wrote, '[a]lthough this subject [salvation] is of central importance to the Bible and is treated in standard theological dictionaries and encyclopedias, it has had remarkably little attention directed to it in theological monographs'.⁴ The present situation has improved only a little since then.⁵ The same, however, cannot be said

¹ Ford, *Theology*, 103. ² *Ibid.*, 105–10. ³ Green, *Salvation*, 2.

⁴ Marshall, 'Nature of Christian Salvation', 30.

⁵ Recently two monographs on salvation have been published: The edited volume of Van der Watt, *Salvation in the New Testament* and the published PhD dissertation of Wieland, *The Significance of Salvation*.

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[More information](#)2 *The Doctrine of Salvation in the First Letter of Peter*

with regard to 1 Peter.⁶ Commentators have long recognised the theological richness of 1 Peter in general and the importance and richness of its soteriological language in particular. However, as van Rensburg has recently observed, '[t]he soteriology of 1 Peter has, to a large extent, been neglected. No monograph on soteriology in 1 Peter could be located – only scattered and sporadic remarks in commentaries and in articles'.⁷ This neglect is evidenced by a recent survey by M. Dubis, 'Research on 1 Peter: A Survey of Scholarly Literature Since 1985' in *Currents of Biblical Research* (2006), in which he lists only two recent (1987, 2002) scholarly treatments of 1 Peter's soteriology (neither of which are very substantial): one article treats redemption in 1 Peter (two and a half pages)⁸ while the other addresses the issue of whether a predestination to judgment appears in 2:8 (four and a quarter pages).⁹ Scholarly literature treating the topic of salvation generally consists of either a few pages set aside in the introductions of some commentaries on 1 Peter or treatments of the theme of salvation in 1 Peter as part of broader surveys. The theme of salvation does not fare much better in doctoral dissertations. A number of dissertations on 1 Peter have appeared in recent years treating such themes as the doctrine of God, Christology, baptism, hope, suffering, obedience, the Christian life, ethics, even the atonement, the new birth, and election, however there has been no similar study carried out on the theme of salvation. The importance of such a study becomes immediately apparent, for, as we noted above, the theme of salvation is inseparably related to our understanding of God and the person and work of Christ, and is foundational for our understanding of the Christian life, baptism, obedience, ethics, suffering, and hope.

The present study is an investigation of the understanding of salvation in the first letter of Peter, asking (1) what is the content of the concept of salvation expressed in it, given the propositional content, illocutionary force, and rhetorical role of those texts treating this concept in 1 Peter, and (2) given that content, what contribution can 1 Peter make to the broader theological conversation between the different theological traditions (e.g., Reformed, Neo-orthodox, Lutheran, Arminian, Pelagian, Wesleyan) and how might that conversation shape, sharpen, and safeguard our own understanding of 1 Peter's soteriology? Since my interests are

⁶ Since the completion of this study Stephen Fagbemi has published his work: *Who are the Elect in 1 Peter? A Study in Biblical Exegesis and its Application to the Anglican Church of Nigeria*.

⁷ Van Rensburg, 'Metaphors in the Soteriology in 1 Peter', 409.

⁸ Kennard, 'Petrine Redemption', 399–405.

⁹ Panning, 'What Has Been Determined (ἐτέθησαν) in 1 Peter 2:8?', 48–52.

both exegetical and theological, I need a methodology that will accommodate both interests. This methodology, which I have called ‘theological-critical exegesis’, is outlined in chapter 1 of this work. Moreover, since I am concerned with the ‘concept’ of salvation I am not merely concerned simply with an analysis of ‘salvation language’ (i.e., words that translate the Greek verb σωζω and its derivatives), though it is no less than that.¹⁰ The reason for this is that the concept of salvation is much larger than the language itself.¹¹ Thus to confine ourselves strictly to ‘salvation language’ would, in the words of Moisés Silva, lead to a ‘distorted picture’ and ‘an unrefined understanding of the topic’.¹² On the one hand, then, I will be investigating the uses of the σωζω word-group which is primarily concerned with (negatively) the hope of deliverance at the final judgment and (positively) the gift of coming glory. On the other hand, I will also be investigating those aspects of salvation which are expressed in other terminology (that of election, atonement, new birth, and calling).

To achieve these goals, the present work has been divided into three parts: (1) Methodology, (2) Literal Sense Exegesis, and (3) Intercatholic Conversation. In **part I**, chapter 1, entitled ‘Theological-Critical Exegesis’, I outline the presuppositions and approach to theological interpretation taken in this work. Basic to a theological interpretation of Scripture, we will note, is the recognition of its dual authorship as a divine and human communicative action embodied in written discourse. This means that the interpreter must be oriented primarily toward the subject matter of the biblical text and be committed to discerning the meaning placed there by the author. This is another way of saying that the theological interpreter must take seriously the literal sense of the text. To do this, I will suggest, involves three things: (1) a careful exegesis of the text itself, (2) an intercanonical conversation, and (3) an inter catholic conversation.

