

The Vision

Shalom / Wholeness: the panorama of biblical hope

SHALOM: THE FOUNDATION OF HOPE

Encountering *shalom*

There is a dramatic image in the Hebrew scriptures that pictures Yahweh, the God of Israel, running, leaping – and even dancing - upon hilltops and mountains. God moving powerfully ahead of the people who have been exiles, leading them home as they return from Babylon to Zion. As we watch this dramatic spectacle we hear God loudly proclaiming one single word - “*Shalom!*”

How beautiful on the mountains,
are the feet of the one who brings good news,
who heralds peace,
proclaims joyful tidings,
announces salvation,
and tells Zion, "Your God reigns!"
Listen! Your watchmen raise their voices,
they shout for joy together,
for they see Yahweh face to face, as he returns to Zion
Yahweh bares his holy arm
in the sight of all the nations,
and all the ends of the earth shall see
the salvation of our God
But you are not coming out in panic,
you are not leaving like fugitives.
Yahweh is going ahead of you,
the God of Israel is your rear guard.
(Isa 52:7-12)

Here the returning exiles are seen as the first fruits of a whole new eschatological age. God is proclaiming a cosmic victory, which will embrace the whole world, establishing justice, salvation and peace. Yahweh's word of proclamation is not just a sound or a statement; it has actual effective power. As at the original creation, the word heralded begins the process of bringing into being a new creation. The word proclaimed is the word, “*Shalom!*”

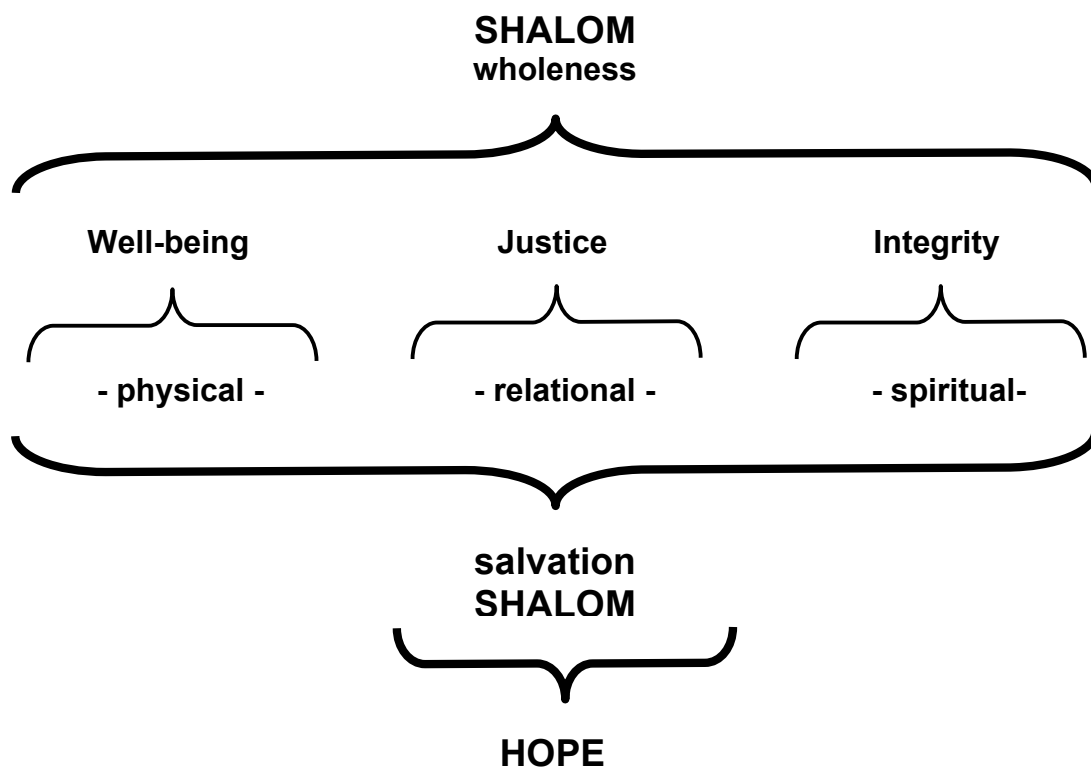
שלום

From a New Testament perspective this image is continued in the graphic statement:

