

How Were People Saved in the Old Testament?

By Jim Myers

Introduction

The most significant question that anyone can ask is, “What must I do to be saved?” The only authoritative answer is found in the Bible. To most Christians the words *save* and *salvation* immediately call to mind the meaning of deliverance from the lake of fire after death or perhaps “go to heaven when you die.” But this idea of salvation is not the most common meaning of those terms in the Bible. The various Hebrew words translated, “to save,” or, “salvation,” rarely relate to personal salvation from eternal judgment or ultimate entrance into heaven. The New Testament words *save* and *salvation* also have a variety of meanings in different passages. If one assumes that every occurrence of the word *save* or of the word *salvation* refers to deliverance from the lake of fire, it will inevitably lead to an incorrect interpretation of many passages.

It is important to understand that most of the time when the words *save* and *salvation* appear in Scripture they mean something other than, “final deliverance from the lake of fire.”

The Hebrew word *yeshua* means, "salvation," and is the Old Testament equivalent of Jesus, whose name means salvation. The principal Old Testament verb, *yasha*, indicates a divine deliverance from any type of spiritual or temporal evil which man might encounter. "In general, the root [*yasha*] implies bringing help to people in the midst of their trouble. (...) It is almost exclusively a theological term with Yahweh as its subject and his people as its object."¹

This deliverance might come through men such as judges or kings,² but most often through the agency of YHWH.³ René López listed several categories of salvation in the Old Testament, including salvation from external evils in general, victory over enemies in battle, salvation from moral troubles, salvation from enemies, and a national and spiritual salvation involving Israel's possession of the nations and future restoration from exile.⁴ None of these refers to individual salvation from eternal damnation.

By far, the most common usage in the Old Testament is of God's deliverance of His people from their struggles or enemies.⁵ Often, however, the word refers to the future blessings of the messianic kingdom.⁶ At that time, in the future earthly kingdom, Israel “will draw water from the wells of salvation” (Isa 12:3), and the entire world will participate in the messianic salvation (Isa

1 Willem VanGemeren, ed., *New International Dictionary of Old Testament Theology and Exegesis* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1997), pp. 556-62.

2 Judges 2:18; 6:14; 8:22; 12:2; 1 Sam 23:2.

3 Psalms 20:6; 34:6; Isa 61:10; Ezek 37:23; Zech 3:4.

4 René A. López, "Old Testament Salvation—From What?" *Journal of the Grace Evangelical Society* 16:31 (Autumn 2003): 50-57.

5 E.g., Exod 14:30; Num 10:9; Ps 18:3; Isa 30:15; 45:17; Jer 30:17.

6 Psalm 132:16; Isa 25:9; 43:3, 5, 8, 19; Jer 31:7.

45:22; 49:6). In that day Israel will say, "Behold, this is our God; we have waited for him, that he might save us. This is the LORD; we have waited for him; let us be glad and rejoice in his salvation" (Isa 25:9).

“But Israel is saved by the LORD with everlasting salvation...” (Isa 45:17). The messianic salvation is called “everlasting salvation” because the kingdom of the Messiah will last forever. David also anticipated salvation in this sense: “Oh, that salvation for Israel would come out of Zion! When the LORD restores the fortunes of his people, let Jacob rejoice, let Israel be glad” (Ps 14:7).

But what does the Old Testament itself say about salvation from sin? How were people saved in the Old Testament before Jesus Christ came in the flesh? It has often been said that people in the Old Testament were saved by looking forward to the Cross in faith, while people after Christ are saved by looking back to the Cross. But is this true?

Remarkable as it may seem, there is no explicit gospel message to be found in the Old Testament. There is no specific command to believe in a future Messiah for salvation, nor is there any mention of an Old Testament saint who put faith in a promised savior for salvation. There are no clear salvation verses like John 3:16 or Acts 16:31 to be found in the Old Testament.

