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Brief Studies

W. F. Beck

Concordia Seminary, St. Louis

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BRIEF STUDIES

HOSANNA

(Matt. 21:9, 15; Mark 11:9-10; John 12:13)

The word "hosanna" in the Communion liturgy is a problem for the worshiper who means "to sing with understanding" (1 Cor. 14:15). We may be aware of the etymological meaning, "Please save!" but that is not what the Passover crowd meant when it welcomed Jesus, nor does that meaning fit the music of our liturgy, which happens to be a rather sound interpretation of the term. An examination of the Hebrew *yasha* gives a clearer meaning and at the same time throws light on many other passages concerning our salvation.

"Salvation" Means "Victory"

"Salvation" means deliverance from danger of every kind, from sin and its punishment, from personal or national enemies. When such enemies are defeated, "salvation" is a victory; if the victory is overwhelming and celebrated, "salvation" may even be a triumph. And so we find that in 2 Sam. 19:3 Luther, following the Vulgate, which has *victoria*, translated *t-shua* with *Sieg*. In 2 Sam. 23:10, 12, where he could have translated in the same way, he also followed the Vulgate, which has *salutem*, and translated *Heil*. In all three of these passages the Authorized Version has "victory." But in Ps. 118:15; Prov. 21:31; 24:6; Hab. 3:8, where the Vulgate and the A. V. have "salvation" or "safety," Luther has *Sieg*. And in Ps. 98:1, where the Vulgate translates *yasha* with *salvavit*, Luther has *sieget*, and the A. V. has "hath gotten Him the victory."

This article in no way means to displace the central meaning of "salvation," which is "deliverance," "health of spirit and of body," "safety" (2 Sam. 14:4; 2 Kings 6:26; Ps. 20:9), but to bring out the subdued element of "victory." Even where "salvation" means "victory," the idea of "deliverance" is present. The perfect solution would be a word that would integrate both meanings in one term, but in our vast English vocabulary such a word is not to be found.

Since by definition "victory" is the defeat of an enemy, "salvation" as "victory" is established in the Hebrew text wherever it clearly speaks of the defeat of an enemy. Moses tells Israel (Ex. 14:13-14), "Stand still, and see how the Lord will save you [or win the victory for you] today. For the Egyptians whom you see today you will never see

again." After the drowning of the enemy comes the song of victory (Ex. 15:1-2):

I will sing to the Lord who has triumphed;
Horses and their drivers He has thrown into the sea.
My strength and my song is the Lord, who has saved me
[won the victory for me];
He is my God, whom I praise,
My fathers' God, whom I glorify.

After Samson (Judges 15:14-18) has slain a thousand Philistines, he says triumphantly, "With the jawbone of a donkey I have killed a thousand men!" Then he says to the Lord, "By the hand of Your servant You have given this great salvation" (or "victory"). After Saul (1 Sam. 11:11, 13) has inflicted a crushing defeat on the Ammonites, he says, "Today the Lord has achieved a salvation [a victory] in Israel." Jonathan (1 Sam. 14:6, 13-16, 23, 45) believes "there is nothing to stop the Lord from saving [winning a victory] by many or by few." Then he and his armorbearer defeat the Philistines. So "the Lord saved [won a victory for] Israel that day." When Jonathan is found guilty of violating his father's vow, the people ask Saul, "Must Jonathan die, who has achieved this great salvation [won this great victory] in Israel?" David (1 Sam. 17:47) tells Goliath, "This whole gathering will know that the Lord does not save [win a victory] with a sword or a spear, for the battle is the Lord's and He has put you into our hands." Jonathan (1 Sam. 19:5) speaks to his father about the killing of Goliath: "The Lord has achieved a great salvation [victory] for Israel. You saw it, and you were glad." (See also 2 Kings 5:1; 13:17; Ps. 20:5-6; 44:4-5.) It is correct Biblical language to say God gave us a great "salvation" in Europe in 1945 and in Korea in 1950-51.