‘And (Jesus) came and preached peace to you who were far off
and peace to those who were near’
(Eph 2:17)



Shalom is about both the physical and the spiritual as an integrated whole:



Shalom is *only* present to the extent that there is:

- **Physical well-being:** that people and creation's material needs are met; whether it be food, clothing (in the case of people), shelter, protection and everything that enables a healthy and dignified life to be lived;
- **Relational justice:** that people between themselves and within creation are living in just and right relationships, whether it is inter-personal, local or global, and are actively working to put this right if that is not the case;
- **Spiritual integrity:** that individuals come to a place of uprightness, integrity and spiritual wholeness within themselves, and that that is reflected and expressed in the spiritual quality of their interaction with every relationship.

Shalom is therefore quite simply salvation in the most complete sense. Erich Dinker observes 'From the beginning one is confronted with whether to translate *shalom* as 'peace' or 'salvation'.² *Shalom* is a declaration of how things should be and it is an affirmation of how things shall be. *Shalom* touches the heart of the individual, but that it does so from the centre of God's purpose for both society and the cosmos. It is everything holding together in harmony; all peoples, all social structures, the whole material universe. It is at the centre of all things; it cannot be marginalized. Because it demands that all basic needs are met, that justice is established everywhere and that the human heart displays integrity, it is nothing short of full salvation.

² In '*Eirene – The Early Christian Concept of Peace*' in PB Yoder & WM Swartley (Ed) '*The Meaning of Peace*' (2nd Ed) pub IMS Elkhart 2001; 74



Envisioning *shalom*

The fact that *shalom* is both salvation in its most complete sense, and also the means by which this salvation is brought into being, puts it at the very centre of the biblical vision of hope.

While *shalom* has a real immediacy about it and is concerned very much with the practicalities of the here and now, it is also the foundational eschatological biblical concept. *Shalom* gives the biblical understanding of hope a sharp focus and takes it into dimensions of understanding and expectations unsurpassed by any other faith.

As we shall see time and again there are very many passages that give a glimpse of what *shalom* in its fullness will be like. At this point just three must suffice:

‘The words of Yahweh are words of peace,
peace to his people and his loyal servants
and to all who turn and trust in him...
Love and truth have embraced,
justice and peace have kissed each other.
Truth has sprung up from the earth,
righteousness reaches down from heaven...
Justice makes a path before him,
his footsteps bring peace’³
(Ps 85:8,10-11,13)

‘... until a spirit from on high is poured out on us,
and the wilderness becomes a fruitful field,
and the fruitful field is deemed a forest.
Then justice will dwell in the wilderness,
and righteousness abide in the fruitful field.
The effect of righteousness will be peace,
and the result of righteousness, quietness and trust for ever.
My people will abide in a peaceful habitation,
in secure dwellings, and in quiet resting-places.
The forest will disappear completely,
and the city will be utterly laid low.
Happy will you be who sow beside every stream,
who let the ox and the donkey range freely’
(Isa 32:15-20)

‘But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off
have been brought near by the blood of Christ.
For he is our peace;
in his flesh he has made both groups into one ...
So he came and proclaimed peace to you who were far off
and peace to those who were near;
for through him both of us have access in one Spirit to the Father’
(Eph 2:13-18)

³ This last line is the translation taken by the ‘*Jerusalem Bible*’ Darton Longman & Todd 1968



Nature and *shalom*

The whole of nature has been created to find its meaning and destiny in *shalom*. Every part of creation, will flow with a fruitful abundance:

‘... the mountains will drip sweet wine
and all the hills will flow with it ...’
(Amos 9:13)