How then were people justified before God in the Old Testament? Some have wrongly taught that salvation was by keeping the Mosaic Law. Even if this were true, which it is not, there would remain the question of the means of salvation before the law was given. With regard to the Law of Moses, the Scripture is very clear: “For it is impossible for the blood of bulls and goats to take away sins” (Heb 10:4). “For what does the Scripture say? ‘Abraham believed God, and it was counted to him as righteousness’” (Rom 4:3).

Justification has always been by faith and never by law. “For we hold that one is justified by faith apart from works of the law” (Rom 3:28). Only by faith, whether in the Old Testament or the New Testament, can one be a son of Abraham.

Does he who supplies the Spirit to you and works miracles among you do so by works of the law, or by hearing with faith—Just as Abraham “believed God, and it was counted to him as righteousness”? Know then that it is those of faith who are the sons of Abraham. (Gal 3:5-7)

Therefore, the law was unrelated to justification. “Now it is evident that no one is justified before God by the law, for ‘The righteous shall live by faith’” (Gal 3:11).

The Scripture also clearly teaches that man’s works cannot save from sin:

And to the one who does not work but believes in him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is counted as righteousness, just as David also speaks of the blessing of the one to whom God counts righteousness apart from works. (Rom 4:5-6)

Basics about Salvation from Sin

One factor that is often neglected in discussing salvation is that the character of God must be satisfied. God is holy, absolutely pure, without sin or evil of any kind or degree. Any sin is an offense to God's holiness. God is also perfect in justice. Perfect justice demands that a penalty be paid for violation of God's righteous standard. The penalty is death of an infinite kind.

Man, who is sinful, cannot, by his own efforts, achieve the level of perfect righteousness required by a holy God. If man pays his own penalty, he himself must suffer an infinite death, which would forever exclude him from a relationship with God. But God solved this great problem. Through the death of a sinless substitute, God's righteousness and justice could be satisfied. This satisfaction took place at the Cross where the sins of the world were imputed to Jesus who was judged for all sins of all people of all time. This is the one and only basis for the salvation of any person—Christ died as our substitute, satisfying the demands of an infinitely holy God.

God, who knows all things perfectly, knew from the beginning that He would send His Son into the world to pay the penalty for all sins. God postponed judgment on man's sins in the Old Testament until Jesus came and went to the cross:

[W]hom God put forward as a propitiation by his blood, to be received by faith. This was to show God's righteousness, because in his divine forbearance he had passed over former sins. It was to show his righteousness at the present time, so that he might be just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus. (Rom 3:25-26)

The substitutionary death of Jesus Christ on the cross is the one and only basis for salvation in any age.

But how did people in the Old Testament obtain salvation from the penalty for their sins? Always by faith. But other questions arise: "What was the precise *content* of their faith?" What did they believe in order to be justified? Has it always been exactly the same or is there a different content which changed as God gave more revelation?

People who lived before the time of Christ did not have the same information that we have today. There are many things we know about the person and the work of Christ that simply were not revealed in the Old Testament. They could not understand the Savior as we do today because they simply didn't have all of the revelation that we have. So there are obvious differences between the content of the gospel in the Old Testament and the New Testament. The content of faith depends on the particular revelation from God at any given time.

This does not mean that there are different *ways* of salvation, but the precise content of faith, that is, what people were believing for salvation, is necessarily different. But understand clearly that the Bible absolutely does not teach more than one way of salvation, for salvation has been, is, and always will be based on the substitutionary death of Jesus Christ.

Faith was the necessary condition for salvation in the Old Testament as well as in the New: "And the people of Nineveh believed God. They called for a fast and put on sackcloth, from the

greatest of them to the least of them” (Jonah 3:5); “And he believed the LORD, and he counted it to him as righteousness” (Gen 15:6).

This is not a generic faith in the existence of God, but rather, a specific faith in the revelation of the true God who is the sole origin of salvation. “Salvation belongs to the LORD!” (Jonah 2:9).