Only God can make our salvation an enduring victory.—In the greatest of his wars David had to choose between two theaters of war, the north and the south, just as we have tried to choose between Asia and Europe. David chose the north, and while he was fighting the Syrians there, his inadequate forces in the south were unable to hold back the Edomites, who laid waste the south of Israel. There was an unrecorded disaster which made David feel that God was against him. He wanted his God to lead him to victory (Ps. 60:9):

Who will lead me to a fortified city?
Who will lead me to Edom?

David sent Joab against Edom. With the help of his brother Abishai (1 Chron. 18:12) Joab slaughtered the Edomites (2 Sam. 8:13; Ps.

60:12). But before that victory David says, "A man's salvation [victory] is in vain" (Ps. 60:11; 108:12). The ICC comments, "Victory to be won by man in war against the enemy amounts to nothing; it is a vain hope. Victory cannot be brought about by man, but by Yahweh only." Ps. 146:3: "Don't trust in princes, in human beings, who cannot save [give you a victory]."

We turn from our doubtful victories to the certain one in the Lord, who is "mighty to save" (Is. 63:1). The Savior's work was σωζειν and σωτηρια; these terms, which the Septuagint used to translate *yasha* and its derivations, carry with them a tone of victory; we are aware of that especially when those who were around Jesus appealed to His divine power for help. The disciples (Matt. 8:25), seeing the billows of the Lake of Galilee dashing over them in the boat, cry to Him, "Lord, save us! We are drowning." Peter (Matt. 14:30) does not trust the water to hold him up; so he cries, "Lord, save me!"

Jesus had come to save the lost (Luke 19:10) from sin (Matt. 1:21) and its punishment (Rom. 5:9). Since His work was a success (John 17:4), He could say, "It is finished" (John 19:30). His resurrection demonstrated His "victory" (1 Cor. 15:57, concluding the resurrection chapter). John, who saw and recorded that His work was "finished," refers to "the Lamb that was slain" and writes, "One of the elders said to me, 'Don't weep! See, the Lion, who came from the tribe of Judah and from David, has conquered'" (Rev. 5:5-6; cp. 17:4). We may discern a note of victory in such a phrase as the "horn of salvation" (Luke 1:69; cp. 2 Sam. 22:3) and in the following passages: "The God of our fathers raised Jesus and took Him up to His right hand as a Leader and a Savior" (Acts 5:30-31). "We look to heaven for the Lord Jesus Christ to come as the Savior" (Phil. 3:20). "We wait and joyfully hope for our great God and Savior Christ Jesus to show Himself in glory" (Titus 2:13). Bauer (under σωτηρια) says, "An den drei Stellen der Apk., an denen σωτ. in *Doxologien* erscheint, haben wir einen Hebraismus (vgl. Ps. 3, 9, τοῦ κυρίου ἡ σωτηρια) 7, 10, 12, 10, 19, 1." In these three passages "salvation," that is, "victory," is ascribed to God and to Christ; particularly the contexts of Rev. 12:10 and 19:1 point to a salvation which is a victory over enemies.

Jesus tells us, "In the world you have trouble. But have courage, I have conquered the world" (John 16:33). By faith (1 John 5:4) we share in the spoils (Luke 11:22) of His victory. "Be victorious," He says, "and I will let you sit with Me on My throne, as I have won the victory and have sat down with My Father on His throne" (Rev.

3:21). This "victory" lends a clearer meaning to the statements that speak of our "salvation" as still in the future. The first part of our salvation, our deliverance from sin, is a fact of the past; but there is some "mopping up" to be done before the final victory. "Take the helmet of salvation" (Eph. 6:17; quoted from Is. 59:17). "Put on . . . the hope of salvation as a helmet" (1 Thess. 5:8). "Thirst for the pure milk of the Word in order to grow until you are saved" (1 Peter 2:2). "Work out your salvation with fear and trembling" (Phil. 2:12). "Yes, I will continue to be glad, because I know that your prayer and the help of the Spirit of Jesus Christ will make this turn out for my salvation" (Phil. 1:19). "The power of God protects you by faith until you come to the salvation that is waiting to be revealed at the end of time" (1 Peter 1:5). "Those who are going to inherit salvation" (Heb. 1:14). "Those who eagerly look for Him will see Him again, without sin, when He comes to save them" (Heb. 9:28). "Our salvation is nearer now than when we first believed" (Rom. 13:11).