Animal and plant kingdoms in their entirety will be embraced by *shalom*, living in dynamic and creative peace and harmony, becoming partakers in God's covenant:

‘The wolf shall live with the lamb,
the leopard shall lie down with the kid,
the calf, and the lion and the fatling together,
and a little child shall lead them.
The cow and bear shall graze,
their young shall lie down together;
and the lion shall eat straw like the ox’
(Isa 11:6-7; cf 65:25)

‘I will make with them a covenant of peace
and banish wild animals from the land⁴
so that they may live in the wild
and sleep in the woods securely’
(Ezk 34:25)

‘I will make for you a covenant on that day
with the wild animals, the birds of the air,
and the creeping things of the ground’
(Hos 2:18)

Obviously much of this language recalls images from the ‘Eden’ story (Gen 2:4-24); but what is being proclaimed here is very much more than simply imagining there must be a return to how things were believed to have once been. This vision embraces all that was part of the first creation plus all its potential fulfilled.

Eden is a garden:

“And the Lord God planted a garden in Eden, in the east’
(Gen 2:8)

But it is no ordinary garden; this is ‘God’s garden’:

‘You were in Eden, the garden of God’
(Ezk 28:13)

⁴ This cannot mean that wild animals will be removed or no longer found in the land, but rather that their wildness no longer poses a threat to other people or creatures with whom they now live in harmony

The word 'garden' popularly implies something created by people, which is not wild nature, but rather tamed and controlled by human hands. Here, the 'garden of God' represents the complete opposite; *it is wild nature* as God first intended it to be.⁵ Adam, the gardener (Gen 2:15), is not to impose human order upon nature, but rather to live in harmony with the God-given order in such a way that not only respects it but also enables it to keep finding its full divine potential. Eden is a symbol of humanity living in ideal harmony with the rest of creation. Their ultimate expulsion from the 'garden' brings about their estrangement from nature (Gen 3:23-24), creating both a loss and a longing that haunts all true human hope yet is finally more than fully restored in eschatological biblical hope.

Eden is on a mountain:

'... you were on the holy mountain of God;
you walked among the stones of fire'
(Ezk 28:14)

'A river flows out of Eden to water the whole garden,
and from there it divides and becomes four branches'
(Gen 2:10)

'They shall not hurt or destroy on all my holy mountain;
for the earth shall be full of the knowledge of the Lord
as the waters cover the sea'
(Isa 11:9)

It has been insightfully reflected:

'Eden is more than the enchanted forest in which humans once belonged. It is the holy heart of nature. It is situated on 'the holy mountain of God'. At the mythical centre of the world, where not only humans and nature, but also where God and humans and God and nature are at one. As such it is the life-giving heart of nature from which the life of the world is continually derived and replenished. Down from the mountain of Eden runs the river of the water of life ... Eden is the source of the fertility of the whole earth from which all living things live ... To live in Eden would be to live from the undying source of life. It would be to drink the water of life and to eat the fruit of the tree of life. In that sense the loss of Eden was more the loss of a possibility than the loss of an actuality.'⁶

As we shall see these ideas play a central role in the unfolding and understanding of a biblical Christian hope.

New creation and *shalom*

The biblical vision of *shalom* looks towards an astonishing fulfillment. In Matthew's gospel Jesus speaks about:

⁵ The thinking in this section draws on the ideas found in R Bauckham & T Hart '*Hope Against Hope*' Darton, Longman & Todd 1999 p 147-153

⁶ See R Bauckham & T Hart p148-149; also make links with the imagery of Jerusalem as a high mountain below



‘at the *renewal* of all things’
(Mt 19:28)

In the book of Acts Peter declares:

‘Jesus,
who must remain in heaven
until the time of *universal restoration*
that God announced long ago through his holy prophets’
(Acts 3:21)

In both cases the same Greek word *palingenesia* is used. It is translated here as ‘renewal’ and ‘restoration’. It looks to the future and speaks of a time when the universe has found its creation destiny completely fulfilled in God.