Three Points of View

Among evangelical Christians, however, there is not a consensus as to the content of faith necessary for salvation from sin in the Old Testament. There are three major viewpoints on this subject:

The Classic Dispensational View

The Classic Dispensational view is stated succinctly by Ryrie:

The basis of salvation in every age is the death of Christ; the *requirement* for salvation in every age is faith; the *object* of faith in every age is God; the *content* of faith changes in the various dispensations.⁷

Two of these statements find general acceptance among all evangelicals. Certainly the basis of salvation is the death of Christ, for there can be no salvation if the penalty is not paid. Also, it is clear that God's requirement for man is that he have faith. However, the statement that the content of faith changes in the various dispensations is not accepted by those who hold to Covenant Theology. The statement that the object of faith in every age is God is somewhat problematic, although it can be said that the *ultimate* object of faith is God. But according to Classic Dispensational writers, the specific object of faith is God or some promise made by God, but not faith in a promised Seed or Savior. This position encounters numerous problems because it is nebulous. Is a generic belief in the existence of God sufficient for salvation? Does faith in *any* promise of God result in imputed righteousness? God promised Abram that he would make him a great nation (Gen 12:2). Is a person saved by believing God's promise to Abram? And what is it that people to whom no promises were made should believe?

Paul Enns, another Dispensational theologian, said this:

God's revelation to man differs in different dispensations, but man's responsibility is to respond to God in faith according to the manner in which God has revealed Himself. Thus when God revealed Himself to Abraham and promised him a great posterity, Abraham believed God, and the Lord imputed righteousness to the patriarch (Gen. 15:6). Abraham would have known little about Christ, but he responded in faith to the revelation of God and

⁷ Charles Ryrie, *Dispensationalism* (Chicago: Moody Bible Institute, 1995, 2007), p. 134 (emphasis original).

was saved. Similarly, under the law God promised life through faith. Whereas the Israelite under the law knew about the importance of the blood sacrifice, his knowledge of a suffering Messiah was still limited—but he was saved by faith (Hab. 2:4). Dispensationalists thus emphasize that in every dispensation salvation is by God's grace through faith according to His revelation.⁸

The Covenant Theology View

The view of Covenant Theology is that salvation has always been by faith in Jesus Christ. Salvation in the Old Testament was by faith in Jesus, except that they didn't yet know His name. This is seen in the Westminster Confession of Faith, Chapter VII, Section 3:

Man, by his fall, having made himself incapable of life by that covenant, the Lord was pleased to make a second, (Gal. 3:21, Rom. 8:3, Rom. 3:20-21, Gen. 3:15, Isa. 42:6) commonly called the covenant of grace; wherein He freely offereth unto sinners life and salvation by Jesus Christ; requiring of them faith in Him, that they may be saved, (Mark 16:15-16, John 3:16, Rom. 10:6-9, Gal. 3:11)...

Covenant theologians are explicit in declaring that Jesus was the object of faith in the Old Testament and that God has always required faith in Christ and His redemptive work in order to receive eternal life. Hodge notes:

...faith in the promised Redeemer was required from the beginning, but from the admitted fact that the Old Testament is full of the doctrine of redemption by the Messiah, it follows that those who received the religion of the Old Testament received that doctrine, and exercised faith in the promise of God concerning his Son.⁹

Buswell agrees, "Abel's faith was, in substance, faith in the atoning work of Christ, the promised Redeemer."¹⁰

A Modified Dispensational View

There is a position between the classic Dispensational view and the Covenant Theology view, and that is faith in a Savior promised by God. The revelation increased as time went on, and the requirement for salvation was faith in this Deliverer as He was revealed at any given time. So, they could have faith in a "seed" (Gen 3:15) that was promised, faith in a Messiah, faith in Yeshua, and yet not believe in Jesus specifically, for Jesus had not yet been revealed.

8 Paul Enns, *The Moody Handbook of Theology* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1989), p. 522.

9 Charles Hodge, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, Reprinted 1989), 2:372.

10 James Oliver Buswell, *A Systematic Theology of the Christian Religion* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1962), 2:185.

Many Old Testament believers did not believe what we now know to be essential doctrines about salvation, yet they were saved. They were not told to believe on Jesus for salvation. Therefore, while the mandated content of belief is different from one age to another, there is a minimal, absolutely necessary soteriological content of faith for all people during all ages in all places.