"Jesus" Means "Victorious Savior"

The angel of the Lord told Joseph (Matt. 1:21) to call Mary's son Jesus (speaking Aramaic, he will have said: *yeshua*), because He would save (Aramaic: *y-bosha*) His people from their sins. As the genealogy of Matt. 1:1-16 points to a line of kings and patriarchs as the legal ancestors of Jesus, so "He will save" in verse 21 links His name, person, and glory by a linguistic ancestry to the wonderful help that God gave His people through the "saviors" (Neh. 9:27) from Moses to the Maccabees and so proclaims Jesus to be our victorious Savior. He was given the same name as Joshua, the second leader in that line, whose Greek name in the Septuagint, in the New Testament (Acts 7:45; Heb. 4:8), and in Josephus was "Jesus." In the wilderness Moses had changed his successor's name from Hoshea, meaning "salvation," to Joshua, meaning "the Lord saves" or "is victorious" (Num. 13:8, 16). He began his career by a victory over the Amalekites (Ex. 17:8-16) and carried the promise that he would take Canaan for Israel (Deut. 3:28; 31:23; Joshua 1:1-6); he took the land and in his farewell address could recount the victories that God had given him (Joshua 24:1-18). The name of such a man was significantly given to Jesus. The statement "because He will save His people from their sins" (Matt. 1:21) is the angel's direction that the etymological meaning (which often is displaced by idiomatic usage) of our Savior's name is its correct definition. Matthew's Jewish readers understood that meaning. "Verstand doch jeder Jude in Palaestina soviel von der Sprache seiner Vaeter, seiner Bibel und der meisten liturgischen

Formeln, um zu wissen, dass in dem Namen Jesus der Gedanke der Hilfe, der Rettung ausgedrueckt sei. Schon das bei den Prozessionen des Laubhuettenfestes von allem Volk ausgerufene und bei dem Einzug Jesu in Jerusalem von Maennern und Kindern sinn-gemaess angewandte Hosianna oder Oschanna (Einl. I, 14) buerget dafuer. Ob Joseph und die Leser des aram. Mt. den in der Form *yeshua* untergegangenen Jahvenamen noch heraushoerten, wozu lexikalische Gelehrsamkeit gehoert haette, ist sehr zweifelhaft, aber auch gleichgiltig, da nur der Begriff von σώζειν, σωτηρία, σωτήρ, der jedenfalls darin steckt, zur Begrueendung der Wahl dieses Namens verwendet wird." (Zahn on Matt. 1:21.) Kittel (under 'Ιησοῦς) also states that "the Lord" had dropped out of the meaning of "Jesus," and he cites Sirach 46:1, "Joshua . . . was according to his name made great for the saving of God's chosen ones," and Chrysostom, who defined "Jesus" as "salvation." But the evidence is faulty. "Salvation" rather generally meant "God's salvation." And every Jew knew how Moses had changed Joshua's name by adding "the Lord." The rabbis ascribed to Moses a statement by which he was supposed to have explained the change of name to Joshua: "The Lord will save you from this generation," referring to the ten cowardly spies. Philo defined "Jesus" as "the Lord's salvation"; and Eusebius, as "God's salvation." (All these are cited in Kittel.) Matthew's own context should decide the question. For him the prophecy of the name Immanuel, "God is with us," is fulfilled in the name "Jesus." Now "with" is a weak synonym of "save," but "God" is a strong emphasis of the ' which stood for "the Lord."

