

Critical Comments on the Reformed Idea that Only God can Save

By: Dan Mages

The question is: “Is it necessary for Jesus the Messiah to be Deity in order to be the agent through which God saves?” The issue at hand is one in which has been the focus of reformed theology for a long time. Reformer Robert C. Doyle writes in an essay called “The uniqueness of Christ, ‘Chalcedon’ and Mission,” that “*only* God can reveal God and save humanity.” I am not convinced by such rhetoric. While on one hand this sounds glorifying, making God great, it can lead to faulty conclusions.

God says in Isaiah 43:11, “apart from me there is no savior.” This statement taken by itself would suggest a conclusion that many Reformers have sermonized, and have authoritatively taught. On the other hand, if we look at the context in which this is said, and then look at Scripture as a whole, we will find that this statement does not mean that which has been commonly conveyed by it.

Let’s look at the context. The one and only true God of Israel is comparing himself to all other so-called gods which Israel might be tempted to look toward, and seek help from, for physical, earthly salvation. In this case, deliverance from the bondage and oppression of the Babylonians. This is compared to the slavery, hardship and misery that they were rescued from in Egypt. This would be a new exodus. YHWH says that these so-called gods that Israel is turning to are not able to speak, hear, know, understand, act, answer prayer, and especially save, deliver, or rescue (Is 44:17,18; 45:20-22).

The word used for savior in Hebrew is *YASHA*. An exhaustive concordance reveals that “the LORD gave Israel a *savior*” (2 Kgs 13:5 KJV Emphasis mine). Immediately we are confronted with the seeming dilemma of two saviors: the Holy One of Israel and the *savior* mentioned in the text above. It is important to take notice that the LORD provided the savior. He is ultimately the only one who has the power and ability to save, rescue, deliver, help, etc...God is able to save through, or by, whatever means God desires to do so. Thus we read, “Thou gavest them *saviors*, who saveth” (Neh 9:27 KJV Emphasis mine). Isaiah 19:20 reads, “The LORD...will send them a *savior* and defender” (NIV Emphasis mine).

The evidence becomes weightier as we read in Obadiah 21, “*saviors* will go up on Mt. Zion to govern the mountains.” This type of language is almost overwhelming when we turn to the Second Testament and find Luke recording, “God has brought to Israel the *savior* Jesus, as he promised” (Acts 13:23). This is very much in line with the texts cited above.

As I was reading through Exodus this last summer while pool monitoring on a hot a sunny day, I almost fell out of my chair when I read “And when the Israelites saw the great power the LORD displayed against the Egyptians, the people feared the LORD and put their trust in him and in Moses his servant” (14:30-31). What? This can’t be. The words of all Reformers I have come in contact with, even some of my own Reformed theology rang loud in my ear, “Do not place your trust in man, but only in God alone.” I could not fathom that the Scriptures themselves said that the Israelites put their trust in God and in God’s servant Moses, a fallible, weak, human being whom God used to *deliver* them from captivity. Moses, the one whom God has called to be their head, their leader, and their *mediator* was worthy of a certain trust. Moses was the *mouthpiece* for God to the people. “All the Israelite men and women who were willing brought to the LORD freewill offerings for all the work the LORD *through* Moses had commanded them to do” (Ex. 35:29). Moses *mediated* on more than one occasion pleading with God with all sincerity and genuineness to spare the people, even on account of his own life (Ex. 32:31). Having these things in mind, especially the language used of Moses, “his servant”, the book of Acts miraculously comes to life.

Jesus is repetitiously called the “servant” of the one and only true God who made all of the promises to the patriarchs. These servant passages also draw our thinking back to the imagery used in the later chapters of the book of Isaiah. “The God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, the God of our fathers, has glorified his *servant* Jesus” (Acts 3:13 NIV). Peter also exclaimed: “When God raised up his *servant*, he sent him first to you to bless you by turning each of you from your wicked ways” (Acts 3:26 NIV). Two more times in the book of Acts Jesus is called the *servant* of the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob who anoints human beings to do his will and speak his truth (Acts 4:25,27).

It seems to be a pattern for the *one* God of Israel to save *through* human beings. God told Gideon to *save* Israel out of the hand of Midian. “The LORD turned to him and said, ‘Go in

the strength you have and *save* Israel out of Midian's hand. Am I not sending you?" (Jdg 6:14 NIV) Later, in the same chapter Gideon says, "If you will *save* Israel by my hand as you have promised...then I will know that you will *save* Israel by my hand, as you said" (Judges 6:36-37). This concept is found throughout the Hebrew Bible. 2 Kings 14:27 says "He [YHWH] *saved* them by the hand of Jeroboam son of Jehoash". These texts give a Hebraic background for texts like 1 John 4:14 "We have seen and testify that the Father has sent his son to be the *savior* of the world." Paul says, "God was *in* the Messiah reconciling the world to himself" (my translation) or as the NIV states, "All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself *through* Christ" (2 Cor. 5:18).