"Most of the believers who came to faith before NT times are those who give evidence that their faith was based on the God who disclosed himself in the Seed of the Woman."¹¹

From the very beginning God had a plan for man's salvation which is centered in the Seed, the One promised in the protoevangelium (Gen 3:15).

The Gospel in the Old Testament

Protoevangelium—the First Declaration of the Gospel

And the LORD God commanded the man, saying, "You may surely eat of every tree of the garden, but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall surely die" (Gen 2:16-17).

They ate. They died immediately. It was a spiritual death. This is the exercise of God's righteousness and justice. This death penalty is passed down through Adam to every person born through procreation (Rom 5:12-14). Man is born physically alive but spiritually dead. He is separated from God—no relationship, no fellowship. This is manifested by the attempt of the man and the woman to solve their problem by covering themselves with fig leaves and hiding themselves when they heard the Lord coming. They made excuses, but the Lord got them to admit their wrongdoing. God then gave three prophetic curses: one each for Satan, the man, and the woman (Gen 3:14-19).

First, to the serpent He announced that it would suffer perpetual humiliation, evidenced by its crawling. Then God announced the ultimate destruction of Satan by *the Seed of the woman*. This reference to the Seed of the woman is the first promise of Messiah in the Bible (cf. Isa 7:14). This Seed must be the Messiah, the virgin-born Son of God, who would eventually destroy sin and Satan forever.

Obviously they did not understand "her seed" as a reference to a virgin birth. What they could understand was that One would be born who would undo what they had done in their sin, and that this One would destroy the serpent. The serpent would deal a fatal blow to the Seed of the woman. This fatal blow was delivered at the Cross, although Adam and Eve would not have understood this as a reference to the Cross. But ultimately, "her seed" (referring to one Person) would defeat Satan. We see in the genealogies that the reckoning was always through the father and not the mother. Consequently, in looking back to Gen 3:15, the Biblical authors recognized

¹¹ Walter C. Kaiser, Jr., "Is It the Case that Christ Is the Same Object of Faith in the Old Testament? (Genesis 15:1-6)" *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 55:2 (June 2012).

that the One who was promised in that passage would be unique—true humanity because He would be born of a woman, but conceived without the participation of a man.

Second, God pronounced a curse on the woman: she would experience pain in childbirth, and she would struggle with a continual desire to dominate her husband. Finally, because the man listened to his wife who tempted him to sin, the man was told that the ground would be cursed, and, as he expended his energy in an effort to produce food for living, he would weary himself in frustrating toil even to the point of death and would eventually return as dust to the very soil from which he came.

Then the Lord made garments of animal skin for them and covered them. The obvious understanding is that God killed an animal to get the skin. At this point they gain knowledge of physical death, which is a faint picture of the spiritual death which they had already experienced. Certainly, God could have created clothing for them out of nothing or He could have used existing plant material, but an innocent animal gave his life in order to provide what man needed. The man and the woman tried to cover their nakedness by making garments of fig leaves, but what was needed was something greater, something to cover not only their physical bodies, but their spiritual nakedness as well, a spiritual covering which could only be provided by the death of a substitute, and which could only be received by faith.

We are not told in the narrative that God explained to Adam and Eve the significance of that death, but surely they saw that it was through the death of an innocent animal that God provided the covering which they needed because of their sins. Nor are we told in the text that the death of this animal was a picture of the promised Seed of the woman who would die for their sins. But we can see that they understood that they must put faith in the One whom God promised would come to destroy Satan and the sin he brought into the world. How do we know this?

Immediately after God pronounced the curses, Adam called his wife “Eve” which means “life” because she was the mother of all living, a clear indication that Adam understood the implications of Gen 3:15: that God would provide a Savior, "the seed of the woman," who would solve the problem of death which came about as a result of his sin.

Cain—Genesis 4:1

Now Adam knew Eve his wife, and she conceived and bore Cain, saying, "I have gotten a man with the help of the LORD" (Gen 4:1).

