CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE

SALVATION IN THE GOSPELS, PAUL, AND THE MAGICAL PAPYRI

[63] I wish I could begin this paper by asking for a show of hands. If you were making a list of things you must do or get in the coming week, how many of you would include “salvation”? My expectation is that not one hand would rise. Salvation is like the kingdom of God—something we all hope for, but in the far future. “Thy kingdom come, but not just now” is a familiar prayer. Consequently, in our mental shopping lists of immediate concerns, salvation rarely figures, though we should all claim to want it eventually. This is true of the shopping lists we take to the gods, no less than of those we take to the supermarkets. Therefore the supermarkets of the gods, religion and magic, though they always stock salvation, don’t sell much of it. The day-to-day, bread-and-butter business of the average priest, like that of the average magician, concerns the problems, big and little, of everyday life.

For religion, this was pointed out brilliantly by Versnel (1981: 1-68). He began by citing a book I have not been able to get my hands on and must therefore cite from him: Bonnet (1977), a collection of prayers from French churches and pilgrimage shrines. “Holy Virgin, your great grace and protection for my air trip to Hungary, April 15, leaving 11:50, and for son, daughter-in-law, and grandson April 27, 10 past 10, arriving 1:35; return May 14, 3:50 to 6:40. Heartfelt thanks of a mother.” Another was simpler, “Cure my goat.” Another showed more altruism: “For the conversion of our President and all our government.” (There is true faith; the belief that all things are possible to God!) From my own experience I can assure you that in this matter French and Americans are at one. The church to which I was attached during most of my service as a priest kept a box into which members of the congregation could drop requests that they wished to have made in the secret prayers at the consecration of the eucharist; so, day in and day out, I offered the blessed sacrifice “with special intention” for Mary’s relief from hay fever, the [64] reconciliation of Jack and Jill, the victory of the church team in next Saturday’s game, Susan’s passing her examinations, and so on and on. To the best of my recollection, nobody ever asked prayers for anybody’s salvation—except, of course, for that of the dead or deathly sick. Except when death is near or here, in the everyday life of ordinary people, salvation is not thought of as a pressing need.
Nevertheless, occasionally, many people can be persuaded that they need it now. This the success of its salesmen shows. Salesmen of patent medicine had similar spectacular successes, before their activities were limited by law. But besides the legal limits, there are natural ones. Rarely does a revivalist rise to the control of any sizable society (the outstanding exceptions occur in politics, rather than recognized religion—Hitler, for instance, and Robespierre). Nevertheless, in every generation a few religious revivalists do attract large followings and accumulate large fortunes, as tangible evidence of the sizable minority market for what they offer. Women begin to need salvation when they lose their looks and their fertility; men, when they come to suspect their own unimportance. The onset of old age is apt to produce a need for it; so do serious disease and death, mentioned above. Adolescents, in our society, often decide they need it when they are forced to leave the playpen in which we confine children, to look at the rest of their life as a whole and face the awful question, What do you want to be?

“Saved” is a short, easy answer, but it begs another question, What do you mean by salvation? The common answers to this can be classified in various ways, one being, for instance, by the way they relate salvation to time and space. Some promise it in the present; others, soon after death; others, at the end of the world. Various combinations are possible, but the antithesis between present and future types is so prevalent and important that it has been used, for instance, by Wilson (1973) as the basic criterion by which to classify many enthusiastic religions. (What he bluntly calls “magic” is more often politely termed “realized eschatology.”) [65]

Besides differing about time and place, notions of salvation differ in content over a range that runs from popular ideas of the goings on in Mohammed’s “garden” to the wheeling circles of stars in Dante's Paradiso. The root word, sōs, originally meant “as ever, alive and well, undamaged,” and the verb, sōzein meant “to save from harm, keep a thing in its proper physical condition,” whence came the secondary meanings, “rescue, heal preserve,” etc. This is the range of meanings the verb usually has in its forty-odd uses in the synoptics,1 where the word “salvation” (sōtēria) never occurs except in four verses of Luke, three of which imitate Old Testament references to the “salvation”—i.e. preservation—of Israel.2 However, the thought of protection/preservation was soon carried over from the physical to the moral sphere, and so the gospels occasionally speak of saving from sins (Matt 1:21 etc.), and among circles that took a darker view of this present life

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1 In all but one of the thirteen instances in Matt (1:21, “save from sins”; 18:11 is spurious); in all thirteen instances in Mark (contrast 16:16, which is spurious); in all but four of the sixteen instances in Luke (exceptions: 8:12; 9:24; 13:23; 19:10; spurious, 9:56).
2 Luke 1:69, 71, 77; the fourth is 19:19—“salvation came to this house.”