"Jesus" is the name "which points to the conquest won in the flesh" (ICC on Phil. 2:9). It had the victorious power to drive out devils (Matt. 7:22; Mark 9:38-39; Luke 9:49; 10:17-20), heal the lame (Acts 3:6, 16; 4:7, 10, 30), paralyzed (Acts 9:34), and sick (James 5:14-15). The name "Jesus" conquered the world; as Paul said, "God has also raised Him up on high and given Him the name above every other name that at the name of JESUS everyone in heaven and on earth and under the earth should kneel and everyone should confess: 'Jesus Christ is Lord!' and so glorify God the Father" (Phil. 2:9-11). (The phrases "everyone should kneel and everyone should confess" are borrowed from Is. 45:23 and can be used only of God.) Because His name means a divine victory, it makes us who believe in it the sons of God (John 1:12) and gives us everlasting life (1 John 5:13); and the Father will give us anything we ask for in His name (John 15:16).

"Jesus" is Hebrew or Aramaic; its Greek equivalent is σωτήρ. Xenophon (*Anabasis* I, 8, 16) tells us that Greek soldiers, preparing for battle, chose as their watchword: Ζεὺς σωτήρ καὶ νίκη: Zeus, acting as σωτήρ, gives victory. Originally the name σωτήρ was restricted to Zeus and other gods. "Bis zu Alex. d. Gr. blieb er d. Goettern vorbehalten, von da an, da sich ueberhaupt d. Grenzen d. Goettlichen u. Menschlichen staerker zu verwischen begannen, wurde er auch auf d. Heroen u. grossen Maenner uebertr., zu ihrer goettlichen Ehrung" (Cremer-Koegel, *Woerterbuch*, 10th edition; Cremer also asserts that Josephus, perhaps deterred by the idolatrous use of σωτήρ, never used it of God). The name was given to the Ptolemies of Egypt and the emperors of Rome (Moulton and Milligan, *Vocabulary*, p. 621). But it really belongs to God, who is always victorious (LXX: Deut. 32:15; 1 Sam. 10:19; Ps. 23:5; 24:5; 26:1, 9; 61:3, 7; 64:6; 78:9; 94:1; Is. 12:2; 17:10; 45:15, 21; Micah 7:7; Hab. 3:18. N. T.: Luke 1:47; 1 Tim. 1:1; 2:3; 4:10; Titus 1:3; 2:10; 3:4; Jude 25). When Jesus is born, the angel tells the shepherds (Luke 2:11), "there is born for you today a σωτήρ" — at the end of the statement, as though he meant to prepare them for this "scoop" of the centuries. And so the Good News proclaimed Him the "Savior"; we feel the full impact of divine power and majesty in the term — never used in the New Testament of mere men — among the non-Jews of Samaria, who say, "We know that He certainly is the Savior of the world" (John 4:42; the same phrase is used in 1 John 4:14). Peter, writing to Christians who were predominantly Gentiles, called Him σωτήρ (2 Peter 1:1, 11; 2:20; 3:2, 18), and so did the Apostle to the Gentiles (Acts 13:23; Eph. 5:23; 2 Tim. 1:10; Titus 1:4; 2:13; 3:6).

We Sing "Hosanna!"

Every Jewish child was familiar with the word "hosanna" (Ps. 118:25) from the Hallel (Ps. 113—118), which was sung at the festivals of the Passover and of Tabernacles. The central meaning of "hosanna," "please save," had receded into the background. Zahn says (on Matt. 21:9): "Der voellig abgeschliffene Gebrauch der Formel, die in der Volkssprache nur als ein hebr. Fremdwort lebte, macht es wahrscheinlicher, dass man die urspruengliche Bedeutung nicht mehr empfand und, selbst wenn man wusste, dass der Begriff des Heils in dem zusammengesetzten Wort enthalten sei (oben S. 78 f.), nicht mehr ein Gebetswort an Gott, sondern ein "Heil dem Koenige" auszusprechen meinte, welches von einem "Hoch" oder *Vivat* sich nicht wesentlich unterschied." Allen and Plummer on Matt. 21:9 say

"hosanna" means "glory," especially since Luke (19:37) substitutes "peace" and "glory" for "hosanna."