Eve makes a statement about her firstborn son, Cain, in Gen 4:1. The Hebrew text says literally, “I have gotten a man: YHWH.” That is the literal rendering.¹²

This verse shows that Eve understood that the promise of Gen 3:15 included a personal divine entrance into human history by birth, as a child, to be born of a woman. She believed that Cain, her firstborn son, was the fulfillment of that promise, and therefore she said, "I have gotten a man: YHWH."

¹² See Arnold G. Fruchtenbaum, *The Messianic Bible Study Collection*, vol. 50 (Tustin, CA: Ariel Ministries, 1983), p. 12.

Now, her theology was correct. The Messiah would be both God and Man. It would be the divine entry of God Himself into the human realm, by being born as a child, born of a woman (Gal 4:4). It was Eve's application of the promise that was wrong. Cain proved not to be the One she thought he was.

The narrative goes on to tell how Cain and Abel brought offerings to the Lord. Cain brought produce from the land; Abel brought the firstborn of his sheep and goats, which he sacrificed to the Lord. Why would they offer sacrifices? There is no indication in the text that the Lord had commanded them to do so. But, surely, they must have received instructions from the Lord. Why else would they do it? Hebrews 11:4 tells us that “By faith Abel offered to God a more acceptable sacrifice than Cain, through which he was commended as righteous.”

In what was Abel expressing faith? He offered an animal sacrifice. He had to kill it, gut it, skin it, and remove the fat from the internal organs, which is also declared to be a part of the offering. This, too, is significant. The fat was considered to be the best part and was to be given in offering to the Lord (cf. Leviticus 3, 4, 7–10). While we are not given the reasons why Abel did this, it was obviously in obedience to divine instruction. He was believing instruction that had been given by the Lord. Did he understand that the death of the lamb was a picture of Jesus Christ, “the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!” (John 1:29)?

Abel offered it in faith. Faith in what or in whom? Obviously he was believing God for something, and this faith resulted in his being declared righteous. It is not unreasonable to think that he understood about a substitutionary death—one who is innocent dying in the place of one who is guilty. The offering of this sacrifice resulted in the declaration that he had been justified.

Also, in Gen 4:6-7a there is an interesting question from God: “The LORD said to Cain, ‘Why are you angry, and why has your face fallen? If you do well, will you not be accepted?’”

Cain could be accepted by God if he would do well. In what way could he do well? This is not specified in the text, but surely it must be obedience to a divine command. Man can only approach a holy God in the way specified by God. Since the Lord accepted Abel's offering and a declaration was made that he was justified before God, it can only be that "doing well" on the part of Cain would be to offer a blood sacrifice in faith. This would be an expression of faith that the death of an innocent substitute would satisfy the demands of a holy God.

Noah—Genesis 8:20

Immediately following the flood when Noah came out of the ark with the animals, he built an altar and offered sacrifices on it from every clean animal and bird. Why did he do this? We are not told in the text that God had commanded him to do this. But in this way he worshiped the Lord, and the Lord was pleased with his offering. It can only be that Noah also understood the principle of substitutionary sacrifice.

Abraham—Genesis 12:1-3

While Abram was still in Ur of the Chaldees, God had spoken to him (Acts 7:2; Heb 11:8):

Now the LORD said to Abram, "Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you. And I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and him who dishonors you I will curse, and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed" (Gen 12:1-3).

Would God make such promises to one who was not saved? Unthinkable!

Abraham—Genesis 15:6

According to Gen 15:6, "...And he believed the LORD, and he counted it to him as righteousness."

This verse is often interpreted to mean that Abraham was justified at that time because he believed God's promise that he would have a literal physical son of his own. However, it is probable that the statement in Gen 15:6 is stating a past fact, that Abram had previously believed in the Lord while he was living in Ur before he ever arrived in Canaan (Heb 11:8). The Hebrew grammar of Gen 15:6 indicates a break in the narrative flow from the previous verses and is simply asserting the reality that Abram had previously believed in the Lord, at which time the Lord credited that faith to him as righteousness.¹³ The result of this faith in God was that the Lord imputed righteousness to Abram.

