CHAPTER FOUR

SALVATION IN THE GOSPEL ACCORDING TO JOHN

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1. INTRODUCTION

In the stated purpose for writing the Gospel (20:31), “But these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name”, Christology and soteriology are identified as the two major themes, and are even equated by some (Tong 1983, 100). An interesting observation is that relatively little has been published on soteriology as an independent theme, seen in the light of the flood of publications on this Gospel. The trends in the research on the Gospel seem to be:

a) The theme is so dominant in the theology of John, that it is usually developed in relation to other themes in this Gospel, and not as an independent theme. It forms part of most of the descriptions of theological themes in this Gospel, but is rarely developed in depth on its own.\(^1\)

b) Where the focus falls on the soteriology, the presentation of the material is usually descriptive in nature (see, for example, Beasley-

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\(^1\) Salvation (soteriology) is defined as the action of restoring the relationship with God, or how one moves from spiritual death to life. Relevant questions are: from what, how and to what is a person saved? Focus will not fall on the results of salvation.

Murray 1987, ad loc.). In-depth discussions are usually not attempted and sometimes the discussions follow detours, like the discussions of Sevenster (1946, 235–237) or Coetzee (1990, 62–65) who fall into the trap of trying to defend the theology of the cross (against Bultmann or Käsemann) rather than discussing the soteriology.

c) Although commentaries obviously treat the theme where it occurs in different verses, most of them do not treat it in-depth as a separate theme on its own. If it is done, the treatment is usually brief and descriptive (Beasley-Murray 1987).

The argument to be unfolded in this article is that the soteriology is developed within the context of and determined by a conflict (of which the contours cause a continuing debate in Johannine literature—see, for example, Coloe 2001, 1–4; Reinhartz 2001, 213–227; Bieringer et al. 2001, to mention just some of the more recent sources within a flood of literature dealing with this issue) between the “disciples of Moses”\(^3\) and Johannine Christianity (called the disciples of Jesus). The major question was “where and with whom is God?”

This is a question, which was answered differently by the disciples of Jesus and the disciples of Moses, based on their differing convictions of who Christ was, each consequently claiming that God is on their side and that theirs is the authentic religion. It will be illustrated that this conflict is formative in the way John formulates and presents his soteriology. It will be shown that John does not present a comprehensive, a-historical, all-inclusive soteriology, for the sake of describing a soteriology, but a soteriology modelled on questions at stake in the conflict, namely, “with whom is God and where can he be found (seen/heard)?” It will be argued that efforts to treat the soteriological expressions in the Gospel as a-historical or as a closed soteriological system, which would validate expressions like “Johannine

\(^3\) The identity of the Jews is a widely discussed topic in recent literature. “Jews” should not be identified with modern Jews, neither with all genealogical Jews in ancient times. Jesus and his disciples were also Jews (see De Jonge 2001, 121–140; Lieu 2001, 110–113). De Boer (2001, 141–157) argues that the “Jews” indicated in the Gospel are a socio-religious category of people who identify themselves as “disciples of Moses” (9:28). See Ashton (1994, 44–49). No effort to identify the “Jews” as such will be made in this article. The Jews will be described according to the material given in the Gospel itself and it can at least be argued that the Jews exist in this narrative as a fictive group with these qualities. Further than that I would not like to go in this article. They identify themselves as the “disciples of Moses” and therefore this phrase will be used to refer to them.