

Word Study of ΣΩΖΩ and ΣΩΤΗΡΙΑ in Acts and the Pentateuch

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ALG 411 / Acts in Greek
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28 March 2005

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Provisional Definition of ΣΩΖΩ

In its most basic meaning, σωζω means personal deliverance from harm. In nearly every passage examined, there is some kind of harm either stated or implied and either potential or actual from which a person or persons are delivered. This basic meaning may be subdivided:

1. *Personal deliverance from physical harm:* Most uses of σωζω involve deliverance from physical harm rather than spiritual harm (11 uses to 9).¹ In Acts, however, the deliverance is more frequently spiritual than physical; in the Pentateuch, the meaning always has at least the idea of physical deliverance. In a very broad sense, the noun σωτηρια is used to translate the Hebrew word *shalom*, a word meaning peace in the sense of “completeness, wholeness, harmony, and fulfillment.”²
 - a. *Personal deliverance from illness or physical malady:* One type of deliverance in Acts is miraculous deliverance from some kind of physical malady or illness, such as lameness (Acts 4:9; 14:9). The noun form is used in the sense of *health* for fasting sailors who are urged to eat (Acts 27:34).
 - b. *Personal deliverance from disasters:* σωζω can also indicate physical deliverance from disasters such as storms at sea (Acts 27:20, 31), the judgment on Sodom (Gen. 19:17, 20, 22),³ and famine (Gen. 47:25).
 - c. *Personal deliverance from enemies:* In at least a few instances, the harm from which one is delivered is an enemy in warfare (Gen. 32:9; Deut. 33:29). The idea of delivery from enemies can be seen in a use of the noun form of the word used to speak of the salvation that God gave the Israelites (Exod. 15:2).
2. *Personal deliverance from spiritual harm:* σωζω also means salvation in the sense of deliverance from spiritual death. It can mean salvation away from something negative; in Acts 2:40, Peter commands his hearers to be saved “from this crooked generation.” It can also mean salvation towards something positive; just a few verses later those who were saved were added to the church (Acts 2:47). Especially important is Acts 13:46-47, which

¹ Uses cited are occurrences of σωζω in Acts and the Pentateuch only. Some of the uses may have both a physical and a spiritual reference (e.g. Acts 14:9); in such cases the use has been counted as referring to whichever sense seems to be dominant.

² R. Laird Harris, Gleason L. Archer Jr., and Bruce K. Waltke, eds., *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament*, 2 vols. (Chicago: Moody, 1980), p. 2:931. TWOT also notes that the Septuagint uses many other words besides σωτηρια to translate *shalom*.

³ Because the judgment on Sodom was from God for sin, the salvation in these verses is also spiritual as well (cf. 2 Pet. 2:7, though the word for deliverance there is ρυομαι, not σωζω).

shows that because the Jews rejected eternal life σωτηρια is offered to the Gentiles; salvation and eternal life are thus intimately connected.

Though this is not the place to discuss the theological implications of the word, σωζω is primarily used in the sense of *divine* deliverance from harm. Though in the Pentateuch the relationship is not nearly as clear, the uses of the word in Acts shows that connection. Salvation comes by calling on the name of the Lord (Acts 2:21; 4:12) and there is no salvation in any other (Acts 4:12). Salvation comes from hearing the gospel (Acts 11:14) and by faith (Acts 14:9; 16:31).⁴ Salvation is not by circumcision as the legalizers taught (Acts 15:1) but “by the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ” (Acts 15:11). σωτηρια translates the Hebrew word *yeshua* which means “salvation from God” (Gen. 49:18). For Israel, salvation from the Egyptians is “of the LORD” (Exod. 14:13), and “[the LORD] is become my salvation” (Exod. 15:2). The usage of the word so frequently and exclusively with reference to God seems to indicate that the meaning of the word contains the idea of salvation that comes from God and not from man.

The idea that the meaning of σωζω includes deliverance from God is supported by an examination of the subjects and direct objects used with the verb. σωζω always appears in the passive in Acts (though not in Luke). If the word could be used in the sense that man saves himself, one would expect to see the active voice as well. σωζω is used however of man saving man in a physical sense; e.g. Jacob save the people of Egypt from the famine (Gen. 47:25). σωζω does also allow for man to be involved in salvation, either as the proclaimer of salvation (Acts 11:14; 16:17) or as one working miracles (Acts 4:9; 14:19). Examining the direct objects and the subjects in passive constructions used with this verb also shows that salvation is personal; that is, only people and not things receive its action. Furthermore, that salvation is usually individual. Most uses of the word have singular direct objects or subjects; the uses with plural direct objects or subjects seem not to act upon the group as a whole but to distribute the action to the individuals who comprise the group, for example to the individuals in the crowd on Pentecost (Acts 2:40) or to the members of a household (Acts 16:31). However, there are times when the verb appears to act on the whole group; for example all the sailors would be saved or would drown as a group (Acts 27:20) and God saved Israel (Deut. 33:29).