Abram was saved while he was a gentile, but later he became the patriarch of all Jews. He is therefore considered to be the example of all who are saved, whether Jew or gentile, for all are saved in the same way—by faith. As Paul wrote, "And the Scripture, foreseeing that God would justify the Gentiles by faith, preached the gospel beforehand to Abraham, saying, 'In you shall all the nations be blessed.' So then, those who are of faith are blessed along with Abraham, the man of faith" (Gal 3:8-9).

In Gen 12:3 it is said, "in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed." Later, in Gen 22:18, it is stated, "and in your offspring shall all the nations of the earth be blessed..." What did Abraham understand about this statement? We know from our New Testament perspective that the seed is a reference to Messiah, Jesus Christ: "Now the promises were made to Abraham and to his offspring. It does not say, 'And to offsprings,' referring to many, but referring to one, 'And to your offspring,' who is Christ" (Gal 3:16).

Abraham offered animal sacrifices on numerous occasions. Even though it is not written that he was commanded to do so, he did it frequently. This would indicate an understanding of approaching God through the blood of an innocent sacrifice.

¹³ See Allen P. Ross, *Creation and Blessing: A Guide to the Study and Exposition of Genesis* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1988), pp. 310ff.

Genesis 22

In this passage God told Abraham to offer his son Isaac on an altar, but then God intervened and stopped him from doing so. God Himself provided a ram for a sacrifice, and this is certainly significant. What we do know is that Abraham was willing to sacrifice his son because he believed in the ability of God to raise the dead (Heb 11:17-19). So he also knew about resurrection.

The Song of the Suffering Servant of YHWH

Isaiah 52:13–53:12 is the clearest presentation of the Lord Jesus Christ and His work of providing salvation in the Old Testament. He is designated as the servant of YHWH who will bear the sins of the world. The substitutionary nature of His death is explicit:

Isaiah 53:5-6 says:

But he was pierced for *our* transgressions; he was crushed for *our* iniquities; upon him was the chastisement that brought us peace, and with his wounds we are healed. All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned—every one—to his own way; and *the LORD has laid on him the iniquity of us all*. (Emphasis added.)

Isaiah 53:10-12 adds:

Yet it was the will of the LORD to crush him; he has put him to grief; when his soul *makes an offering for guilt*, he shall see his offspring; he shall prolong his days; the will of the LORD shall prosper in his hand. Out of the anguish of his soul he shall see and be satisfied; by his knowledge shall the righteous one, my servant, make many to be accounted righteous, *and he shall bear their iniquities*. Therefore I will divide him a portion with the many, and he shall divide the spoil with the strong, because *he poured out his soul to death* and was *numbered with the transgressors*; yet he *bore the sin of many*, and *makes intercession for the transgressors*. (Emphasis added.)

Isaiah 28:16

...therefore thus says the Lord GOD, “Behold, I am the one who has laid as a foundation in Zion, a stone, a tested stone, a precious cornerstone, of a sure foundation: ‘Whoever believes will not be in haste.’” (Isa 28:16).

This verse is quoted or referred to no fewer than eight times in the New Testament. The stone is the Messiah, the Savior (Ps 118:22; Zech 3:9; cf. 1 Pet 2:4-7; Acts 4:10-12).

The last phrase of the verse, following the Hebrew text, is translated in the New King James Version, "He who believes in it [the Cornerstone] will not act hastily" that is, flee because of

fear. However, the Greek translation of the Hebrew reads, “the one believing on it shall not be ashamed” (see Rom 9:33, and 1 Pet 2:6) which is substantially the same idea, that the one who puts faith in Him shall not have the shame of judgment, nor flee in sudden panic (Isa 30:15; 32:17).

Salvation is always by faith, based on the work of Christ on the cross. God withheld judgment of pre-cross sins until Jesus became our substitute on the cross (Rom 3:25-26). However, Old Testament people could be saved by believing what God had promised, that there would be a Redeemer, a Savior, an Intercessor, a sinless Substitute who would bear the sins of the world, pay the penalty for man’s sins and satisfy the demands of infinite justice. Those who would believe in God for this Deliverer were justified or declared righteous before God, for He imputes His righteousness to all who put faith in Him for salvation.