In **part II**, chapters 2–6, then, I conduct a careful exegesis of those passages in 1 Peter that treat the subject of salvation. This section begins, in chapter 2, in eternity past with God’s eternal, sovereign, free, and gracious election of some to salvation (1 Pet. 1:1–2; 2:4–10) and others to damnation (2:8). The theme of election is of great significance to the author of 1 Peter (it has been referred to as a ‘controlling concept’ with ‘thematic significance’)¹³ and serves to underscore the initiative

¹⁰ As in the study of Wieland, *The Significance of Salvation*.

¹¹ See Silva, *Biblical Words*, 26–8; Barr, *Semantics of Biblical Language*, 206–96.

¹² Silva, *Biblical Words*, 27.

¹³ Schrenk, ‘ἐκλεκτός’, *TDNT*, 4: 190.

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-00328-6 - The Doctrine of Salvation in the First Letter of Peter

Martin Williams

Excerpt

[More information](#)4 *The Doctrine of Salvation in the First Letter of Peter*

and sovereignty of God in the believers' salvation and the unbelievers' damnation.

The divine initiative in salvation is further underscored in chapter 3 which examines those passages that deal with God's gracious provision of salvation in Jesus Christ (1 Pet. 1:18–19; 2:21–5; 3:18). This chapter brings us to the heart of the doctrine of salvation, which, for Peter, is grounded in the death, resurrection, ascension, and exaltation of Jesus Christ. More specifically, it seeks to answer the question: How is the death of Jesus actually said to 'save'?

While chapter 3 deals with the provision of salvation outside of us and apart from us, chapter 4 contains an analysis of those passages (1:3, 23) that treat the application of that salvation to us under the metaphor of the 'new birth', 'regeneration', or 'calling'. Peter once again highlights the initiative of God in the believers' salvation by reminding them that it was God 'who, according to his great mercy has caused us to be born anew' (v. 3bc).

Having explored God's eternal election to salvation (chapter 2), the historical provision of that salvation in Jesus Christ (chapter 3), and the application of that salvation in the rebirth of the believer (chapter 4), chapters 5 and 6 (1 Pet. 1:3–12 and 3:18–4:6 respectively) bring this section to a close (and a climax) with its focus on the consummation of the believer's salvation, which Peter declares is 'ready to be revealed in the last time' (1:5; cf. v. 7d).¹⁴ Unique to Peter's presentation of eschatological salvation is his focus on God's vindication of Christ's innocent suffering through his resurrection (3:18e, 21d), ascension (vv. 19, 22b), victorious proclamation to the spirits in prison (v. 19), and exaltation to God's right hand (v. 22), as a model designed to provide suffering believers with the assurance that God will one day vindicate them also by raising them from the dead (3:18e/4:6c) and bestowing upon them praise, glory, and honour (see 1:7). I will argue that Peter's unique presentation of the believers' final salvation in terms of future vindication and victory through suffering is designed to engender hope amongst a small minority group of believers facing the onslaught of a hostile world against their faith (see '2. The situation of the addressees', below).

In **part III**, chapters 7–8, I seek to bring the results of my exegesis into dialogue with a variety of theological traditions (e.g., Reformed, Neo-orthodox, Lutheran, Arminian, Pelagian, Wesleyan) in order to allow 1 Peter to make its own distinctive contribution to the ongoing discussion

¹⁴ The original thesis also dealt with the subject of baptism in 1 Pet. 3:20d–21 (pp. 465–97).

(both between the traditions and between the Bible and theology) but also to allow that dialogue to shape and sharpen my own understanding of salvation in 1 Peter. Because of the confines of space, I have limited my discussion here to the doctrine of election (chapter 7 – building on chapter 2) and the atonement (chapter 8 – building on chapter 3).¹⁵ Part III, with its dialogue between New Testament exegesis and systematic theology, is the second area in which this work aims to make a distinctive contribution. As such it seeks to overcome the present and unfortunate segregation of biblical studies and systematic theology and hopes to further open up the way for a more fruitful dialogue between the two.

