

In a recent pastors update I said beginning in February when I turn 70, I'll be working for Blue Ocean half time. Advantage to church: lowers the payroll. Advantage to me: frees up time to do more writing. Working on a new approach to the so called "clobber texts"—those handful of passages used against LGBTQ people. I'm going to rehearse what I have in mind for this book briefly, then get on to my point today. I'm not going to even mention what the clobber texts are, btw. Here's my angle: So, progressive Christians object to traditional interpretations when it's clear that these interpretations cause harm. But they can only point to a few proof texts, like "Love doesn't harm the neighbor." Conservative Christians reply, "Well, our traditional reading is just tough love—it prevents the lasting harm of spending eternity apart from God." In fact, ancient Judaism was very much concerned with the problem of harm, harm to people in this life, not the next, but this concern is rooted in Israel's ancient writings: Genesis, Exodus and Leviticus. It's rooted in the temple worship rituals, and the food laws, and other things that Christians consider irrelevant.

My thesis—that we've lost the Jewish concern for the problem of harm—revolves around the idea that very early in its history Christianity was taken over by voices that were deeply anti-Jewish. Within a few hundred years, a Jewish believer in Jesus—and there were many in that period—were forbidden from embracing both their Jewish identity and Jewish practices (like keeping Kosher, observing the seventh day Sabbath). When you deny a person their identity and the practices that go along with that identity, you're doing a very harmful thing—seeking to erase their existence.

In today's politics we know the Big Lie led to the violence of Jan. 6 in our capital. Christianity's historic Big Lie—is that Judaism has been replaced by Christianity. Without the Big Lie the holocaust could not have happened. Christianity's original "othering crime" (turning a group of people into a dismissed "other") is its anti-Judaism. Fortunately, the institutional church has been trying to come out from under this anti-Judaism ever since the holocaust revealed just how dangerous this anti-Jewish bias is. The church has made great strides. But certain problems take a long time to acknowledge, let alone unlearn. Christianity is like a recovering alcoholic in the early stages of admitting it's anti-Judaism has made life unmanageable. Facing this is part of saving Christianity from

being used to harm others (then denying the harm done) in direct violation of its namesake.

Of course our sacred writings are Jewish writings. Jesus and Paul were Torah observant Jews—who were circumcised, kept kosher food laws, observed the Sabbath. They identified as Jews and practiced Judaism. So, as Torah-observant Jews they would have been driven out of the church, certainly by the 4<sup>th</sup> century. After WW2 and the holocaust, Christian scholars have emphasized the Jewishness of Jesus, and now, at last the same thing is happening with Paul. Paul is not a Jewish person who converted to Christianity. He is not a “former Jew” but a Torah-observant Jew following Jesus. If you’re intrigued by all this, our next Deeper Dive Theology book group is studying *Paul Was Not a Christian* by Pamela Eisenbaum.

Anyway, because early Christian interpreters of Scripture absorbed an anti-Jewish bias, the meaning of key words used in these Jewish writings was lost. Words are slippery things: their meaning changes over time. When people who didn’t understand their original meaning start using them in different ways, they can change the meaning of the words to fit their ideology. This happened with some really important words. Today, we’ll focus on two of them: the Greek word “sozo” (often translated saved) and the Greek word (aeon) often translated “forever” or adjective-form “eternal.” We can now demonstrate that these common English translations “saved” (in the Evangelical sense) and “eternal” stray far from their original Jewish context.

Today if you asked the average person with passing knowledge of religion, “What does it mean when Christians speak of being saved?” they will answer. “Converting to Christianity” or “saved from hell.” This belief is justified by bad English translations of 2 greeks words: sozo, and aeon (or aionios).

Let’s start with “eternal.” The word translated “eternal” in most English translations of NT is ***aionios***. It’s an adjective—a word that describes something else. What kind of life? Eternal life. The noun form of this adjective is ***aeon***, from which we get the English “eon.” That should be a hint: eon in English means “age” or a “long time” but it doesn’t mean eternity as in time that goes on forever.