Can We Find Jesus in the Old Testament?

Throughout the Old Testament more and more information is given about a Deliverer, a Savior, a substitutionary Sacrifice who would die for the sins of the world. This One is designated as Messiah or Yeshua, which is the Hebrew equivalent to Jesus.

When the word *salvation* in the Old Testament occurs along with the Hebrew suffix meaning, “my,” “your,” or “his,” it is the same word, *Yeshua* (Jesus), used in Matt 1:21.¹⁴ When the angel spoke to Joseph, husband of Mary, he said: “She will bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus, [Yeshua—salvation] for he will save his people from their sins” (Matt 1:21).

The name of Jesus occurs in the Old Testament in Hebrew form, Yeshua. When Jacob was about to die, as he was blessing his sons and prophetically foretelling their future experiences in those blessings, he said, “I wait for your salvation, O LORD” (Gen 49:18). Or it could be translated, “In Yeshua [Jesus] I am hoping [trusting], O Lord!” Jacob was trusting in Yeshua [Jesus] for salvation. Jacob was already a saved man and has not waited until his dying moments to start trusting in the Lord. He just reminded God that he was trusting in Yeshua for salvation, and at the same time he was comforting his own soul.

In Isa 12:2-3, salvation is mentioned three times, with Jesus as the personification of the word *salvation*: “Behold, God is my salvation [Yeshua—Jesus in His pre-incarnation and eternal existence]. I will trust, and will not be afraid; for the LORD GOD is my strength and my song, and he has become my salvation [Yeshua (Jesus)].’ With joy you will draw water from the wells of salvation [Yeshua (Jesus)].”

Isaiah makes this more explicit in Isa 62:11: “Behold, the LORD has proclaimed to the end of the earth: Say to the daughter of Zion, ‘Behold, your salvation [Yeshua] comes; behold, his reward is with him, and his recompense before him.’”

Here salvation is a person and not a thing or an event. *He* comes, *His* reward is with *Him*, and *His* work is before *Him*.

¹⁴ Editor’s note: The Greek name, *Iēsous* (Jesus) is transliterated, not translated, from the Hebrew *Yeshua*. It is essentially the Hebrew word spelled with Greek letters.

This salvation is Jesus Himself. When Simeon came to the Temple and took the baby Jesus in his arms, he said, "Lord, now you are letting your servant depart in peace, according to your word; for my eyes have seen your salvation [Yeshua—Jesus]" (Luke 2:29-30).

The hope of Israel is the Lord Jesus Christ, and in Him is steadfast love and plentiful redemption:

If you, O LORD, should mark iniquities, O Lord, who could stand?

But with you there is forgiveness, that you may be feared.

I wait for the LORD, my soul waits, and in his word I hope;

my soul waits for the Lord more than watchmen for the morning, more than watchmen for the morning.

O Israel, hope in the LORD! For with the LORD there is steadfast love, and with him is plentiful redemption.

And he will redeem Israel from all his iniquities. (Ps 130:3-8)

Conclusion

People before the time of Christ did not have a full picture of the Savior and the Cross. However, they did have an adequate picture that was sufficient for salvation. God has always revealed His plan of salvation and that revelation has always been sufficient to bring man to salvation.

As it says in John 5:24: "Truly, truly, I say to you, whoever hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life. He does not come into judgment, but has passed from death to life."

So, salvation in the Old Testament was not by some generic faith in God, but by faith in the God who would send the Savior. Faith in a god who is not sending the Savior does not save.

How were people in the Old Testament saved? By faith in the salvation promised by God! This salvation is a Person, the promised Seed of the woman, the promised Seed of Abraham, the promised Seed of David, the promised Deliverer, Yeshua.

By means of faith in the Messiah, as He was revealed at any point in history, man is saved from his sins. As Rom 4:16 says, "That is why it depends on faith, in order that the promise may rest on grace..."