This theme is most clearly presented in the dramatic biblical statements about ‘the new heaven and the new earth’:

‘For I am about to create new heavens and a new earth;⁷
the former things shall not be remembered or come to mind.
Be glad and rejoice forever in what I am creating...’
(Isa 65:17-18 cf 66:22)⁸

‘But in accordance with his promise,
we wait for new heavens and a new earth,⁹
where righteousness is at home’
(2Pt 3:13)

These phenomenal declarations make two important things very clear:

- That the earth, and in fact the whole cosmos existing today, will have a destiny in God. They will not be destroyed.¹⁰ The earth and the whole cosmos will experience

⁷ The Hebrew word for ‘new’ is *chadash* and can express both the ideas of completely new and as in this case ‘renewed’

⁸ The Hebrew scriptures see the inhabitants of this new age of peace experiencing true wholeness. All their ills will be removed (Isa 30:19; 35:3-4; Ezk 34:16) and will truly rejoice (Isa 35:10). They will be extremely fertile in childbearing (Jer 30:19, Ezk 36:10; Zech 14:8) and like lilies and the cedars of Lebanon (Hos 14:5). There will be forgiveness of sins for all (Isa 33:24), with death swallowed up forever (Isa 25:8). This hope is of course truly earthly, expressed in the language and ideas of human experience, but every aspect of its essence is spiritual, focusing on Yahweh. God is the foundation of everything, whose presence shelters and protects the people like the Shekinah of old (Isa 4:5; 60:19). To live in the kingdom demands having a relationship with God; ‘eschatology is ethically conditioned’. Those who were part of this age would be the true ‘remnant’, with the new covenant written on their hearts making no need for priestly intervention (Jer 33:18,22; Ezk 37:12). The new temple is for praise rather than sacrifice. The relationship between Yahweh and the people will be like husband and wife (Heb 2:16; Isa 62:5; Zeph 3:17). There will be reconciliation: not only Israel and Judah walking together again (Jer 3:18; Ezk. 37:15-17) but universally between peoples, and between humanity and nature (Isa 2:4; 11:9; 32:15; 54:13; Zech 9:10). There will be a banquet for all nations (Isa 25:6-9; cf. Zech 8:22-23; 14:1; 16-19; Zeph 3:9). The question, as to who was expecting to enjoy this *shalom*, is not clear - only the living ‘remnant’ or the righteous dead as well (Hos 6:2; Ezk 37; Isa 26:19; Dan 12:2)? The full answer has to await the new covenant.

⁹ There are two words for new in Greek *neos* which refers to something ‘completely new, never having existed before’, and *kainos* which refers to something ‘completely renewed, the old made new again’. It is the word *kainos* that is used here.

complete recreation in a parallel to our experience of the promise of the 'resurrection body'. It will be renewal not replacement. It will be creation completely fulfilled and transformed. There will be the continuity of all that already exists and is good and a discontinuity from and destruction of all that is evil or corrupt. In fact, the new creation of the renewed heaven and earth will involve the total and absolute integration of everything spiritual and divine with everything human and physical;¹¹

- That beyond death, following the resurrection, where a redeemed humanity has an eternal future within a renewed cosmos where the spiritual and physical are totally integrated and wholly fulfilled. Nobody is going to heaven! The Christian understanding of resurrection is of totally full-embodied personhood, beyond mere life after death, living and moving in complete harmony with and within the renewed creation.