The NT was written in Greek, but Greek is a step removed from the language Jesus spoke (Aramaic, a variant of Hebrew.) There's no word in Hebrew that naturally means "eternity."

The word in Aramaic that Jesus would have used, is alma in Aramaic, olam in Hebrew. Alma/olam means something at a great distance, on the far horizon. It doesn't mean forever, eternal, or never ending. The Greek word (the first language of the NT) is aeon: it means age, like the Bronze age, of the information age, or the Age of Aquarius.

We might say, but wait! The Psalms were written in Hebrew, and in Ps. 23 it says: "surely goodness and mercy will follow me all the days of my life, and I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever" But that word in Hebrew is olam. Robert Alter translates this "surely goodness and mercy will follow me my whole life long." Same as NRSV. Why do so many older English translations use forever? Because it's traditional, not because its accurate. Because Psalm 23 is used at funerals and "forever" is more comfort at a funeral.

There are only 3 verses in the NT that could possibly be translated "eternal punishment" and the word is the adjective form of aeon, aionios—a word that refers to a limited period of time, often in the far horizon of the future. Hell as a place of eternal conscious torment is a horrible doctrine, one that could only be executed by a God I don't want to be close to, and it cannot be justified by the meaning of the original language of the NT. So that's interesting! We're getting somewhere!

Now we turn to the word translated "saved" or "sozo" in the Greek of the New Testament.

In evangelical-speak the word "saved" is used to refer to conversion—as in, I was saved in May 1971 when I gave my life to Christ. But word "sozo" doesn't mean conversion as in getting saved. That's a later meaning imposed on the word by evangelical usage.

Sozo is a word with multiple meanings depending on context. It can mean cured, protected, spared. There is a Jewish scholar whose primary field of study is the letters of Paul, named Mark Nanos. Quoting Nanos, "The Greek word "sozo" [often translated "saved"] is normally used for protecting or keeping safe. The word was not used to refer to someone or something that had been lost being returned or saved in the evangelical

salvation sense that it has come to denote—converted in common parlance.” The core meaning, according to Nanos, is protect or to keep safe

So even though the word “sozo” has been hijacked to mean “saved” in the sense of “converted to Christianity” or “saved from eternal conscious torment,” the original meaning—the one known to Jesus and Paul, still holds. Protected from harm, safe. And that needs to be our emphasis, not the other stuff.

Let me end with a story—a close encounter I had with a black bear recently. My latest close encounter that happened last Sunday [tell story]

What’s my point? It’s scary to be close to a black bear! Which brings us to our reading today, a vivid picture of sozo—protection from harm, safety. What Jesus is about. Jesus had a vision of a future age that he received from the Hebrew prophet, Isaiah who spoke poetically of a time when “the wolf will lie down with the lamb” and the lamb would be safe. The wolf has always been safe lying next to the lamb. The point is, the lamb will be safe lying next to the wolf. A poetic picture of the future age, that we are called to work for, to begin to usher in. A time when those who would normally be terrified, aren’t terrified any more—a lamb close to a wolf, a child by a viper’s nest. We might call this a Jewish utopian vision—because so often the Jewish people were on the short end of the safety stick—they were the lamb and the Assyrians, or the Babylonians or the Roman Empire was the wolf; Israel was the child living next to the viper’s nest. But it wasn’t gonna stay that way!

For too long, too many people have not felt safe in communities of faith. For too long too many people have been terrified by readings of Scripture torn from their original Jewish context to mean what they were never intended to mean. So we need to return to the original vision of Jesus in its original Jewish context. The Jesus who wants to bring sozo, protection from harm. The Jesus who spoke as Jewish prophet in Israel, using Jewish idioms and stories and images.

Like this highly symbolic and poetic picture from the prophet Isaiah. This is the hope for the future that animated Isaiah, and Jesus, and it can animate us. We can picture it. We can hope for it. And if hope is doing what hope does, we can work for it in the here and

now. It can shape the kind of community of faith that we can become—a place not to terrify people, but a place of safety, of protection from harm, God helping us.

Isaiah 11: 6-9 NRSV