These comments are weak in two respects. First, they presuppose that the Jewish crowd did not know the meaning of "hosanna." F. Spitta even asserts that Matthew and Mark misunderstood the Hebrew term (*Zeitschrift fuer wissenschaftliche Theologie*, 1910, "Der Volksruf beim Einzug Jesu in Jerusalem," p. 315). Now, while an ordinary crowd's applause might be as vague in meaning as "hail" and "glory," the word "hosanna" was a part of the Psalms that were dear to these pilgrims, and there were many among them who like Mary and Zacharias (Luke 1) had a fine understanding of Hebrew words. Secondly, there is the assumption of a linguistic development for which it would be hard to find a parallel. How could the cry "help me" change to "hail"? The gap between these two widely different meanings is too great for an easy leap. But there is no gap when we see that in Hebrew and Greek "save" also means "be victorious."

The history of the word "save" shows that "Hosanna to the Son of David!" means "May this Son of David be our victorious Savior!" The dative τῷ υἱῷ Δαυὶδ that follows "hosanna" (*Didache*, 10:6: Ὡσαννά τῷ θεῷ; help *from* the Son of David would require ἐκ, Ps. 19:3 LXX), the context (for instance, "blessed"), and the festival joy that accompanied the cry show that the crowd welcomed and applauded the lowly Savior, expressed its high confidence in "the King of Israel" (John 12:13), and greeted Him with the wish (Meyer, Zahn), not the declaration (Keil), that He would mightily accomplish His "salvation." It honored Him as the descendant of King David, who, after Joshua, had won the greatest victories for Israel.

People welcomed a victorious Simon (1 Macc. 13:51) and Judas Maccabaeus (2 Macc. 10:7) with palms. "To carry palms was a mark of triumphant homage to a victor or a king. . . . The cry of *Hosanna* . . . was the refrain sung by the people in the processional recitation of Ps. 118 at the feast of Tabernacles. When v. 25 was reached, the palm branches which were carried by the worshipers were waved; and hence these sprigs of palm with myrtle and willow (*lulab* was the technical name) came themselves to be called *hosannas*" (ICC on John 12:13; see also Ps. 92:12 and Zahn, *Einleitung*, I, p. 14). "So schliesst sich denn unmittelbar an den Bericht von der Herstellung der *Via triumphalis* der von dem Volksruf" (F. Spitta, *op. cit.*, p. 316). More than half a century after the entry into Jerusalem, John, remembering how the Savior, riding beside him into Jerusalem, had been

greeted with palms and hosannas, writes about heaven (Rev. 7:9-10): "After that I saw a large crowd, that no one could count, from every nation, tribe, people, and language standing before the throne and before the Lamb, wearing white robes and carrying palms in their hands. And they called aloud, Salvation" (or "Victory") "to our God who sits on the throne and to the Lamb!"

The *Didache* (10:6), perhaps soon after 100 A. D., had "hosanna" embodied in the communion liturgy. Penitent communicants in their procession through the centuries have had their cry for mercy changed to a shout of victory as they celebrated their Lord's triumphant death. Today we are in that procession, because we, too, partake of that one Bread; and we sing "Hosanna!" in rhythmic major chords and to a melody that wings its flight to the upper notes to wave a flag of victory. It is a "hosanna in the highest," for it is "echoed and ratified in heaven" (*Expositor's Greek N.T.*, on Matt. 21:9; cp. Ps. 19:1; 148:1-6). As the multitude of the disciples (Luke 19:37) on the road that leads through the Kidron Valley to Jerusalem sings "Hosanna in the highest!" it is joined by the multitude in the home of God (Ps. 118:26) that sings "Glory to God in the highest" (Luke 2:13-14) until in one mighty chorus, "with angels and archangels and all the company of heaven we laud and magnify Thy glorious name, evermore praising Thee and saying: . . . Heaven and earth are full of Thy glory; Hosanna in the highest!"

W. F. BECK, St. Louis, Mo.