This means that the earth and the material cosmos in which we live today is inseparably linked to our future in the recreation of the resurrection of the new heaven and the new earth. Creation shares both in our struggle with sin and our liberty in Jesus:

'For the creation waits with eager longing
for the revealing of the children of God;
for the creation was subjected to futility,
not by its own will but by the will of the one who subjected it,
in hope that the creation itself will be set free from its bondage and decay
and will obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God.'
(Rm 8:19-20)

The truth is that all trees, plants, animals, birds, mountains and rivers, today, in spite of their beauty, are but a shadow of what they will be; this is because they are 'subjected to futility' and in 'bondage to decay' – this means that:

- There is no tree, as yet, that has ever truly experienced what it means to be a tree. There is 'a treeness-of-trees' that as yet no tree has ever experienced – but they will!
- There is no fish, as yet, that has ever truly experienced what it means to be a fish. There is 'a fishness-of-fish' that as yet no fish has ever experienced – but they will!

¹⁰ As we shall see below the images of 'shaking' and 'burning' that we find connected to visions of 'the end' are referring to the idea of ridding the cosmos of every trace of evil, never the destruction of the cosmos itself. As scripture that has been frequently misquoted to give the impression that everything will be 'burnt up' is 2Peter 3:10:

"The heavens will pass away with a loud noise,
the elements will be dissolved with fire,
and everything that is done on it will be (burnt up).

However, it should be translated, 'everything that is done will be *found* ...' No evil or corruption escapes God's work of putting everything right. This is not destruction but regeneration, not incineration but liberation!

¹¹ The phrase 'heaven and earth' is a *merism*, which in Hebrew has the sense of 'complete totality', absolutely everything. Here of course, it has the idea of the totality of the cosmos or universe, but the way the ideas are used shows that it also includes 'heaven' as the dwelling place of God. Hence, the sense of complete totality - everything spiritual and physical, earthly and heavenly, human and divine!

This is true of creation in its totality. The image here is of the whole of creation locked into a prison-house, incarcerated, but longing to be free. The phrase, 'waiting with eager longing' (Gk *apokaradokia*), has the sense of standing on tiptoe, searching the horizon with the body tensed and eyes focused in the certainty of seeing something. What is it waiting for? Not just God, but in fact 'the children of God' – us! We have a unique role to play in setting the whole of creation free, and in 'hastening the day of God!' ¹²

So we will share a freedom with the whole of creation 'on that day', the nature of which is beyond either description or imagination! But nevertheless it is the truth!

'I will make for you a covenant on that day
with the wild animals, the birds of the air,
and the creeping things of the ground;
and I will abolish the bow, the sword, and war from the land;
and I will make you lie down in safety.
I will take you for my wife forever;
I will take you for my wife in righteousness and justice,
in steadfast love and in mercy.
I will take you for my wife in faithfulness;
and you shall know the Lord'
(Hos 2:18-20)

'Until a Spirit from on high is poured out on us,
and the wilderness becomes a fruitful field,
and the fruitful field is deemed a forest.
The justice will dwell in the wilderness,
and righteousness abide in the fruitful field.
The effect of righteousness will be peace,
and the result of righteousness, quietness and trust forever.'
(Isa 32:15-17)

'They will hunger no more, and thirst no more;
the sun will not strike them nor any scorching heat;
for the Lamb at the centre of the throne shall be their shepherd,
and he will guide them to springs of the water of life,
and God will wipe away every tear from their eyes'
(Rev 7:16-17)

Notice how physical and tangible and tactile it all is; this is no spiritual imagery, but reality! Notice how spiritual and ethical and moral it all is; the sacred and the sensual inseparably intertwined! This truly is hope; this truly is *shalom*! Remember that the reality of this future hope has already been demonstrated in the person of Jesus:

- In his incarnation Jesus perfectly and fully integrated the physical and the spiritual the human and the divine; he became the exact model of the new heaven and earth:

¹² 2Pt 3:12

‘You will see heaven opened
and the angels of God ascending and descending
upon the Son of Man’
(Jn 1:51)

So already, the barriers between heaven and earth, the human and divine, the spiritual and the physical have been removed and we are called to live in the light of this reality.