2. The situation of the addressees

The occasional nature of 1 Peter demands that we say something about the situation which Peter's addressees were facing and which called forth the need for this letter to be written to them in the first place. As Elliott has pointed out, '[t]he most prominent and repeatedly emphasised feature of the addressees' situation as portrayed in 1 Peter is the undeserved suffering that they were undergoing as a result of the disparagement and abuse to which they were subjected to by hostile nonbelievers'.¹⁶ It is necessary, therefore, at the outset of this study to consider the nature and cause of the suffering being experienced by Peter's readers, for as Selwyn points out, '[t]he question [of Christian suffering] is ... of importance because some of the deepest teaching of the Epistle is bound up with the trials through which its readers were passing'.¹⁷ We know from the letter that its readers were experiencing some form of hostility from outsiders on account of their faith (1:6–7; 2:18–20; 3:1, 13–17; 4:1–6, 12–19; 5:10). But what was the actual nature and cause of this hostility? Was it the result of an official policy of the Roman Empire or was it due to unofficial harassment of a more local and sporadic kind?

A number of earlier commentators sought to trace the suffering of 1 Peter to an official policy of persecution on the part of Rome. Proponents of this view have sought to link these persecutions to the reign of Nero (54–68), Vespasian (69–70), Domitian (81–96), or Trajan (98–117). The following arguments have been advanced: (1) Some commentators point to the reign of Nero from which comes the first

¹⁵ The original thesis also dealt with the doctrine of regeneration (pp. 425–56).

¹⁶ Elliott, *1 Peter*, 97–8. ¹⁷ Selwyn, *First Epistle of St. Peter*, 53.

6 *The Doctrine of Salvation in the First Letter of Peter*

evidence of specific persecution against Christians. This connection has at times been made on the basis of 1 Pet. 4:12 with its reference to the ‘fiery ordeal coming upon you’ (τῆ ἐν ὑμῖν πυρώσει), which, according to Thurston, ‘seems particularly applicable to the Neronian persecution, in which many Christians were burned to death. This reference may therefore suggest that some Christians had already been burned, or at least sentenced to such a death.’¹⁸ (2) Others see a connection between 1 Peter’s reference to persecution ‘for the name [of Christ]’ (ἐν ὀνόματι [Χριστοῦ]) in 4:14 and Pliny’s desire to know whether Christians should be punished for the ‘name itself’ (*nomen ipsum*) ‘albeit without crimes, or only the crimes associated therewith’ (Pliny, *Ep.* 10.96). (3) The phrase ἕτοιμοι ἀεὶ πρὸς ἀπολογία (‘always be prepared to give a defence’) in 1 Pet. 3:15 has been taken, by some commentators, to imply a formal judicial interrogation (e.g., before a Roman magistrate). (4) Finally, the reference in 1 Pet. 5:9 to the ‘the same sufferings [τὰ αὐτὰ τῶν παθημάτων] being experienced by your fellow Christians *throughout the world* [ἐν [τῷ] κόσμῳ]’, has been interpreted by some commentators as a reference to an official empire-wide policy of persecution.

These arguments, however, are far from conclusive, and the objections to them can be stated briefly: (1) The persecution of the Christians by Nero was confined to the city of Rome itself and did not spread to Asia Minor, and, as Elliott observes, it ‘resulted in no official proscription of Christianity, and set no official precedent for any policy of Rome toward the Christian movement in general’.¹⁹ (2) As the exchange of correspondence between Pliny and Trajan demonstrates (Pliny, *Ep.* 10.96–7), there was no official Roman policy proscribing Christianity at this time, and Trajan was unwilling to establish one. Moreover, the expression ‘for the name [of Christ]’ (ἐν ὀνόματι [Χριστοῦ], 4:12; cf. 4:16, ὡς Χριστιανός) is linked to verbal rather than physical abuse (see 4:12–16, esp. v. 14). (3) The phrase ἕτοιμοι ἀεὶ πρὸς ἀπολογία (‘always be prepared to give a defence’, 1 Pet. 3:15) more likely denotes a reply to accusations of a more general and informal rather than a legal and formal nature, as the generalising expressions ἀεὶ (‘always’) and παντὶ τῷ αἰτοῦντι (‘to everyone who asks’) indicate. (4) The assumption that the phrase ἐν [τῷ] κόσμῳ (‘throughout the world’) points to an official policy of persecution on the part of the Roman Empire simply lacks evidence. As Davidson points out, the first systematic and empire-wide attack on Christians was not

¹⁸ Thurston, ‘Interpreting First Peter’, 176. ¹⁹ Elliott, *1 Peter*, 98.

launched until AD 250 during the brief reign of emperor Decius (October 249–June 251).²⁰ There is thus no internal nor external evidence indicating an official Roman policy of persecution against Christians that would have prompted the situation described in 1 Peter.