Categorization of Occurrences in Acts

References about physical deliverance

Physical deliverance from illness or malady

4:9 σωζω A lame man is healed. In context, this use is also connected with the means of

⁴ Particularly strong support for the point that the word ΣΩΖΩ is connected with faith is seen in Luke 7:50: “Your faith has saved you.”

14:9	σφζω	salvation category below. The cripple had faith, explained by an infinitive σωθηναι that serves to explain the purpose. This use may also fall under the means of spiritual salvation.
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Physical deliverance from disaster

27:20	σωτηρια	Sailors lost hope of salvation from storm at sea.
27:31	σφζω	Paul advises that the sailors keep the fore-anchors in the ship; otherwise they cannot be saved.

References about spiritual deliverance

Means of salvation

4:12	σωτηρια σφζω	Salvation is only Jesus. There is no other name than His by which men must be saved.
7:25	σωτηρια	Salvation comes for Israel by the hand of Moses, but it is given by God.
11:14	σφζω	Cornelius and his house would be saved through the words which Peter would speak.
15:1	σφζω	False teachers say that salvation can only come after circumcision.
15:11	σφζω	Salvation is the same for everyone, i.e. by faith.
16:17	σωτηρια	Paul and his companions would show the way of salvation.
16:30-31	σφζω (2x)	The jailor asks what he must do to be saved (purpose infinitive). Salvation come after belief in Christ.

Persons to be saved

2:21	σφζω	Anyone who calls on the Lord will be saved.
13:26	σωτηρια	(This reference says that the ό λογος της σωτηριας ταυτης is sent, thus containing the idea that salvation is from the words of the gospel.
13:47	σωτηρια	Salvation is for the Gentiles, unto the end of the earth.

Dangers from which one is saved

2:40	σφζω	Salvation is from the crooked generation.
2:47	σφζω	Salvation includes addition to the church.

Comparison of Definitions in Lexica

The differences between the BDAG and the Louw and Nida lexica are slight. In the meaning relating to temporal, physical deliverance, Louw and Nida goes beyond BDAG by stating that the verb also means “to restore to a former state of safety and well being” (21.18). In its discussion of verbs about healing, Louw and Nida repeats the idea that σφζω includes not just the idea of deliverance but also restoration (23.136). The other advantage of Louw and Nida over BDAG is that it makes a distinction in the meaning of σωτηρια between “a state of having been saved” and “the process of being saved.” BDAG has an advantage over Louw and Nida in that its definition of spiritual salvation is parallel to its definition of physical salvation. By showing that the meaning to “save or preserve from eternal death” is parallel the meaning to “preserve or rescue fr. natural dangers and afflictions,” the lexicon shows how the one meaning stems from the other. Furthermore, BDAG is much more detailed in its sub-definitions, having at least ten nuances of

meaning compared to Louw and Nida's five. Another, perhaps the primary, superiority of BDAG is its addition of a third definition. In addition to the ideas of physical deliverance and spiritual deliverance, BDAG includes the possibility that some uses of σωζω can mean both physical and spiritual deliverance. Also worth mentioning is the fact that BDAG cites a much broader corpus of literature than Louw and Nida.

Both BDAG and Louw and Nida have an advantage over the definitions above because they are both built on a much broader base of literature, both of the entire New Testament and of other writings. Some definitions in BDAG, for example to "keep, preserve in good condition," are found only in literature outside of Acts and the Pentateuch. As well as the more specialized definitions, there are the particular uses of those definitions mentioned by those lexica (e.g. BDAG states that σωτηρια serves as metonymy for σωτηρ in Acts 13:47). On the other hand, nearly half of the citations in Louw and Nida come from Acts. BDAG also has the same advantage over the above definitions as it does over Louw and Nida, that of the third definition that includes both physical and spiritual deliverance. The primary advantage of the above definitions over BDAG and Louw and Nida is the fuller examination of the subjects and direct objects commonly used with σωζω, which shows that the word means in particular personal deliverance. Connected with that examination is the fact that the above definitions also take fuller note of how often σωζω appears in the passive; however, that fuller examination is due to the exclusive use of the passive voice in Acts.

Addition to the Definition of ΣΩΖΩ

3. *Personal deliverance from both physical and spiritual harm:* Some uses of σωζω share both meanings (1) and (2) above. In cases like the cripple healed by Paul (Acts 14:9), it seems that the basis of the physical deliverance, faith, also allows spiritual deliverance.⁵ In cases like Moses' blessing, the deliverance is at least physical deliverance from enemies, but in context seems to be much broader and mean spiritual deliverance as well (Deut. 33:29; see also Exod. 15:2).

⁵ Though σωζω is not used in the passage, Luke 5:17-25 tells how Jesus first forgave a crippled man's sins, and then healed his physical condition.