- In his resurrection Jesus demonstrated not only the power to completely destroy evil but also the paradox of change, yet with continuity, before and after death:

‘What we will be has not yet been revealed.
What we do know is this :
when he is revealed, we will be like him,
for we will see him as he is.’
(1Jn 3:2)

Questions & Reflections

1. “A biblical understanding of hope is shaped by *shalom*. How does this compare and contrast with other ideas of hope you know?”
2. “Why has a Christian understanding of salvation rarely included the whole of creation?”
“How does its inclusion influence your idea of hope?”
3. “What issues and questions does this understanding of *shalom* as the biblical Christian understanding of hope raise for you?”

Reading and Resources

Key books:

R Bauckham & T Hart ‘**Hope Against Hope**’ Darton, Longman & Todd 1999
JB Green (Ed *et al*) ‘**Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels**’ IVP 1992: article: ‘Kingdom of God’ / Heaven by CC Caragounis p 417-430
G MacDonald ‘**The Evangelical Universalist**’ SPCK 2008
NT Wright ‘**New Heavens, New Earth: The Biblical Picture of the Christian Hope**’ Grove Books 1999
NT Wright ‘**The Resurrection of the Son of God**’ SPCK 2003
P Yoder ‘**Shalom: The Bible’s Word for Salvation, Justice & Peace**’ Life & Faith Press 1987

Other useful book resources:

J Alison ‘**Living in the End Times**’ SPCK 1997
CE Armerding & WW Gasque (Ed) ‘**Handbook of Biblical Prophecy**’ Baker 1977
W Barclay ‘**A Spiritual Autobiography**’ Eerdmans Publishing Company 1977



R Bauckham '**Jude & 2 Peter**' Word 1983

R Bauckham '**The Theology of the Book of Revelation**' Cambridge 1993

GR Beasley-Murray '**The Book of Revelation**' Eerdmans 1981

J Bonda '**The One Purpose of God**' Eerdmans 1993

W Brueggemann '**Peace: Understanding Biblical Themes**' Chalice Press 2001

F Carey (Ed) '**The Apocalypse and the Shape of Things to Come**' British Museum Press 1999

RG Close '**The Meaning of the Millennium: Four Views**' IVP 1977

N Cohn '**The Pursuit of the Millennium**' Temple Smith 1970

DN Freedman (Ed) '**Anchor Bible Dictionary**' Vol:3 Doubleday 1992 see article T Prendergast 'Hope' p 284

DN Freedman (Ed) '**Anchor Bible Dictionary**' Vol:5 Doubleday 1992 see articles:

- Eschatology by DL Petersen p 575
- *Parousia* by Christopher Rowland p xxx

JB Green [Ed et al] '**Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels**' IVP 1992: articles:

- Apocalyptic by DC Allison
- Eschatology by DC Allison Jr p 206-209
- Son of Man by IH Marshall p 775-781

G Kittel (Ed) '**Theological Dictionary of the New Testament**' Eerdmans 1964: article *basileus* by KL Schmidt [et al] Vol 1: p 564-593

AT Lincoln '**Paradise Now and Not Yet**' Cambridge 1981

D Linn 'Good Goats – Healing our Image of God' Paultist Press

BD McLaren '**The Secret Message of Jesus**' Thomas Nelson 2006

RH Mounce '**The Book of Revelation**' Eerdmans 1977

R Parry & C Partridge (Eds) '**Universal Salvation?**' Paternoster 2003

A Richardson (Ed) '**A Theological Word Book of the Bible**' see article 'Hope' London SCM Press 1965 p 108-109

The Doctrine Commission of the Church of England, '**The Mystery of Salvation**' London, Church House Publishing, 1995

D Thompson '**The End of Time**' Minerva 1997

Walter Wink '**Engaging the Powers**' Fortress Press 1992

NT Wright '**The New Testament and the People of God**' SPCK 1992

NT Wright '**Jesus and the Victory of God**' SPCK 1996

NT Wright '**Surprised by Hope**' SPCK 2007

PB Yoder & WM Swartley (Ed) '**The Meaning of Peace**' (2nd Ed) IMS Eikhart 2001