A more comprehensive consideration of the language of persecution in 1 Peter leads us in a different direction. The language of 1 Peter suggests that the cause of the Christians' suffering was more verbal than physical, informal than formal, social and unofficial than state-organized and official. Right from the outset of the letter we see that the believers' theological status as God's 'elect' (ἐκλεκτοῖς, 1:1b; cf. v. 2a: κατὰ πρόγνωσιν θεοῦ πατρός) and 'set apart' (ἐν ἁγιασμῷ πνεύματος, v. 2b) people has put them in tension with surrounding society. The sociological effect of their theological or sociospiritual status is that they have become 'strangers [παρεπιδήμοις] of the Diaspora of Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia, and Bithynia' (1 Pet. 1:1). As a result, they are misunderstood (cf. 2:15) and maligned (cf. 4:4): 'Beloved, I exhort you *as aliens and strangers* [ὡς παροίκους καὶ παρεπιδήμους] to abstain from fleshly desires which wage war against the soul; having your conduct honourable *among* the Gentiles [ἐν τοῖς ἔθνεσιν] so that, when they *speak against you* [καταλαλοῦσιν ὑμῶν] as evil doers, from observing your good deeds they may glorify God on the day of visitation' (2:11–12). The verb 'speak against' translates the Greek καταλαλέω ('speak ill of, speak degradingly of, speak evil of, defame, slander'),²¹ which appears again in 3:16 ('when you are slandered [καταλαλεῖσθε], those who malign [ἐπηρεάζοντες] your good conduct in Christ'), and is only one of a number of terms employed in 1 Peter to depict the hostile verbal abuse that is directed against Christians by society around them: λοιδορέω (2:23, 'revile, abuse'), λοιδορία (3:9, 'speech that is highly insulting, abuse, reproach, insulting'),²² ἀντελοιδορέω (2:23, 'revile in return'), βλασφημέω (4:4, 'to speak in a disrespectful way that demeans, denigrates, maligns'; [in relation to humans]: 'slander, revile, defame'),²³ ἐπηρεάζω (3:16, 'threaten, mistreat, abuse'),²⁴ and ὀνειδίζω ('reproach, revile, mock, heap insults on').²⁵ As Elliott observes, '[a]ll these related terms illustrate the kind of oppression to which the nonbelievers subjected the believers: verbal abuse, disparagement, denigration, maligning, insult, contemptuous reproach, public defamation and public shaming on the suspicion of their "doing what is wrong" [cf. 2:12]'.²⁶

²⁰ Davidson, *Birth of the Church*, 322.

²¹ BDAG, 519. ²² BDAG, 602. ²³ BDAG, 178. ²⁴ BDAG, 362.

²⁵ BDAG, 710. ²⁶ Elliott, *1 Peter*, 467.

Cambridge University Press

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Martin Williams

Excerpt

[More information](#)8 *The Doctrine of Salvation in the First Letter of Peter*

According to 1 Peter, because believers have distanced themselves as non-conformists from the ‘way of life’ (ἀναστροφή) handed down to them by their ancestors (1:18), ‘[i]gnorance (2:15), curiosity (3:15), suspicion of wrongdoing (2:12, 14–16) and aggressive hostility (3:13–14, 16; 4:4) were the public reactions which the Christians had encountered and under which they suffered’.²⁷ The situation is well illustrated in 4:3–4:

For the time that is past was more than enough for carrying out the will of the Gentiles, having lived in sensuality, lusts, drunkenness, revelries, drinking parties, and lawless idolatries. In this they are surprised that you no longer join with them into the same flood of dissipation, and they malign you.

This verse provides us with an important key for understanding the nature of the suffering alluded to in 1 Peter. The difficulties being experienced by many of the Petrine readers, as we will note below, resulted not from an official policy of state-organised persecution, but instead involved various forms of social persecution beginning with astonishment and suspicion and leading to resentment, ostracism, verbal abuse, and perhaps in isolated cases more serious forms of persecution. And so ‘[i]f this precarious situation of innocent suffering was not to lead to disillusionment, despair, defection, and the ultimate demise of the movement in Asia Minor, those who suffered had to be provided with a persuasive rationale for remaining firm in their faith and resolute in their commitment to God, Jesus Christ, and one another’.²⁸ This ‘persuasive rationale’ finds embodiment in the form of a letter, the first letter of Peter. And at its heart is the message of what God has done for believers in Jesus Christ, the message of salvation: ‘I have written to you briefly exhorting and witnessing that this is the true grace of God. Stand fast in it!’ (1 Pet. 5:12).

²⁷ Elliott, *A Home for the Homeless*, 79. ²⁸ Elliott, *1 Peter*, 103.

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[More information](#)

PART I

Methodology

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